

loveyoudivine

Bryn Colvin

Beauty  
In  
Tears



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Beauty in Tears

By

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According to her timepiece, Melerton's arrival was overdue by a good ten minutes. The absence of punctuality irritated Jemima Southerby considerably, but she did not betray her impatience with any obvious gestures. He, after all, had approached her and she rather needed the work. While her current, bohemian lodgings had given her a pleasant summer, she feared they would be miserable once winter set in, and her savings would not last forever.

As the door opened into the small room, she rose, behaving with the decorum of a servant in the face of a prospective master. The submissive posturing had never come naturally to her, but she did what she must in order to survive.

"Do sit down Miss Southerby."

"Thank you sir." She returned gracefully to the chair, her back perfectly straight as she eyed the man directly. Poor skin, a heavily waxed moustache. Clothes that might have been expensive once, but no longer represented the height of fashion. Not untypical of a country gentleman, she decided.

"You come very well recommended," he began.

She dipped her head in acknowledgement, having assumed as much. People did not write to her requesting her services unless they knew precisely what she was capable of.

"I have a rather delicate problem," he continued.

To this, she nodded encouragingly, but kept her face in an unmoving, polite smile.

"I have a ward. I wish to keep her out of the way in the country, and I want no trouble. There are complications. Matters of money, inheritance, wills and all that sort of business."

"I understand entirely Mr Melerton."

"I require absolute discretion."

"Of course."

"Harrington Nunnery is in an isolated spot. There is a cook, a maid, and a man who generally makes himself useful. But if you accept, and can do the job, then the pay will be excellent."

"I have no trouble with isolation. I shall ask no awkward questions regarding the delicacy of your circumstances and I can assure you I take no personal interest in such matters. If you have any particular thoughts regarding the girl's instruction, I should be delighted to follow whatever program recommends itself to you."

"To be honest, I had given the matter no thought. Do whatever you think best."

"Ah, then perhaps the question is; what do you wish her to be?"

"Eh? I don't follow you madam."

"Do you wish her to go mad? Or do you require that she be biddable and compliant with your wishes? Is it necessary to preserve her honour and teach her discipline, or to render her unfit for marriage? Should she be afraid to set foot outside the house? What do you wish her mental state to be?"

"And you could do all of that?"

"I have achieved all of that with others, and more."

"Impressive. We certainly need her compliant. Could you break her spirit without making her completely useless?"

"I expect so."

"Then Miss Southerby, I should like to offer you employment. I should warn you, the girl is a mute."

"Can she hear at all, Mr Melerton?"

"As far as I can tell, but she won't speak."

"I would be delighted to accept your offer sir."

The train deposited Jemima at a request-only stop – little more than a raised tump of earth beside the line, with a farm track leading to it. To her relief, a pony and trap waited for her. It had clearly seen better days, but now evening drew in so she had no desire to walk through several miles of unfamiliar countryside. With the sun low in the sky, they climbed the final ridge and found the former Nunnery squatting low, merely a dark shape against the fading light. Only one window offered light and on first appearances, she judged it a lonely, joyless place. *A suitable enough setting for the job in hand.* She had seen no sign of other houses nearby. The driver stopped, offering a grunt that she had no idea how to interpret.

"Thank you," Jemima returned.

The man removed her trunk and hauled it towards the front door, offering another gruff vocalisation. It occurred to her he may in fact be the 'useful man' Melerton had referred to. He seemed familiar enough with the place and proceeded to let her in. In a few moments, she stood inside a cheerful kitchen, presented with an ancient cook, and a remarkably ugly young girl.

"Mrs Garner, I assume?"

"You'd be Miss Southerby then?"

"I would."

"This is Katie."

The girl raised a pockmarked face and nodded.

"And you've already met Ben Riggs. Can I get you some tea?"

She accepted politely. These early negotiations with staff were always such delicate things, especially without an employer to inform how it would all work. Technically, her role was as a governess, and breeding ranked her as part of the gentry. Poverty and family disgrace had left her a nobody, obliged to fend for herself. Unable to live as a gentlewoman, but not working class either, she never found it easy to establish her place within a household. However, this trio seemed dull-witted and deferential, which boded well. She surmised that Melerton had picked people who lacked the inclination to ask questions or the wit to see something awry even when it stared them in the face.

"Is my charge already here?"

"She is."

"Mr Melerton did not mention her name."

"I don't know as she's got one. Call her whatever you like, won't make no odds."

"I shall see her in the morning. In the meantime, I would very much appreciate some refreshments, and directions to my room."

"Right you are Miss."

The meal was comprised of simple things – fresh bread, sharp cheese, cold ham and pickles, all of it good and entirely satisfying. When she found her room by candlelight, her impression was much the same – sturdy old furniture, everything neat but worn. A small fire burned in the grate and a pitcher of heated water had been brought up for her. She needed no more than this – her tastes were rather spartan and ostentation irritated her. A well-aired bed, a quiet house – she desired no more.

The following morning found her ready for work and curious about the nameless girl she had been sent to break.

"Through here Miss," Katie gestured, then turned back towards the kitchen. Jemima had the impression the servant did not want to look into the room. *No native curiosity whatsoever.* The handle rolled beneath her fingers, allowing the door to swing open onto a bare space. An odd smell wafted towards her, sweet, musky and evocative of sadness, although she couldn't quite think why. No bed. No furniture of any kind in fact. *Is the mute already deranged? Is that one of your 'complications' Mr Melerton?* She eyed the empty space carefully, deducing that her charge must have hidden behind the door. She wouldn't be the first child to try that particular trick! Ready to fend off an attack, Jemima stepped into the room.

In the meagre shelter behind the door, a small figure lay curled on the floor. It was filthy, naked, and rather barbaric in appearance as a consequence. However, on hearing her approach, it raised its head, exposing a pair of large, luminous eyes. Jemima studied the face before her. The expression was alert, watchful and confused. A lithe frame, long limbed, folded itself defensively in face of her observation. From the build she guessed the creature must be at least sixteen years of age, but very likely older. The eyes gazing up at her seemed impossibly knowing, and full of emotion. Jemima had no idea how to read what she saw there, but found no trace of insolence. Melerton wanted the girl biddable. That could be achieved in a number of ways, some crueller than others. Looking at her new charge, Jemima had the feeling this was no spoiled rich girl to be punished, but something rarer, finer. All inclination to ruin died within her. Melerton had said to break her spirit, but she saw little sign of pride or self determination in that grimy face. She turned to the door and summoned Katie back with a sharp word.

"Have hot water prepared. We will render the girl presentable. She is to learn how to behave herself, and if she is to be civilised, she must be clean. What clothes are there for her?"

"None Miss."

"Nothing at all?" she barely managed to conceal her disgust at this.

"Then we must make arrangements. Take her to the bathroom and bring hot water up immediately."

Jemima did not possess a large wardrobe. She returned to her room and selected a dress – a simple, dark affair with no adornment. It would suffice. As the girl had nothing, Jemima would have to loan her own hairbrushes and pins as well.

Once the bath was full and steaming, she sent the servant away. "Do you understand me?" she asked the filthy girl before her.

A shy nod answered her question.

"Can you speak?"

A shake of the head confirmed Melerton's assessment.

"Take off your clothes. You will bathe."

The silent creature complied, pulling off the tattered, shapeless garments she had worn and dropping them on the floor. She showed no signs of awkwardness about being naked. *Interesting.* Most young women blushed at the very least when required to bare their bodies. *She has no shame. Is that a mark of innocence, or experience?* The girl lowered herself into the water with closed eyes and a blissful expression on her face.

Jemima rolled up her sleeves, and set about scrubbing layers of filth from the narrow body. As the dirt soaked into the water, it revealed exquisite white skin and silken hair that gleamed where the sunlight touched it. There were blue and purple bruises contrasting vividly with the white. Lifting the tangled hair to wash it, Jemima drew in a swift breath, startled by what lay beneath. The young woman's beauty was marred by two horrendous wounds running in parallel from her shoulder blades to the base of her ribs. Washing had opened the injuries and they both seeped blood. She couldn't keep her fingers from them. The girl started at her touch, evidently pained but still silent. When Jemima looked at her face, she saw slow tears rolling over pale cheeks. Another mystery, into which she would not pry. Still, she had to wonder what it meant.

Dry and dressed, the girl appeared demure enough. Her hair brushed out into fine strands of brilliant gold. These were soon tamed and platted, coiled up on her head until she looked modest and presentable. Her feet were small, and Jemima had nothing that would fit, nor had she felt inclined to loan undergarments. She had few enough of her own things, and it felt far too intimate an action. For the time being, her charge could go barefoot. At least she had the semblance of propriety now.

"We will eat," Jemima announced.

The girl followed on her heels, quiet and co-operative. As they went down to the kitchen, she had to wonder how this silent, passive being could possibly have resisted any wish of Melerton's. Perhaps his requirements were more perverse than had first seemed the case. Jemima decided not to consider the issue further. It did not matter very much, and if the girl was tame already, her job would be easy.

Jemima approached food with the same calm determination she applied to every other aspect of her existence. She ate meticulously; always fanatically neat, but taking little pleasure in the experience. The girl picked things up with her fingers, sniffed at them as though finding them unfamiliar. She ate cautiously at first, but with growing confidence and hunger. Jemima watched, intrigued by the absence of manners. Where on earth had she grown up, to not even know how to use a fork? The girl smiled as she ate, clearly enjoying the experience. She turned adoring eyes towards her new keeper, her expression full of gratitude. In all her life, Jemima had never seen anyone respond to her in such a way. She expected to inspire fear, dislike, disgust, disdain, but not this. It unnerved her, and she did not know what to do with it.

"Do you not know how to use cutlery?" she demanded, expecting that the chill in her voice would remove this bizarre adoration from the girl's face.

This won her a shake of the head, coupled with an expression of sadness.

"You will learn. You will not eat with your hands like a peasant. In the future, you will only place in your mouth what you can lift on a fork."

The girl nodded.

"It is also necessary that you should have a proper name. After some consideration, I think we will call you Imogen."

Her face lit up in response to this. Jemima had considered the issue of naming since the previous night, aware that whatever she bestowed would inform her relationship with the creature, and direct the way in which the servants treated her. Girls who were obliged to answer to 'harlot' did not tend to fare well. To withhold a name was to imply worthlessness. It surprised her that she had offered the girl this much dignity.

With the meal finished, she expressed an intention to walk for an hour or so. Having been obliged to sit for long hours in the train on the day before, she longed to stretch her legs. Imogen rose from her chair, her face full of hopeful expectation. Jemima arched her eyebrows. "You have no footwear girl."

Her words earned her a smile and a shrug. Aware that both Katie and Mrs Garner were watching the unfolding scene with great interest, Jemima knew she had no time in which to think. They would judge her on this. She could not afford to seem weak or hesitant.

"Well, this should be interesting. Mrs Garner, I have made up a list of items Imogen will require. Please can you make the necessary arrangements?"

"I'll see what I can do."

"Excellent. The day is fair, let us be on our way."

There was a cold, northerly wind blowing when she stepped out of the house. It buffeted her, piercing her jacket and woollen dress all too easily. Jemima set off at a brisk pace, relishing the chill. To her surprise, Imogen trotted along beside her, apparently untroubled by the cold, uneven ground. When she took a sidelong glance, she saw the girl's expression radiated joy and delight. Hair haloed her head, breaking free from the pins that had held it tame for a while. She turned, meeting Jemima's eyes and gifting her with another adoring smile. *Such a warm expression, so tender.* It puzzled her – she had done nothing to warrant this. On the other hand, it probably meant the girl would be easy enough to direct.

A flock of goldfinches streamed before them, landing in the hedgerow to feed. Imogen turned her benevolent smile towards them and parted her pretty lips. A ripping, musical sound emerged from her mouth. Jemima had never heard anything like it before and had she not seen the source, would have doubted a human voice could do such things. A finch fluttered into the air, landing on Imogen's outstretched hand. It stayed for a few moments, then returned to its companions.

With this unlikely image in her mind, Jemima strode onwards, following the curve of the ridge from the house towards higher ground. She needed to feel the full force of the wind in her face, and to have the wide expanse of land and sky stretch out around her. Eventually she found the vantage point her soul required. Slowly turning, she examined the view, picking out the spires of distant churches, and a far-off cloud threatening rain. A sense of calm settled over her. This had long been the only joy in her life – a silent communion with lonely places. She had been in London too long, and returning to the land felt good.



Nearby, Imogen opened her arms and twirled, suddenly child-like. Watching her, Jemima noticed that she did not seem to suffer the cold, or to mind the mud on her bare feet and legs. She danced with the wind, welcoming it like a friend, her pale cheeks flushed and her eyes sparkling. Uncivilized, mute and strange, she had uncanny grace. At that moment, sunlight shafted through the high clouds, bathing the area in golden tones, and warming Jemima's cheeks. Her charge glowed with it, more radiant than ever. *Beautiful*. The thought struck hard and deep, inspiring a rush of pain that tore at the essence of her being. The wild loveliness of the natural world had long enchanted her, but she had never before perceived anything of the same wonder in human form. Before her, sunlit and windswept, stood the most sublime being she had ever seen – as though flowers and hills had somehow combined to birth a woman.

Without thinking, Jemima clutched her hand to her heart, unfamiliar tears stinging her eyes. *Why does it hurt so?* She could barely breathe. Imogen came to her, eyes wide with concern, bare hands covering her gloved ones. Having the girl so close only heightened the pain. She fought to regain control of herself, pushing the source of her distress away and turning from her. Back resolutely stiff, she marched down the ridge, seeing nothing of the land around her, and blotting every traitorous thought as it rose in her mind.

After supper, Ben Riggs returned noisily, bearing an assortment of packages.

"All I could get Miss," he said. "Not much to be had in town, but I've done my best."

He had procured a pair of rather simple shoes, and a selection of appropriate undergarments. No small achievement given the circumstances, she recognised, and made a point of thanking him with some enthusiasm.

"Is the fire lit in my room?"

"Yes Miss," Katie said.

"Come along then Imogen. Let us see how these fit you." She rose, meaning to leave the kitchen, then paused to ask another question. "The room Imogen was in had no furniture. That hardly seems appropriate to me. Can we not arrange a bed for her?"

"I've nothing aired, Miss."

"Do what you can."

"Of course, Miss."

She rather liked the feeling of power. It might be a small house, but for now at least she could play at being mistress of her own establishment. It came back readily enough. A little more care from her parents and she might have had a house like this, and a library of her own. Climbing the stairs, she sighed to herself over these memories. Family debt and disgrace haunted her past. She could have married her way out of it, spared her father's embarrassment, perhaps saved him from his early death. The thought of giving herself to a man horrified her, and no matter how her brother pleaded or threatened, she could not do it. Her father's candidates for matrimony were all older, wealthy men, with great swathes of ugly facial hair, and hard lines around their mouths. No amount of money made it worth being the

property of such a man. Every time her reduced circumstances chafed, she reminded herself of what a life of comfort would have cost.

Jemima laid the undergarments out on her bed. "Do you know what these are?"

Imogen shook her head.

"They are for you to wear. Take off your dress and I will show you."

The girl stripped, and Jemima looked away, not allowing her gaze to linger on that smooth, supple skin. She lifted the corset; a plain enough thing, but sturdy and sensible. A brief glance in the direction of her naked charge sent a shudder through her frame, so she forced from her thoughts all but the task in hand. Wrapping the garment around Imogen's slender figure, she covered those pert breasts, closing the front with skilful fingers. Then she set about tightening the laces. Her hands ran over the strings with practiced ease – she could do this behind her own back, and did not need to see in order to perform the task.

Imogen remained still while she worked. As the garment pulled in to fit, Jemima could not help but look at the top of those two ugly cuts. They seemed to be healing, the skin around them pink as the process moved onwards. Her eyes drifted over shoulders and neck, and she found herself wanting to touch that exposed flesh. She fought down the impulse, shocked by it even as she remembered the inexplicable emotions of the afternoon. The strings tightened in her hands and she pulled them harder yet. Imogen gasped, but she did not relent, dragging the two sides of the corset ever closer to each other, squeezing bone and skin sadistically.

The urge rose in her, to bring pain, to vent her own disturbed sentiments by making another suffer in her stead. That way, there lay the possibility of relief. If she treated her charge cruelly, the light would fade from her eyes, and the trust would soon die in her. Jemima could not bear to be looked at that way again, could not stand how it made her feel. She tied off the laces, holding the expanse of spare length in her hands. After a moment's thought, she used these to secure Imogen's hands and tie her to the wardrobe door. Throughout the preparations, the girl remained placid. Her submissiveness seemed like another reason to grow angry – why should this girl persist in trusting so foolishly?

Using her bare hand, Jemima landed a heavy blow on Imogen's naked bottom. The heated sting of it soothed her rage. She struck out again, but after the third smack, her palm grew sore, so she picked up the broad headed hairbrush instead. With the weight of it in her hands, her sense of self returned. Each blow fell heavily, full of suppressed emotion transformed into anger. The effort of it made her breathe hard, hot in her own clothing. Beneath the wood of the brush, Imogen's rump reddened. From time to time, the girl broke her habitual silence with whimpers and barely stifled sobs. The sweet sound of it inspired Jemima to hit harder, losing her carefully held control.

Calm at last descended. She took a few giddy steps backwards and dropped gratefully onto the bed, her limbs shaking as her breathing slowed. Spanking someone always worked, leaving her feeling cleansed and clear-thinking again. The pins had pulled loose from Imogen's hair, shining tresses breaking free and spilling over her back. The corset pinched her waist viciously, and her buttocks remained red from the punishment inflicted there. Jemima admired her handiwork. There had

been tears. The girl would hate her now, and her glances would be full of fear. No more inexplicable sentimentality. The idea relieved her. She let the girl stand as she was, prone and pained. It would do her good to wait and wonder and Jemima felt she had full control now.

Feeling suitably rested, she rose from the bed and undid the knots. Imogen turned a tear-streaked face towards her, eyes larger than ever. Lips parted slightly, forming a silent 'oh'. There was no fear on her face, no hint of hatred or defeat. Her cheeks were flushed, and the look in her eyes suggested wonder, not subjugation. A few inches separated them. Imogen brushed a kiss against Jemima's cheek, her mouth warm, tormenting with softness. Even as the girl retreated slightly, the kiss remained somehow, a gentle burn that would be a long time fading. Unable to move or think, Jemima stood, until a knock on the door shattered the moment.

"Excuse me Miss Southerby, but Mrs Garner says she's got a bed made up in the end room."

"Thank you Katie. I shall come and have a look." She hurried from the room, not looking back.

Even when Imogen was ensconced in her own bed, Jemima did not feel entirely safe. She huddled beneath her blankets, face turned towards the wall with sleep elusive. Her cheek still flamed from the kiss, skin refusing to relinquish the memory of it. *Madness*. When had anyone last done something of that nature to her? Recollection stirred – her seventeenth birthday, her mother breaking her usual habit of distance and bestowing a cool kiss. Nearly half a lifetime ago. Now, an old spinster by anyone's standards, she had not imagined anyone would do such a thing, much less that she would like it. In the darkness, her cheeks flushed with shame and confusion. Although she had known for a long time that men repulsed her, it had never crossed her mind that she might find her own sex appealing. The thought seemed outrageous, for she had never heard of such deviancy before, and assumed, with all the prejudices of her upbringing, that this flicker of desire must be wrong.

When sleep finally came, it plunged her into oblivion. Hours later, a shaft of light penetrated the narrow gap between her curtains, disturbing her slumber. She woke with a feeling of heaviness on her, and warmth in her body that she could not at first understand. Her arm circled the source of this comfort, and it dawned on her firstly that she was not alone in her bed, secondly that her hand rested on bare skin, and thirdly that as she slept, her body had voluntarily rolled into an embrace with this unexpected companion. Afraid of what she might find, Jemima opened her eyes. The sunlight glinted off locks of golden hair, and fell softly on pale skin. There could be no mistaking her bedfellow: Imogen had evidently crept in during the night. Her skin smelled of summer fruits and vanilla, and the scent of it provoked acute hunger in the older woman. From the slowness of the girl's breathing, she seemed asleep. Jemima knew she should pull away and order the beguiling creature from her room, but she did not. Instead, she pressed her cheek against the narrow back and inhaled deeply. Imogen rolled in her arms, turning to face her, placing a careful kiss on the tip of her nose. Now her hand rested on the softness of her bedfellow's stomach. The desire to explore flooded her, pooling heat in her loins and a peculiar ache in her

breasts. She wanted to touch, to feel, to possess. The emotions frightened her, and so she made no move, but trembled at the beauty before her.

From beyond the window came the shout of an unfamiliar voice, then the distinctive noise of a coach or carriage. Jemima had not expected visitors, and certainly not first thing in the morning. She wondered how late it had grown, and rose from the bed in a state of panic, hurrying to dress and tidy her hair. Imogen watched her with unabashed interest, her scrutiny intense and unsettling. With no time for privacy, Jemima pulled off her nightgown, fingers stumbling over hooks and strings. She tried not to think about the young woman watching her, but the heat in her refused to be ignored.

"Get back to your own room and dress," she snapped, not sounding anything like angry enough. Plaiting her dark hair, she wound it up into a severe bun and pinned it firmly in place, then hurried downstairs to see what the matter was.

"Miss Southerby I assume?" The man looked young, dishevelled and wealthy, his creased clothes made from fine fabrics.

"I'm afraid you have the advantage sir."

"Percival Argent. Are the other chaps here yet or did I beat them to it?"

"Others?" Jemima asked, wondering if the man had found his way to the wrong house.

"Sakely and Melerton."

"You are the first to arrive sir."

"Good, good. So, where is our girl?"

"Imogen is dressing."

"Imogen?" he chuckled. "How charming. Did you choose the name Miss Southerby?"

"I did. I found her lack of a name rather impractical."

"And how is your charge?"

"Silent and peculiar. But I only arrived the day before yesterday, and am hardly settled in myself."

"Well, my man will get things in order in no time. Fetch the girl down would you? I'd like a look at her."

"As you wish."

The illusion of influence and control had broken all too soon. Once more, she must play the role of servant and submit to a man's will. She growled to herself as she climbed the stairs, liking none of it, but feeling she must comply.

Imogen was still in her room, had put the dress on, but clearly wasn't wearing the corset. Her hair hung loose to her waist, making her look very young and innocent. When Jemima reached for her hair brush, the girl bit her lip and for a few seconds both of them blushed. However, she had no time to paddle that softly curving posterior, even though the idea tempted her. Instead, she set to work brushing tangles from the golden locks. Rather than giving her charge an adult hair arrangement, she tied the tresses back in the style of a child. She had no idea what Percival Argent and his friends intended, but mistrusted him. Perhaps by emphasising the girl's youth she could encourage them to be careful with her. Someone, after all, had caused those bruises and injuries. Hurting Imogen herself

was one thing, but she realised how greatly she disliked the idea of anyone else so doing.

By the time the two women descended, Argent had settled himself in the parlour. Jemima presented her charge. Once Imogen saw who waited for her in the chair, she shied away, eyes full of desperation and pleading.

"I see you are pleased at my return," Argent observed, obviously amused by his own comment.

Imogen tried to bolt for the door, but Jemima caught her wrist and propelled her forwards.

"Come now, a lady does not behave like this!" she admonished. "You will present yourself to Mr Argent with all due courtesy." She could feel the tremors in the girl's body, but Imogen complied.

"I see you're taming her for us. Melerton said you were the woman for the job."

Jemima acknowledged this with a nod and an appropriate murmur.

"Well, here's something for your efforts, with more to follow when we have what we need." He pressed a purse into her hands, heavy with coins. "You can leave us now, Southerby, I will call you if I need you."

"Very good sir."

Imogen turned, her luminous eyes wide, lips slightly parted. Looking at her face, Jemima knew the girl feared being left here. She hardened her heart against the imploring gaze, but found it more difficult to walk away than she could have imagined possible.

Unwilling to sit in the kitchen, she retreated to her room and set about tidying it. There had not been time to make the bed, or fold her nightgown and these small tasks occupied her for a while. A lone golden hair glimmered on the pillow. She lifted it between her fingers as thoughts of her strange awakening filled her mind. The feeling of Imogen's skin beneath her hand came back so vividly that it preoccupied her for a long time.

A pained cry pierced the air, and she knew it originated in the room below. Making a determined effort not to think about what it signified, she sought out a book and focused her attention on its contents.

During the afternoon, Melerton arrived, bringing a pair of dogs and further servants. He joined Argent in the parlour, but although Jemima hovered at his back, she was not invited to enter. Just as the evening was drawing in, Sakely arrived at the door. On his heels came a solitary manservant, his arms full of large, leather-bound tomes of evident antiquity. The pair vanished into the parlour, then shortly afterwards, Melerton emerged with Imogen.

Her eyes were rimmed red from crying and her lip had been split open. Dried blood remained on her chin and there were fresh bruises. She looked up only fleetingly, then turned her attention towards the floor. Melerton pushed her towards Jemima.

"Don't worry about tidying her up, we haven't finished. Keep her out of the way while we dine, and we'll have her back about nine I should say. No point feeding her I think. I rather prefer her weak and pliable, if you understand me."

"Of course sir."

She had played the cruel governess so many times, restraining unwanted children, social embarrassments, pawns in games of power and inheritance. They had all been such revolting beings that she had never found the work hard. Weep and protest as they might, they had never troubled her conscience. She had rather assumed she did not have one. However, looking at Imogen's wounded state, guilt surged through her. She had allowed it to happen, and now they asked her to be complicit in further outrages. It felt utterly wrong, and she could not explain this profound change that had overtaken her.

"This way," she barked, keeping all hint of distress from her voice.

In the kitchen, Imogen would not look at her. Taking a small cloth, she cleaned the blood away from her charge's face. Servants bustled around them, carrying dishes of food, and paying little attention.

"Are you all right Miss?" Katie asked, sneaking closer during a quieter moment. Her question surprised Jemima – she'd written the girl off as dim-witted and disinterested.

Imogen glanced upwards, silent as ever. In response to this, Katie gave her shoulder a gentle pat. "That's men for you," she whispered. "You just put up with it and they get bored and go away before too long. You be brave."

A faint trace of a smile touched Imogen's lips for a moment. Jealous of the response Katie had won, Jemima scowled at the servant girl. "Is there any milk she could have?"

"I'll find some."

Melerton might have prohibited feeding, but she could at least offer the girl liquid.

At nine precisely, she rose from her stool by the fire and took Imogen's hand. Still seated, the girl looked up at her, tears in her long lashes. Jemima found she had to turn away, unable to speak whilst gazing into those eyes. "You have to go back now."

Imogen squeezed her fingers, drawing her attention back. When Jemima risked another look, what she saw struck her as worse than anything that had gone before – hopelessness and resignation. Her charge rose, moving awkwardly like one in pain. Together, they made their way into the hall, hand in hand.

"Ah, perfect timing," Melerton announced.

All three gentlemen and Sakely's servant were crowded into the hallway. The servant retrieved a key from his pockets and unlocked a door at the foot of the stairs. Jemima had assumed it was merely a cupboard and had previously paid it no attention. However, as the door swung open, she saw a flight of stairs leading down into darkness.

"Toddle along then Southerby. I don't think we will be needing you again tonight."

"Thank you sir."

Imogen released her hand, but did not look up as Argent took her hand and steered her towards the steps.

There could be no sleeping. A faint scent of fruit and summer still clung to the pillows, reminding her of the morning's many surprises. It seemed a world away, a

lifetime ago. Her mind returned to the darkened stairs and mysterious door. *What had those men arranged down there? What were they doing to her?* Jemima had only the vaguest notions of what men did with women, but these tenuous thoughts were enough to fill her with fear. No matter how often she reminded herself it was merely another job, concern for Imogen tore at her, and she remained awake. In the early hours, she heard her employer and his friends retiring to the larger rooms, and hoped for a while that the young woman would slip into her bed again. The idea alarmed and enticed her in equal measure. However, she remained alone through the dark hours, unable to clear her thoughts and settle.

When the first hints of dawn touched her curtains, she rose and dressed in the faint light. The little room that had been aired for Imogen remained empty, and the door to the dark stairwell had been locked. In the kitchen, Mrs Garner's kettle whistled cheerfully, but the other servants had yet to appear.

"It's still quiet then," Jemima observed as she sat down.

"The Masters don't rise until late, so it'll be quiet for a bit longer, I'd say. Let me make you some tea. Doesn't look to me like you've slept a wink."

"It was not a restful night, no."

"I don't ask questions, and I don't make comments," Mrs Garner observed. "I don't say anything."

"Neither do I Mrs Garner. Neither do I."

The two women looked at each other, their faces equally grim. *We do as we are paid to, but she likes it no more than I do.* She shook her head, guessing they had all been hired for their hard hearts and disinterest. Somehow, Imogen had enchanted them all out of their normal ways of being.

Jemima remained in the kitchen as the household came alive. Other servants appeared and went about their work; busy and self-important city servants who felt far superior to the country employees. Unable to think of anything to do with herself, she sat and watched their labours, her eyes aching from sleeplessness and her head uncomfortably heavy. Eventually, Melerton's servant sought her out, and she was led to her employer.

"You wished to see me sir?" she began, as he seemed occupied with his dogs and oblivious to her presence.

"Ah yes, Southerby. A disappointing visit, we still haven't got what we want. Sakely thinks we're making progress but... we need her spirit broken. I expected more from you."

"I'm sorry sir, but I have only been here a few days, what you are asking takes time."

"I don't know how much time we have."

"I'll do what I can sir."

"Break her. Nothing else will do. I don't care how much you have to damage her to do it, but make sure you keep her alive."

"I understand." Her stomach cramped with a sudden feeling of sickness. "Where is she?"

"Oh, we left her in the cellar. I'll have it unlocked for you."

"Thank you sir."

She located a lantern, and stood in the hallway for an hour, struggling to keep focused as exhaustion worked on her nerves. At last, one of the men came and unlocked the door for her. With faltering steps, Jemima descended into the darkness beneath the house. It smelled damp and unwholesome. After thirty or so stairs, she turned a corner into a large, underground space. The flickering light from her lantern barely reached the walls and thick shadows threatened to hide all kinds of evils. Stepping forward, she saw there were strange symbols painted onto the floor. Finding them ominous, she muttered a brief prayer. Religion had never played much part in her life, but the familiar words of childhood devotions offered some comfort. As she stepped over the sinister markings, her skin prickled and the hairs rose on the backs of her arms.

*This is very wrong.* Every instinct told her to turn and run, to seek cleaner air and sunlight. It seemed they had left Imogen down here all night, alone in absolute darkness, with only the cold and painted floor to lie on. Whatever the three men were about, she somehow doubted it had anything to do with money or inheritance. The scene struck her as being like something from a darker fairy tale – the bloodier kind that kept small children awake at night.

Taking small steps, she swung the lantern in slow arcs, illuminating as much of the room as she could. After a while, she found Imogen's prone and naked form. Jemima dropped to her knees beside the girl, touching her shoulder. The skin was dreadfully cold, but the girl stirred. Releasing a breath she had not consciously held, Jemima brought the lantern nearer. It showed her dried blood in abundance.

"Imogen," she murmured. "Please wake up. You can't stay here. You have to stand up and come with me."

Her charge made no response. There was nothing else for it. She placed the lantern on the floor and hauled Imogen upright. The girl moaned softly, and swayed, clearly unable to support her own weight. With some difficulty, Jemima lifted her. Gritting her teeth, she headed for the stairs – obliged to leave the lantern behind. Some light filtered down from the open doorway, and she knew the ground to be even. Soon her arms began to ache and burn from this unaccustomed effort, but she forced herself onwards, ignoring the discomfort. Although Imogen was slight enough of form, heaving her up the stairs required considerable labour. When at last she emerged, the silent manservant locked the door behind her. Unable to bear her burden longer, Jemima sank to the ground, depositing the limp body on the floor.

Looking up, she saw the expression of naked hunger on the servant's face, and it angered her. Part of her wanted to demand his aid, but pride called her to do this herself. Outside, coaches were being readied and Melerton's dogs were barking. The stairs up to the bedrooms looked impossibly long, and from the sounds of it, then men would be coming down them at any moment. She wanted to hide Imogen from them, and that meant the kitchen. One final effort and she could rest for a while.

"What in God's name..." Mrs Garner began, but the rest of the question died on her lips as the door closed.

"Not now." Jemima scanned the kitchen, finding no one else there but the three of them. "Where is Katie?"



"I sent her to buy eggs from the farm. It will take her a good hour, by which time they should have gone."

Jemima nodded. "Do you have a blanket, a towel, anything I could wrap her in?"

"It just so happens that I do. Let me help you with her."

Between them, the two women brought Imogen closer to the fire. Jemima sat down on the cold flagstones, cradling the barely conscious girl in her arms as Mrs Garner retrieved the blanket.

"Once they have gone, we should put her to bed. Can you help me get her up the stairs?"

"Of course Miss."

Jemima sat for a long time, listening to the banging of doors and the thunder of footsteps on the stairs. As the house fell silent, Imogen opened her eyes and stared up at the woman holding her.

"They're leaving," Jemima whispered.

Imogen looked away from her – a tiny movement that spoke all too clearly of rejection. Not so many hours ago, Jemima had sought such a response, but having achieved it proved painful indeed.

Sitting on the edge of the narrow bed in Imogen's tiny room, Jemima had no idea what to do. The girl would not look at her, and she hardly knew what to say. Regret, such as she had never felt before, churned inside her, but no amount of wishing it otherwise would undo what had happened. Unable to bear the situation any longer, she reached out a hand, covering Imogen's fingers with her own. The contact made it easier to breathe. Struggling to form the words, she finally spoke.

"I'm sorry." She meant it, but this kind of confession did not come easily.

At last, Imogen turned her head. The expression on the girl's face was impossible to read, but at least now she had some tenuous sense of communication between them. For the first time since meeting her charge, she wished the young woman could speak to her; wanting to know how she felt, what she thought. The look in those eyes daunted her, defying what little skill she had in reading faces. A dozen excuses for her actions flitted through her thoughts, each as flimsy as the next. She would not offer them. Other words came instead.

"It's what I've always done. People hire me to look after children they do not much care for. They pay me to make those children biddable, afraid, easily ruled. I'm rather good at subduing people. It's my only significant talent, and my trade. I sell my skill and it provides me with a place to live, food to eat." She shook her head. "This is who I am Imogen. Not a very good person, but no worse than many others. Merlerton paid me to come here. He has asked me to break you so he can get whatever he wants from you. That's why I let him take you away last night. I'm just a hired servant, like Katie, and Mrs Garner and Mr Riggs."

Her words seemed to have little effect. Sorrowful eyes continued to gaze in her direction, making her feel all the more flawed and inadequate.

"I don't think I can do the job for him. I could pack my bag and go, and you could take your chances with whoever he sends next."

That drew her attention. Imogen shook her head, lines of concern furrowing her brow.

"But if I fail to break you, he will send me away and replace me. Imogen, might it not be easiest to give him what he wants? Be done with it, and perhaps he will let you go."

A weary smile touched the girl's lips. *What is she thinking?* Imogen turned her hand, taking Jemima's and lifting it to kiss, then resting her cheek against it. The gesture threatened to destroy what little self possession she had left.

"Stop this. You shouldn't... it's not right. I don't merit your affection. I am no friend to you Imogen."

Fingers brushed over her forehead, easing the tension there and reminding her of how desperately tired she felt. As if already in a dream, she rested her head on the pillow, then swung her feet up onto the bed as well. In a few heartbeats, exhaustion claimed her.

When Jemima woke again, night had fallen. She slid from the bed, freshly embarrassed by this repeated intimacy. Hungry, she sought out food in the kitchen, making her way through the dark with little difficulty. The whole atmosphere of the house had changed; the disruption Melerton, Argent and Sakely had brought still hung in the air. She couldn't pass the cellar door without a shiver, thinking of the sinister space below the floorboards. *What other unpleasant secrets might the building hide? And what where these men up to?* Melerton's dismissive references to 'complications' hardly explained anything. She had no answers, only a deep unease.

While Mrs Garner dozed in a chair by the fire, Jemima made up a plate of dried fruit and cheese for her traumatised charge, and carried the food upstairs, taking a candle with her. The room was too small even for a fireplace, and had grown cold. Candlelight offered a little cheer. She woke Imogen gently, and this time there were smiles. The unrestrained joy this inspired startled her, but she could not resist it.

"I could light the fire in my room if you would like?" she offered. Her suggestion met with another little smile and a hopeful nod. "Can you walk?"

Imogen looked troubled by this.

"Wait here then," Jemima said, her lips stretching towards the unfamiliar shape of a smile.

There were enough coals in her room, and she managed to kindle a small fire from the candle flame and a few dry sticks. Returning for the girl, she remembered that Imogen remained naked beneath the covers, and hesitated, afraid to touch the lovely, damaged creature. Chiding herself for being so foolish, Jemima lifted her, ignoring the protests from her aching back and arms. Imogen clutched the candle holder as they made the short journey between rooms. Holding her so close, her hands against bare skin, Jemima felt as though she had consumed an excess of alcohol. Her head swam and her senses were in total disarray. The fire welcomed them with a cheerful glow. She tucked the girl into bed, and tended the flames while Imogen picked at her food.

Unsure of what to do next, Jemima sat in her one chair, watching the girl. The silence lay thick between them, full of possibility. She wanted to know what had happened in that cellar, in all the lurid detail. It would be horrible, perverse even, and the thought of it would torture her, but even so she wanted to be told, aware that the darker strands of herself would enjoy hearing the worst of it. *I am no better*

*than they are, I would use her for my own ends.* She thought of how she had wielded her hairbrush, and the recollection brought shame and heat together.

Imogen coughed, sounding as though she meant to clear her throat. Parting her lips slightly, she began to sing. It started as a gentle humming, but at the sound even the fire grew quiet, as though the house held its breath in order to listen. Outside, the wind died and the rattling trees stilled. Pure notes fell from her lips, rippling like summer streams, echoing birdsong. Gradually, Jemima became aware of words flowing through the bright music. Unfamiliar language teased at her ears, graceful, alluring and utterly meaningless. New questions about Imogen's identity began to form in her, but the music washed them away, leaving no room for doubt or uncertainty. Never before had she heard anything as lovely as this. As the melody rose and fell, she felt the tension leave her body and a languid ease seep into her tired limbs.

Without thinking, she stood. A few steps carried her across the room. Imogen welcomed her with open arms, and for a while they sat together, holding each other. It seemed so easy, so natural. The music hung in the air for a long time after the girl had stopped creating it, surrounding them with strange magic. When she started on the buttons holding Jemima's dress closed, the older woman could find no means to protest. The top part of the garment peeled away easily, and the skirt followed. Deft hands touched her corsetry, and the tight lacings holding her small breasts in check. Breathing became strangely difficult, and she ached to be free of all restraint. Imogen's fingers found the way to liberate her, and in little enough time every part of her lay bare.

Shivering in the cold room, Jemima slipped under the covers, immediately aware of Imogen's warmth. She didn't move, but being so close to her companion felt sinfully good. For a while they lay side by side, studying each other's faces by the flicking candlelight. Despite the multitude of cuts and bruises, Imogen remained exquisite. The damage emphasised her vulnerability, and Jemima could not help but be enchanted by that.

When Imogen pressed a silken leg to hers, she gasped aloud. The response brought further contact, as the young woman nestled against her, touching in so many places. Jemima's hands took on a life of their own, gliding over soft skin and tangled hair. Beneath her fingers lay the curves and bones of Imogen's sweet form; hers to discover. As the candle burned low, its guttering flame sent the shadows dancing. Jemima risked a kiss. She placed her lips softly to Imogen's, not knowing how to do more than this. The girl responded, her mouth moving in ways that taught the virgin governess how to give utterly of herself. Gradually, lips parted and she surrendered to the tongue that sought to penetrate her.

With a final splutter, the candle gave out, leaving only the faint glow of firelight from the small grate. They moved against each other, and Jemima wondered how many ways there could be to touch. Fully aware of herself for the first time, the startled woman could not believe she had lived so long unaware of this incredible capacity to feel. Imogen's caresses brought tingling life to her body, each kiss bringing new delights. Wherever those meltingly soft lips explored became delicate and responsive, alive to a symphony of sensation. Jemima no longer knew herself, and it did not seem to matter at all.

Imogen's kisses covered her breasts and stomach, bringing fire to her loins until a gently lapping tongue found somewhere devastating to play. The heat and power of it swept away all other awareness. *Such sweetness.* She cried with it, gasping and trembling. With each moment, the strange blend of pleasure and tension grew more powerful, sending waves out through every part of her body. Unfamiliar feelings held her in thrall, stirring her body and consuming her attention. Her mind might not comprehend, but her flesh responded, crying out for more of this reason-stealing ecstasy. Colours pulsed behind her closed eyelids. She grasped the sheet beneath her, twisting it in taut fists, needing to cling as she shook and strained after greater sensation. Each breath brought the certainty that she could endure no more of this, and yet it continued, and she had no will to protest. Writhing and dripping sweat, she surrendered everything to the sweet angel whose nimble tongue worked transcendent magic between her thighs. For a few rapturous moments, all was light and glory.

Imogen held her until the last of her trembling subsided. In the aftermath of her release, Jemima felt weightless, formless. She drifted, languid and content as she had never been before. *There is Heaven on the Earth, and I have found it!*

For two remarkable days, she lived in a dream. While the sun illuminated the sky, the pair of them walked, roaming the landscape for hours on end. There were copses to be explored, ruined farm buildings, wild creatures, and the ever-changing weather to experience. Every tiny detail seemed miraculous in its beauty. They seldom saw anyone else, and walked hand in hand, fingers intertwined. Every now and then one or the other of them would pause to bestow a kiss. Jemima found herself laughing, and not caring when the wind tangled her hair around her face.

When darkness prevailed, they returned to Jemima's bed, to explore each other anew. Imogen was no innocent girl – that had become evident. She had sensual knowledge far surpassing the older woman's negligible insight. In the hours of sharing, Jemima learned every curve and secret of her beloved's body, enchanted by the soft bounty it offered. The mysteries of her own form became clear to her, and with every hour her understanding deepened. Although she knew few words for these feelings, the power of them overtook her utterly. When her fingers elicited squeals of delight from Imogen, the awe it inspired shook her to the core of her being. Kissing her charge's skin, licking at swollen nipples and losing herself in downy hair, Jemima felt whole and truly happy.

While Imogen lay sleeping, Jemima sat before her small mirror, teasing the many tangles from her hair. She studied the face in the glass, wondering if she had really changed so much, or if she saw herself differently now. Surely her eyes had never been this bright before, nor her cheeks so rosy. She smiled at her reflection, lips curving with practised ease, revealing a flash of teeth. Behind her, the mirror showed a sleeping beauty, her bruises mostly healed and her face untroubled by cares. It struck her then that this idyll could not possibly last. Sooner or later, Melerton, Sakely and Argent would be back for more of their deviant games. She could not break Imogen for them, but they would not keep her here if she failed. Cold dread seeped through her being. This dream of love could not last. Summoning

up all of her former cold control, Jemima forced herself to consider their situation properly.

They returned from the morning walk to find a flushed young man arriving at Harrington on horseback. He alighted from the chestnut gelding and swept off his hat.

"Good morning ladies, please forgive me for my sudden arrival, but my business is of great importance."

"How may we be of assistance?" Jemima enquired.

The young man glanced around nervously, but there was no one in earshot. "My name is Alfred Melerton," he began.

Jemima swallowed hard, wondering what new trouble had arrived at their door.

"You are acquainted with my older brother I believe?"

"I am in his employment," Jemima admitted. She wanted to reach out for Imogen's hand, but knew such a gesture would only reveal her fear. Watching the new arrival, she realised Alfred was staring at her companion.

"My God," he whispered, his tone almost reverential. "So it is true!"

"Sir, I do not follow your words."

"I'm sorry. This is a complicated business to say the least. My brother... oh, I hardly know where to begin. Do you have any idea who this young woman is?"

Jemima stole a glance at Imogen, realising how much she remained ignorant of regarding the sublime creature at her side. In the recent days, the details of history had seemed unimportant. "I believe she is a relative of yours, although I am not privy to the precise connection."

Alfred laughed at this. "Is that what he told you?"

"Yes."

"It's a long way from the truth."

"And what, pray, is the truth sir?"

"I doubt you would believe me if I said."

"I will gladly listen to anything you might have to say on the subject."

He shook his head at this. "We don't have time. She needs to come with me. I can take her to safety, before they do anything worse to her."

His words gave Jemima pause for thought. *Safety*. The one thing she could not give Imogen herself. She studied the young man, trying to gain some sense of his nature. How could she hand over her lover to his care, not knowing anything about him?

"I don't have time to argue with you, woman! Let me do what I must. If you have any human decency at all, you surely won't leave this sweet creature to my brother's tender mercies?"

How could she argue? She turned to look at Imogen, desperate for some word or sign. Alfred spoke a flurry of words in a language she did not recognise and to her amazement, Imogen responded in kind. Unable to follow the conversation, she stared in wonder, pain lancing her heart.

"She says that she will go with me, that she will send you word when she can. She thanks you for your kindness to her, and tells you not to worry. She has also asked me to tell you the truth."

"Thank you."

"The girl you see is not a mortal woman. She is an angel, summoned into this realm by occult powers, bound by cruelty. My brother and his friends seek to exploit her. I mean to keep her from harm."

Jemima stared at him with open mouth. Unable to move or speak, she stood frozen with incomprehension as the young man helped Imogen onto his horse, and rode away from the house. Sunlight blazed in the girl's hair, surrounding her with light. For a moment, she glanced back, only to vanish from view as the road curved away. Once they had gone, Jemima sank to her knees, careless of the mud and damp. She wrapped her arms around her waist, lost in pain and confusion. She wanted to weep and could imagine the downpour of tears that should have rushed forth from her in a torrent as she keened over the anguish of this loss. She could not have stopped him, and hoped with all her heart that he could indeed keep Imogen safe. Her eyes stayed dry and no crying came to ease the pain within her. That had been lost to her for a long time, and even in this moment of devastation she could not free herself into weeping.

*An angel. Impossible!* She remembered the two long injuries on Imogen's back and the birds that flew to her hands. *Angel.* What else could she have been? Still the tears refused to stream from her, but she shuddered with low cries of pain, keening pitifully for all the beauty that she had lost. There had been so little joy in her existence, so little colour, and the sheer loneliness of her existence bore down upon her as never before.

"Miss Southerby, whatever is the matter?"

Firm hands on her shoulders drew her out of the mire of her own distress.

"Mrs Garner, I... Imogen has gone."

"Gone? What do you mean?"

There seemed little point in offering anything but the truth. Jemima rose to her feet, smoothing down her dress. Her gloves were filthy and the plain frock no better but she tried to muster a little dignity. Although her voice cracked repeatedly, she forced out the words to explain what had just happened.

"Mr Melerton won't like it, you can be sure of that."

"I know. I doubt I could have stopped the young man."

"Mr Melerton does have a younger brother, and I have heard there is some ill feeling between them, although I can't say that I ever heard why." She shook her head. "You're in no state to be doing any serious thinking. Come inside. Warm up."

"What will you do?"

"What I am paid to do – to keep this house in good order. No more and no less."

Jemima found a faint smile for these words. "Thank you."

"I didn't think I'd mind when I took the job. I've worked for Sakely before. While I wouldn't like to make comment on my employers, he's an odd one. There are always young women where Sakely is concerned, and they usually end up in tears, one way or another."

"I have worked for rich men in the past. It is often so."

"I never much thought about it before, but then there was Imogen. How many other girls like her get to suffer because women like us turn a blind eye?"

Jemima had no answer to this, painfully aware that wilful ignorance had been the least of her crimes. Conscious of how much she had to atone for, she began to nurse a plan. The prospect of useful action eased her sorrow a little.

"Given time, perhaps Imogen could get to safety. If I leave tonight, do you think Katie might come with me? Just for a few days. Melerton paid me enough that I could easily pay her train fare home again."

"For Imogen, that girl would walk barefoot into Hell."

"Give me a day's head start, then get word to Melerton that I have taken Imogen and disappeared. I will go north – I have some family there."

"Take Katie with you. I follow you, Miss Southerby. Melerton will come looking, and in the meantime perhaps his brother can indeed get the poor girl to some safe place. Let us try."

Even with a bonnet and veil to disguise her face, Katie could never have passed for Imogen with anyone who had actually seen the young woman. Not that it mattered – they just needed to draw enough attention to themselves to be remembered. Ben Riggs took them to meet the evening train. They agreed the story would be that Jemima had claimed a letter had come asking her to take Imogen to Melerton, and that they had been fooled by the deception. None of them expected to keep their jobs.

"Good luck Miss, and you Katie. Good luck to you both," Ben said in quavering tones as the train approached.

"I'll do what I can, Ben," Katie replied in deathly earnest.

"We all will. She's special, that one."

"I know," Jemima whispered, swallowing hard. She squeezed Ben's hand before climbing into the carriage. A few days of Imogen's influence had transformed them all.

She laid a careful trail for Melerton to follow, mentioning her name more than was necessary, leaving a few items with her initials on for lost property to find, and praying with every breath that the scheme would help her lover flee to safety. Once they reached Carlisle, the duo rested for a day, then Jemima bought Katie a third class ticket for home, and wished the girl well. Rather than return to the house, the servant meant to go back to her parents for a while. Jemima envied her having such a refuge, but felt glad the girl would not suffer too much for her part in things.

"Do you think we'll ever see her again?" Katie asked.

"I think not, and it would be best for her if we do not. Hopefully the fine young man who took her away will treat her well."

In her mind, Alfred Melerton had become a chivalric hero of mythic proportions; the knight on his charger who had rescued the fair damsel and would no doubt make her his wife. Jemima tried hard to think no further than the church. If her girl could be safe and happy, that had to be for the best. She could not regret it. Instead, she tried to harden her heart once more and to forget the sweet memories of their brief time together.

Alone in an unfamiliar town, Jemima put the next stage of her plan into action. She had no desire to be caught by Melerton and had kept the final stage of

her flight a secret. With Katie gone, she had few tangible reminders of recent events. It seemed for the best. Having chosen the Lorne Arms for its shabby, rough look, she was keen to be free of the place. Two women might go untroubled in such an environment, but alone she would attract the wrong kinds of attention.

The unfamiliar streets did not intimidate her and after a few careful enquiries, she was well on her way. The three balls hanging over the shop promised all kinds of cheap necessities. She had never needed to visit a pawnbrokers before, and found the cluttered, dusty interior depressing. Poverty did what it must.

"Can I help you love?" enquired a toothless old woman in faded, ancient clothing.

"I need some clothes."

"I've got a nice pinafore, a few shawls..."

"Clothes for a man. About my height."

"I'm with you dearie. Let's see what we can do, eh?"

Evidently, the woman had seen this kind of trade before, and thought nothing of it. Soon Jemima was the owner of some rather musty, masculine clothing. The woman there asked no questions, and Jemima offered no explanation.

"If you want to pawn anything you don't need, you know where to find me," the old woman said with a knowing smile.

Jemima did not intend to leave her dress where it might be found. Here, the trail would end.

Back in her squalid lodgings, she stripped away familiar attire. For a while, she studied her ghostly reflection in the smutty window-pane. Should she abandon her corsetry as well? Her breasts were not large, but she suspected they might be noticeable if left unfettered. Working her fingers up and down the laces, she adjusted the fit, tightening it over her bust, and slackening the waist. Soon her curves were less apparent. She had never worn men's clothes before, but the shirt went on readily enough and she soon found out how the trousers and braces worked. A loose waistcoat further obfuscated her bust, while the shapeless jacket emphasised her shoulders.

Taking a small scissors from her bag, Jemima proceeded to remove the pins from her hair. She took a deep breath, aware that this action prevented all retreat. Hair like hers looked entirely wrong with her current garb and would betray her at once. Hiding it under a cap seemed too risky. She caught a long tress between her fingers, and cut it short, gathering the shorn locks and putting them aside – these she could sell, and she would not miss any easy opportunity for money. Once she had begun, the job ceased to disturb her and she worked rapidly to shear away this last evidence of her gender. As haircuts went, it was uneven, but the dishevelled look fit with her old clothes. For the first time in her life, she felt entirely glad of her strong jaw line and pronounced chin – the absence of feminine prettiness had troubled her youth, but now it served her well. She could pass as a man – tall, broad and plain enough that no one would give her a second glance.

Considering her new appearance, she decided that henceforth she would be Bertram Smith. No more the governess, or the servant of men. She would break no more girls and sell her services in more honest ways. As a man, finding work would be easier, and all kinds of employment possibilities were available where before



there had been none. Jemima nodded to herself. It would do. She could have a new life.

Carrying the remnants of her old self in her bag, she set off from her temporary abode to sell her feminine attire and recently-cut hair. In moments she realised these clothes required her to walk differently. The absence of skirts made her feel exposed, but no one seemed to be looking. Glancing around, Jemima tried to study the other men on the street, and to emulate their movements. A looser, longer stride, and a different way of holding her shoulders made all the difference. She would have to give way to women, lift her hat when appropriate, and remember to keep her voice low.

No one stopped or challenged her, not even when it came to the delicate matter of selling her hair.

"My wife's," she grunted. "Grew it down to her waist, but it's too much trouble."

"Baby pulling on it all the time? Oh, I remember that well enough. They get in your hair, little ones. Made me want to cut mine right off."

Jemima smiled, accepted the few coins she was offered and went on her way. *I can pass!* The thought sent a rush of sheer delight through her. She could be anyone, anything. Heading for the train station, she wondered exactly where she should go next. The border between Wales and England tempted her. Shropshire, perhaps, or Cheshire. *Somewhere with hills and quiet people.* As she walked, she fantasised about finding work as a farm hand, living close to the soil. In her heart, she knew this to be nonsense – she had none of the knowledge or skills for such work, much less the bodily strength. It would be more realistic to try her luck in a small town, where her writing skills might help her to find a place in a shop or some other business.

"Excuse me, can you point us in the direction of the Lorne Arms Inn in Shaddongate?" Startled by this approach, Jemima glanced up into the all too familiar face of Percival Argent. Fear caught her, but she looked down quickly, hoping not to be recognised.

"You go that way sir," she said, pointing in the direction she had come from. "It's a fair walk sir, you might want a cab."

Argent turned back towards Melerton. "A cab, then. I'm in no mood for walking."

"No, we'll walk. I need to stretch my legs. That damned woman's been nothing but trouble," Melerton grumbled. "I'll take a stick to her myself when I find her."

"We're nearly there. Assuming it isn't a trap. I must confess I feel uneasy. It has been almost too easy."

"It's not been my idea of easy! I'm not giving up, Argent, not when we're so close."

"Do you think this is just Southerby, or did one of the others get to her?"

"I don't know. It worries me. She didn't seem the type to run off. A cold-hearted bitch if ever I saw one. I think for the right money, she would have chained up her own grandmother."

"Which unfortunately means that for the right money, she may have done any number of things."

"Very true, my friend."

As they ambled out of earshot, Jemima felt her cheeks burning with a mixture of rage and shame. She recognised the woman they were describing all too easily, and the words struck home.

*Not any more*, she promised herself. Two of the men were on her trail, but where was Sakely? What had Argent meant? *One of the others*. How many people wanted Imogen? Were there other dangers and threats she had not known about? In trying to save the girl from these three, might she have condemned her to something worse? With no idea where Imogen had gone, her only hope of insight came in the form of these two odious men. She glanced towards the station, able to smell the hot oil; a distinctive aroma that promised freedom. *A new life*. Argent and Melerton were some distance down the road now. Let them walk away and that would be the end of it. Follow them and she might undo all the good her distraction might have achieved. Indecision wracked her for a few seconds, then she set off at a trot, getting close enough to her former employer to eavesdrop on his conversation. She caught them at a corner, and stayed as close as she dared.

"... might be on to something. I'll send him a telegram tonight," Argent said.

"The whole thing's rum. I don't mind telling you, I'm feeling out of my depth here."

"We've been out of our depth from the beginning, if you ask me."

"Sakely made it seem so plausible." Melerton sounded ill at ease.

"He's good at that. I think for him, it is."

"He's studied. He knows things. What do I know?"

"We have to find her. If these fellows who got her in the first place... oh, I don't want to be tangled up in any of this." The younger man sighed dramatically.

"Do they know it was us, do you think?"

"I sincerely hope not."

Why Argent stopped walking, she had no idea. He turned, leavening Jemima with nowhere to hide. Recognising her from their encounter at the train station, he looked her over a little more carefully. She kept walking, meaning to pass them as if nothing was wrong, but Melerton grabbed her arm.

"Are you following us?"

"No sir!"

"You have a familiar look about you. Who the devil are you?"

"Smith... Bertram Smith."

Melerton grabbed her chin between his fingers and stared into her face. The tobacco-laden stench of his breath revolted her. A man, in these circumstances, would throw a punch, she supposed. Jemima brought her fist up hard, connecting with her assailant's jaw and throwing him off balance. He released her, and she ran. Taking every turning she could find, Jemima sprinted until her chest ached. Not in the habit of running, she struggled to hold a decent pace, but fear and instinct kept her moving.

They caught her in the end, in a narrow, quiet alleyway. Argent punched her several times, knocking the wind out of her so that she staggered back into the wall.

"Who are you working for?"

"No one."

"Why were you following us?"

"I wasn't."

"What do you think Argent, threats or bribery for this one?"

"Perhaps a little of both?"

Melerton hit her shins with his walking stick. "Now man, let's have some sense out of you."

She stared at him, fierce and defiant, trying to work out how to learn what they knew without giving herself away. *Wait and see what questions they ask.*

"Give us good answers, and there will be money for your troubles," Argent said. "Alternatively..." he let the threat hang unvoiced.

"Hang on a minute!" Melerton exclaimed. "I do know you, dammit!"

Jemima held her breath, trying to reveal nothing.

"Short hair, men's clothes... Nearly had me fooled but I don't forget a face." With that, he pulled open her jacket. In face of this threat, she fought back, trying to push him away. Larger and heavier by far, Melerton had the advantage. With Argent to aid him, they very soon had her on the ground. Unkind fingers tore at her shirt buttons, baring her all-too-feminine corsetry. All she could think of was how much worse it would have been without the underwear. The idea of Melerton exposing her breasts sickened her to the core.

"Miss Southerby, isn't it?" Melerton said.

"It does look to be," Argent agreed.

She remained silent.

"Where is Imogen?"

She knew her silence would win more blows, and tried to ready herself for the shock and pain. With the first few she resisted crying out, but the two men did not relent. As darkness rose like floodwater around her, their questions became mere noise and she slipped gratefully beyond their reach.

Cold. Pain. She pulsed between the two, unable to properly understand either, or free herself from their grasp. Voices chanted in her head, repeating ominous words in languages she could not comprehend. Pain again, like a thousand needles delving into her flesh. Her eyes snapped open, apparently of their own volition, but she could see little – blurry human forms, dancing lights and swirling smoke.

"Speak!"

"Alfred Melerton," she said, not even conscious of the question this answer pertained to. More words assaulted her ears, but her lips could not shape replies. She could not provide them with what they sought.

"Leave her awhile. I'm tired." Argent's voice, she thought.

"Step back then gentlemen, let me close our circle properly."

More sinister language followed, and the chill in the room eased somewhat.

"Not so pretty as our previous guest," Melerton observed.

"But a good deal more co-operative, I am pleased to say," Sakely replied.

"But what on earth does my brother have to do with anything? He doesn't know the first thing about this. Unless..."

"Someone got to him, in order to get to you."

"A possibility Percy, much as I hate to admit it."

"Gentlemen, I think we must pay Alfred a visit tomorrow. It may be too late, but we have little to lose."

"Agreed."

"And what of Southerby here?" Argent asked.

"Throw her out. I don't want her dying down here. No doubt even dead she would manage to cause trouble."

She heard their footsteps on the stairs. There were a few candles still burning, and through the haze of sweat and blood veiling her eyes, she could make out the lurid colours of designs painted on the floor around her. *The cellar at Harrington.* Horror filled her heart. Footsteps alerted her to an imminent arrival. Sakely's servant untied her, and as Jemima tried to straighten out, the pain in her limbs intensified.

"If you can't walk, you'll have to go up those stairs on your knees. I won't carry you," the man hissed.

She crawled, because there was no other way out. Every part of her body shuddered with agony and weakness, but she reached the steps. Undignified though her ascent was, she eventually emerged on her feet into fading daylight. A cold wind whipped leaves from the trees as Sakely's servant pushed her out of the building. She stumbled, but managed not to fall. Turning like one in a dream, she looked up at the familiar windows.

*Here she loved me. Here I spent the best days of my life. And here, in this spot, I broke my heart when she left me. When I let her go. Imogen. Imogen.* She whispered the name like a prayer, and it gave her some comfort.

With her jacket pulled tight around her, she took a few faltering steps forward, stopped, started again. The wind cut through her clothing, chilling battered flesh and emphasising her discomfort. They had torn her shirt, and aside from her clothing, she had nothing to her name. The future seemed hopeless, impossible. She could not live like this; would not degrade herself by begging or throw herself upon the mercy of a poor house. One step at a time. One footfall after another. She walked, because there was nothing else to do.

Several miles down the road, she found the wreckage of a carriage. A tree had fallen across the road, leaving smashed wood scattered in a wide circle. Horses snorted with fear. She went to them, aching fingers struggling to free them from their bonds. Neither animal seemed hurt, and they ran from her as soon as she released them. As Jemima worked, she could not help but see the pulped remnants of the poor man who had been driving them. The grisly sight turned her stomach, but she lacked the strength to be moved by this latest horror. Numb and disoriented, she watched the horses make their bid for freedom and wished she could run as easily as they did. Whoever had been in the coach would be dead, and she had no desire to see any more.

A shattered voice reached her ears.

"Who is that? For pity's sake, help me."

Much as she wanted to pretend deafness, she could not do it. Circling the crushed vehicle, she could find no obvious signs of life, but bending down, she saw a hand reaching through the shattered remnants of a door. A male hand, pale, and splattered with crimson droplets.

"What can I do?" she asked, knowing herself too exhausted to offer any aid.

"I can't move."

"I can't help you."

"It's started." An ugly cough followed. "Tell the others. It's started."

"What others?" Although she knew it must be one of her three tormentors crushed in the broken carriage, she could not tell which.

"Francis Melerton. Robert Sakely. Get word to them... tell them... tell them what you saw."

"And why should I do that?"

"For pity's sake..."

"I have no pity, as you had none for me last night, nor any for Imogen."

"Miss Southerby... please, their lives depend on it. I'm begging you."

There were possibilities in this and she grasped after them. "Tell me how to find Melerton, and his brother. If I see them, I will pass on your message."

He croaked out addresses.

"What were you doing with Imogen?"

"I don't think you would understand." His voice had grown fainter.

"I would like to hear."

"We wanted her power."

"What power?"

"It was Sakely's idea. We stole her but we couldn't break her. And now we're going to pay."

"You think Imogen did this to you?"

"Not her. No." He coughed again. "I don't even know their names. It's all Sakely's fault."

"So you know nothing else that might be of use to me?"

"Nothing. I swear it. I thought it was a joke, and when I realised... it was already too late."

She rose, muscles stiff and slow to respond. However, his words had given her a new sense of purpose, allowing her to draw deep into her reserves of strength.

"Don't leave me! You've got to help me! Please... I beg of you..."

His words haunted her first few steps, but soon grew distant. She could do nothing for him and had no desire to keep him company as he bled to death from his wounds. However much pain Percival Argent might suffer, however afraid he may be of death's approach, she could muster no sympathy for him.

For two days, Jemima did nothing but walk. She could hardly think, her senses addled by lack of sleep. Roadside banks drenched in dew began to look like possible beds, but she knew if she stopped, she would never find the will to start moving again. Whenever she faltered, she concentrated on remembering Imogen: The feel of her hair, the sound of her breathing, the scent of her warm skin. Each detail seemed more vivid than the washed out autumnal landscape around her. She clung to memory, and declined to consider what the future might hold.

After a while, hunger faded away leaving hollowness in its place. Food became unimaginable, as did the idea of ever lying down and resting again. For long hours, only the rhythm of one foot following another occupied her mind. It seemed to convey the essence of a great mystery, as though all the wisdom of the world had

been locked into this simple action. If only she could properly understand it, then all else would make perfect sense, she felt sure. The addresses Argent had given her were the only firm points of reference in her mind, but she knew neither location. However, her feet moved apparently of their own accord, bearing her onwards.

Hooves rattled on the stones in the road. She moved closer to the hedge, shoulders hunched and head bowed low.

"You there!"

At the sound of this strong, young, male voice she raised her head, eyes barely able to focus on the face before her. He rode, and had another horse with him.

"It is you then. My Lady said you would be here."

The phrase sounded bizarre, but Jemima had long since passed beyond reason.

"Can you ride?" the man asked.

"I have ridden, a long time ago," she said. Memories of hunting flashed through her thoughts. She had been a girl then, in an entirely different world.

"Come, there's no time to waste."

It took her three attempts to secure a foot in the stirrup. She had ridden side-saddle before, but this was a man's saddle. She struggled up.

"Keep with me," he said, setting off at a pace. Her horse followed, needing no instruction. All Jemima could do was cling on and hope for the best. At first she found the constantly moving form beneath her difficult and unsettling, but her body adapted to it, settling into the pattern. She drifted along the edges of sleep, only half aware of hedges and lanes as they passed by. Another impossible development in the dream world of her life. Nothing seemed real any more, but she couldn't muster the wit to care.

At nightfall they stopped, resting in an inn. Her companion seemed to have all the details in hand, and so Jemima did as he suggested – sitting, eating, ... and falling asleep at the table. She woke in a bed, and did not ask how she came to be there. When they set off at first light, her head ached from exhaustion, but the few hours of sleep had allowed some of her reason to return.

"Where are we going?" she asked the young man as they trotted along a quiet road.

"To my mistress."

"And who is she?"

"She says that you may call her Isobella."

"And what does this mistress of yours want with me?"

"I do not know precisely and it is not my place to say. She sent me to fetch you."

"How did she know where to find me?"

"It is in her power. I can say no more."

"I know you," Jemima said. "I recognise you. We have met before but I cannot recall your name."

"Alfred Melerton."

"Ah. I have a message for your brother and his friend Sakely."

"Then tell it to me."

She saw no reason to keep silent. "Percival Argent's coach was struck by a tree. I believe he is dead. He said it has begun, but did not say what."

"Oh."

"This comes as no shock to you?"

"I am beyond being shocked."

"What is all of this about, Mr Melerton?"

"Imogen, for the greater part."

"But why?"

"She has power, and others want to control it."

"What power can she have? She's just a girl."

"I do not, in truth, know what she is. But she is certainly not just a girl."

"You told me that she is an angel."

"I did. Perhaps she is."

"You spoke with her!"

Melerton laughed, and produced a few lines of the musical language he had used before. "Something my Mistress taught me."

"But Imogen conversed with you!"

"Imogen may have said something, but I have no idea what it was."

"If you lied to me then, why should I believe you now?"

"I have no idea, Miss Southerby."

"Why are you telling me this?"

"I don't know. I hardly know myself these days."

Jemima nodded. He had spent time with Imogen, and her enchantments were working upon him too, softening his nature and mellowing his ideas. She recognised the symptoms well enough and smiled to herself.

A little after midday, they arrived in a small town perched precariously on the edge of the Cotswolds. Houses clung to the steep sided hill, their yellow stone glowing in the afternoon sunlight. Melerton led her to a large, secluded establishment where a lad met them and took the horses.

"Welcome to Painswick, Miss Southerby." He looked her up and down. "A bath may be in order, and a change of clothing before I present you to my mistress. Although I have no idea where I am to find you skirts at this time of the day."

Jemima looked him in the eye. "I have no desire for skirts."

"I can lend you something of my own."

"That would be much appreciated. Thank you."

Just as the young man claimed, he had evidently moved beyond all ability to be shocked.

The water around her turned cloudy grey with the accumulated dirt. The heat of it revived her a little, and it felt good to be clean again. Jemima noted that her body had grown harder and leaner than ever, taxed to its limits by all she had endured of late. By the time she emerged from the water, a neat set of clothes lay on the bed. She and the younger Melerton brother were of a comparable height and build, so they would do well enough. She appreciated his choice of dark fabrics and simple designs and set about dressing with some enthusiasm. With the ruined remnants of her corset gone, she could do nothing with her breasts but let them hang

free. It felt peculiar, but they did not show, and the cut of Melerton's garments disguised her gender well enough.

A long mirror showed her a slender, elegant figure, more masculine than not. She no longer recognised herself in the image. The closed and angry woman of her past had vanished. Jemima felt no desire to be a man – she liked the freedom the appearance granted, but did not want to forsake her female self entirely. *What am I? Who am I? I do not fit anywhere. I suppose I never did if truth be told.*

A knock at the door redirected her attention. "Are you ready, Miss Southerby?"

"I believe so, Mr Melerton."

Neither spoke as he led her towards her audience with the lady of the house. They entered a sunny parlour on the ground floor. Jemima hardly saw the room, her eyes drawn instead to the woman who stood by one of the long windows. At first glance, their hostess defied any attempts at divining her age. Beauty and bearing combined such that she might have been twenty, or fifty. Raven black hair piled ornately on her head, held in place with glittering pins. Her clothing seemed the height of fashion to Jemima's eye. She had a sleek figure, and a cold expression. Everything in her demeanour spoke of pride, confidence and authority.

"Mistress, I bring you Jemima Southerby."

At this, the lady of the house turned. She offered no polite introductions, but instead scoured Jemima with a long gaze.

"Well done," she replied at last, her voice barely more than a whisper.

Prickly from being inspected, Jemima stood mute, unsettled. None of her notions of manners had prepared her for a scene like this and she had no idea how to behave. Silence seemed the safest course of action.

"Welcome to my home, Miss Southerby."

"Thank you."

"I am sure you are anxious to know what this is about."

"I cannot deny it."

"Imogen is ... dear to me. I wish to take care of her. She is unhappy, and I believe your presence may ease that."

Jemima could not hide the degree to which these words startled her. After everything she had experienced, this twist seemed the most improbable of all.

"My intention, Miss Southerby, is that you live here as my guest, indefinitely."

"Oh!" She shook her head in disbelief. "Thank you."

"Then you accept my offer?"

"Yes."

"Good. We have a few house rules. Melerton can explain them to you." Her tone implied dismissal, and she reinforced it by turning away to gaze through the window once more.

Melerton led her to a smaller room, and rang for servants. Soon there was cake and buttered toast. After her days of fasting, it seemed like a feast.

"The house rules," Melerton began. "We are not to go out before eight in the morning, nor to remain out later than eight in the evening without permission. We are not to invite anyone to the house, nor are we to discuss our business or that of



other guests with anyone outside the house. Any room that is unlocked is free to be used, locked rooms are not to be discussed or enquired about. Otherwise, you are free to do as you please. If you need anything, just ask."

"This all seems very strange," Jemima admitted.

"It is that. Better not to ask questions."

"Imogen...?"

"Is here, but is not well. I will take you to her in a while."

"What does your mistress want with her?"

"I do not truly know, and I have learned not to ask."

"So long as no harm befalls her, I am happy enough to help in whatever way I can."

"Good. It is not advisable to cross my Lady. She does not take kindly to it, and her responses are ... thorough."

"I do not much like the sound of that."

"If ever you are inclined to consider betrayal, remind yourself of Percival Argent."

Jemima frowned at this. "His carriage was struck by a tree. An unfortunate accident."

"No accident. Believe me. Sakely will die, as will my brother."

"Do you imply that she can bring death by supernatural means?"

"I do not imply it Miss Southerby, I state it plainly. Cross Isobella at your peril."

"Thank you for your advice," Jemima said, already wondering how long it would be before she had to take such a risk. It might easily be scaremongering. Melerton knew about Argent. It proved nothing, but she intended to be on her guard nonetheless.

At the back of the house, nestled against the much older building, stood a stunningly modern glasshouse. Jemima had seen small ones from afar, but this impressed her. Warm and humid, it smelled of growing things. With the world beyond the glass so drab and grey, the bold colours of exotic plants were breathtaking. For a few moments she paused at the threshold of this magical place, her senses delighting in the scene. There were chairs amongst the plants, statues and other surprises. Somewhere, amongst the foliage, Imogen waited for her. Just under a fortnight had passed since their separation, but so much had happened in that time. Jemima was half afraid to see her lover again, unsure of how they would relate to each other now. Her chest tightened painfully as she stepped forward to hunt for the girl who had changed her life so utterly.

In a secluded corner, Imogen sat in a large wicker chair, curled up like a cat, bare feet peeking from beneath a simple dress. Her long hair fell loose around her shoulders, and she stared distractedly into space. Although she looked pale and drawn, she appeared more lovely than ever. A lump formed in Jemima's throat. She wanted so many things - but above all, to have those soulful eyes look her way and brighten with recognition. She feared Imogen might not welcome her, or want her attentions, and for a few long seconds, Jemima found she couldn't move or speak. The sheer power of her adoration eventually triumphed over her doubt. Three paces

carried her forward, and she dropped down onto her knees at Imogen's feet, reaching for her beloved's hand as she did so. Her body shook, no longer hers to control. Imogen started at her touch and looked her way, startled. Realisation lit her eyes and a hint of colour flushed her pale cheeks.

"He-llo," she whispered, her voice faltering.

"You are talking?"

Imogen smiled at this and looked awkward. "Hello." She managed the word smoothly on the second try.

Jemima's mind raced. *Imogen could speak!* She guessed her sweet girl had learned a few words while they were apart. Perhaps someone had thought to teach her, or she picked it up as a small child might.

"Are you well?" she asked.

"No," Imogen said.

"What is the matter?" Jemima asked, her heart full of tender protectiveness.

Imogen looked about her, as if trying to find a word, but remained silent.

"You can understand what I say?"

"Yes."

"But find it hard to speak?"

"Yes."

That at least paved the way toward better communications. There were so many things she wanted to ask, she hardly knew where to begin. "Imogen..." Before she could give voice to another question, Imogen lifted her hand, bringing it to her cheek. The gesture spoke so clearly, Jemima felt all the fear she had carried melt away. Soft hair brushed her face as they moved closer to each other, kisses covering her forehead and cheeks. Her position on the floor restricted her movements, so Jemima rose, drawing Imogen from the chair and pulling her close.

"I have thought of little but you since we parted," she confessed.

By way of answer, her former charge reached delicate fingers into her shorn hair, exploring it with an expression of fascination on her face. Unable to resist for any longer, she planted a gentle kiss on Imogen's lips. Arms wrapped around her neck, lips parted to give her unimpeded access. There could be no mistaking the need and desire flaring between them, and Jemima revelled in it. Her hands glided over familiar curves, and her touch elicited sweet murmurs of delight. She could tell Imogen wore nothing beneath her shift, and the possibility of pulling the dress from her and revealing her naked beauty filled the older woman's thoughts.

Imogen's fingers snaked up under her borrowed waistcoat, finding the curve of unrestrained breasts. It was Jemima's turn to sigh and gasp, as knowing fingers sought her nipples and teased them into hardness. She had missed this so very much! Having forced herself to accept she would never lie with Imogen again, it seemed hard to believe they could be so happily reconciled. A beautiful house to live in. Protection from Melerton and Sakely. It felt too good to be true. The feeling that there must be some catch stole away a little of Jemima's happiness, but she threw herself into the moment, determined that the worrying could wait until later. For now, she needed to taste those sensuous lips again.

Pulling away from her, Imogen tugged the shapeless dress over her head and discarded it. As Jemima had thought, she wore nothing else. Although afraid of

being caught, she had to come closer, to touch and taste the beautiful form once more. Imogen's eager fingers went to work on her own attire, the intention to strip her naked clear enough. They were well enough hidden, she supposed, although what would happen if they were caught, she hated to think.

*No worrying. No future. Only this moment, and Imogen.* Skin to skin, they caressed each other. Jemima realised she had barely lived since their parting. Only here was she truly alive, with this strange and beautiful woman pressed close against her. Nothing else stirred her soul in the same way.

A hand slipped over her stomach, plunging down between her thighs. Jemima responded in kind, seeking out the secret places she had cherished before. They clung to each other, fingers working with shared determination. *Such sweet wetness!* Imogen yielded to her, slick and luscious in her arousal. Hungry for each other and aching from separation it took so little to win those first, trembling orgasms.

"Yours," Imogen breathed.

The word conveyed such powerful sentiments, Jemima felt stinging at her eyes and wondered if she might cry. Imogen stripped away her defences so easily, dismantling the hardened layers that had kept her safe. There could be no protecting herself from this tender invasion. Trembling and struggling for breath, she buried her face in Imogen's silky hair.

"Oh!" the girl whimpered, audibly grieved.

"I'm sorry. You give of yourself so freely. I am not used to such kindness. Forgive me for seeming sad." She raised her head, no longer needing to hide her emotions.

Gentle fingers caressed her cheeks, eyes full of compassion gazing up at her all the while. She had the feeling Imogen understood, and accepted. "No one has ever loved me as you do."

The confession won her a smile. "Yes."

They spent the fading hours of sunlight in the greenhouse, lost in touch and tenderness. Jemima tried her lover with new words, watching as she struggled to form the shapes and sounds. Often her speech emerged fragmented into bird-like music, and barely intelligible. Imogen struggled to communicate, and laughed, and all seemed well. As the short day reached its close, they dressed again, retreating to brighter rooms and the comfort of fire.

"Are they kind to you here?" Jemima asked in lowered tone.

"Yes."

"Good. Are you happy to stay then?"

"Yes."

With the right questions, she could find out enough about her companion's wishes.

There were only three of them for dinner; the two women and Alfred Melerton. None of them commented on Isobella's absence. They made an odd trio - Melerton had dressed formally, Imogen wore her white shift and loose hair, while Jemima retained her manly attire.

"I must admit you carry my suit rather well," Melerton observed.

"Thank you."

"You will need clothing. Isobella has asked me to see to it. Given the... delicacy of the circumstances, I could have my tailor make up a few things for you based on my own measurements. You would not need to see him I think."

"That would be most appreciated." She paused, wondering how to broach the delicate subject of undergarments. Inspiration struck. "Could I have some lengths of linen as well?"

"Certainly."

That solved the problems both of securing her breasts, and dealing with her infrequent bleeding.

"As for instructing my tailor, any preferences I should be aware of?"

"I like dark colours and simple designs. These suit me very well."

"People may assume we are siblings. You look more like me than even Francis does. Perhaps, when Isobella has finished with him, you could assume his place. His identity. So long as you stay out of London it might work very nicely."

"What a curious idea!"

"It amuses me."

They said no more on the matter, but Jemima's mind fluttered with both possibilities and misgivings. It had never been in her nature to trust anyone, especially when she could not tell what motivated them. If Alfred's offer was genuine, it created a new selection of possibilities, and attendant dangers. She did not feel inclined to trust him. Undoubtedly there were a great many things she had yet to learn about Isobella and her peculiar household. While Imogen was safe, she had no objection to staying, but already her mind had turned towards escape plans, certain they would need to leave eventually. This time she had no doubts about the matter – they would run together, and make the best of it. She would not part from Imogen again.

When Melerton excused himself, the lovers remained seated for a little while. A few shy glances and questioning looks passed between them. In the thrall of desire, Jemima could find no voice for her wanting. However, Imogen rose, taking her hand. "Come!"

There were a great many closed doors in the vast house. Jemima intended to explore as many as she could, but for now her only interest lay in following Imogen. They paused in one of the doorways, stealing a kiss, before entering the room. A fire had been lit, and in its glow, the furnishings were just visible. A large bed dominated the room, standing free from the walls. It was a peculiar arrangement, but at that moment, Jemima did not care in the slightest.

"Is this your room?" she asked softly.

"Yes."

It had been easy before, in the madness of Harrington – Imogen had come to her and she had never needed to do much. Now she felt awkward, uncertain of quite how to behave.

"Plea...?" Imogen said, her gaze intense. "Plea?"

No matter how she doubted or disbelieved, the need in that barely voiced request undid her. She swept Imogen up in her arms and carried her the few steps to the bed, depositing her carefully and finding herself drawn down too.

"Do you want me in your bed Imogen?"

"Yes."

"I can think of nowhere I would rather be."

They wandered the wooded hills, crunching over dead leaves and listening to the birdsong. A pathway led them up to a vantage point, with views down to Gloucester and across the Severn flood plain. While it seemed a gentler place than the border hills she loved, Jemima felt happy enough here. She caught Imogen around the waist and pulled her close, not caring if anyone saw them. Wearing Melerton's clothes, she could pass well enough for a man, at a distance at least. Out here, with the sun on her cheeks and the wind in her hair, Imogen came to life. All the wilting fragility visible the previous night had vanished. She laughed readily, her merriment tinkling like a stream. As they walked, Jemima named the various birds for her, and listened to garbled attempts at repeating them.

"Bla... bla..." Frustration furrowed Imogen's brow.

"Blackbird. Look, there's a nuthatch, on the tree ahead." She pointed, delighted in being able to share this knowledge she had learned from books as a child. Birds had appealed more to her than the disinterested adults in her family. "Can you make them come to you?"

Imogen smiled at this and took Jemima's hand, holding it so that forearm and wrist were level. She called out, her voice undeniably birdlike. In moments, a bright eyed blue tit landed on Jemima's wrist, small talons gripping her glove as it regarded her. She held her breath, never having been so near to a wild thing before and awed by its closeness. It stayed for a few moments, then fluttered away again.

"Thank you!" she said, her heart full of wonder. Each day gave her more to love in this remarkable creature, and she thought that she would burst with the magnitude of her feelings. When Imogen's gaze met hers, she felt that passion returned and echoed; a soul in perfect sympathy with her own.

"I wish it could always be like this," she said, with a sigh.

"Yes. I... I am..."

Jemima smiled encouragingly.

"So-a-ray," Imogen said, very slowly. Her expression suggested hope that the word had been clear enough. Jemima shook her head.

"Soh-ray."

"Sorry?"

"Yes."

"You have nothing to be sorry for! Oh, my dear one, there is no fault on your part."

"I..." she shook her head. "I am..."

"Beautiful." Whatever criticism Imogen wished to make of herself, she had no desire to hear it.

"Mistress wishes to see you at once," a servant girl announced when they returned to the house. "Alone."

Jemima felt a quiver of foreboding. "Wait for me in the glasshouse?" she asked Imogen.

"Yes."

Returning to the parlour where she and Isobella had first been introduced, Jemima could not help but worry at the reason for this summons.

"Good afternoon Jemima," her hostess murmured as she entered the room.

"Come, sit with me." She gestured toward a chair.

"Good afternoon," Jemima responded, sitting as directed.

"How are you settling in?"

"Very well thank you."

"Imogen seems a good deal happier for your presence."

She smiled at this, unable to prevent a blush from blossoming on her cheeks.

"There is nothing to be ashamed of. Not in this household. Here, the rules and restrictions of the wider world hold no sway.

"There is a great deal I am unused to."

Isobella smiled at this. "It is my dearest wish that you and Imogen should be happy here. I have a gift that I hope will aid you in finding that happiness." She placed a parcel into Jemima's hands.

Inside the paper, Jemima found a leather cylinder with a rounded tip and a number of ribbons spreading from its base. Puzzled, she turned it over in her hands.

"I see you are not familiar with such toys."

"I am afraid not. What is it?"

"Stand, and I will show you."

Isobella slipped ribbons around her thighs and waist, tying the item in place over her trousers. It bobbed there, and realisation began to dawn. Jemima touched the object gingerly, fascinated by it.

"Smear it with this to make it easy," Isobella said, presenting her with a jar of oil. "With this, you can give our dear, sweet Imogen everything she needs."

Jemima considered what it might be like to use this artefact on her beloved's body. It would go deeper than fingers, filling her in new ways. She imagined the gasps, the sighs, and heat pooled between her legs.

"Thank you, for the gift and the instruction."

"Make good use of both."

"I will."

"I shall see you at dinner. Save your toy for tonight however, surprise her with it then."

Jemima nodded, happy enough to go along with this simple plan.

Although she had nothing in which to dress for dinner, Jemima retired to the room she now shared with Imogen. Her beloved remained in the glasshouse, gaining confidence with a pencil as she tried to draw the plants. Unfastening her borrowed trousers, Jemima retrieved the leather dildo and set about tying it in place. She had decided to wear it – wanting it ready for use when the time came, and concerned about putting it on. The ribbons took some organising, and she fiddled with them for nearly a quarter of an hour before the device sat as she wished. Looking in the mirror, she examined her new protrusion, wondering whether it much resembled a male part. It made her feel different – powerful and transgressive. Even when she tucked it out of sight beneath her clothing, it remained very much in

her awareness. She thought it did not show, but the idea of going down to dinner with it still in place gave her a most deliciously indecent feeling. For a moment, she questioned her doubts about Isobella – in this house all things seemed possible, and the gift she wore created wondrous possibilities. Something niggled in her thoughts, and her tendency to doubt remained ascendant. She would not lower her guard, or have her confidence bought so readily.

There were a surprising number of dinner guests that evening. Mr Edward Prase, and Mr Nathaniel Dover both appeared to be affluent men in their forties, while Mrs Emma Carterhaugh appeared to be of her own age. None of them enquired into the private life of another, and so the conversation focused on the weather, the quality of the food and fragments of political gossip that held no allure for her. Jemima had never taken much interest in what the newspapers had to say.

During the meal, she divided her attention between watching Imogen, and thinking about the object in her trousers. She had let it slide down one leg, and whenever she moved, she could feel it.

"I do like that radical hairstyle of yours, Jemima," Mrs Cartherhaugh observed.

Such familiarity from the mouth of a stranger unsettled her, but in this house of broken rules, she wanted to accept it. "Thank you, Emma."

"Suits you. It must be so much easier to get things done without the petticoats to contend with, I imagine."

"It is. I have had quite enough of skirts, I think."

"Oh, I think they have their moments," Isobella remarked, never raising her voice above a whisper. Her quietness had an uncanny power to command, and the table fell silent as she spoke. "Sweet Imogen would look quite out of place in anything else, I think."

Imogen smiled at this, but watching her, Jemima could not help but think of the corset, and the hairbrush. She swallowed hard and shifted her leg, feeling the fake cock again.

In this house, the convention of the women rising after a meal and leaving the men to talk and smoke held no sway. Isobella rose, and the men stood much as normal, but instead of inviting the women to join her she said, "Jemima, Imogen, do excuse us, we have business to attend to." With that, the others quietly followed her out of the room.

Finding herself alone at last with her beloved, she smiled across the table. While it had been merely a few hours since their last kiss, it felt too long. She needed that soft mouth yielding to hers, and the musical sighs of Imogen's pleasure.

"Will you come to bed with me?" she asked.

Imogen bit her lower lip, and smiled. "Yes."

As she undressed, Isobella's gift revealed itself.

"Oh?" Imogen reached to touch the smooth leather, turning it slightly so that the ribbons tugged.

"Do you like it?" Jemima asked, nervous now that the moment had come.

Imogen laughed and ran her hands up and down the length, making Jemima wish her body extended that far.

"It is for you, I think. What should we do with it?"

By way of an answer, Imogen kissed her, with tongue sliding erotically between Jemima's hungry lips.

"Have me Jem." Her words were a breathy staccato that transformed Jemima into liquid heat.

"Have you?" She had never heard such a phrase before, but the words carried power.

"Yes!"

"I don't know how." The confession embarrassed her, but she had no idea how to use this strange toy. She supposed it could replace her fingers, but without touch to guide her, how would she know what to do?

"Come."

Imogen took her to the bed in the centre of the room, and encouraged her to lie down, then straddled her. This was familiar enough, for they had spent delicious hours like this, sliding their bodies together. With hips nuzzling, they could both find satisfaction. However, Imogen evidently had other plans. Jemima watched in fascination as her lover took the leather toy in her mouth, licking it from tip to base until the surface gleamed slick with moisture. This gesture sent heat to her nipples, hardening them for whatever action might ensue. The air seemed to buzz with energy and possibility as Imogen lifted her hips, and lowered her gorgeous body onto the toy. Jemima stared, full of wonder and delight as the entirety of the thing slid into that secret place. She wished her senses could travel there, to feel each seductive response and share more intimately in the act. Still, from the look of rapture on her lover's face, the toy had the power to bestow bliss, and she could be happy with any role in that process.

As Imogen rode her hips, the toy pressed against her body, sending waves of pressure into her own sensitive places. She had not thought of that. *Such a marvellous gift!* Her beloved's face flushed with growing pleasure, small breasts enticing as she rose and fell in earnest rhythm. Her head pulsed and thrummed, the tempo catching at her hips until all sense of control left her. Enchanted by this compelling rhythm, she locked hands with Imogen. Never before had their shared passion fired her senses like this.

Movement on the peripheries of her vision caught Jemima's attention. A queasy feeling tore at her guts. *Something is wrong!* The pulse commanding her body was audible, its source external. She twisted, trying to fight it. Looking up, she could see Imogen's expression darken with rage, but neither of them could break away from the wild rhythm of their coupling. There were figures around the bed, drums, and voices repeating a low chant. Every so often, they stepped a little closer. Jemima had no idea where they had come from. She concentrated on trying to regain control of her body.

"Jem!" Imogen's voice drew her to look up, and their gazes met. Whatever madness surrounded her, the powerful sense of connection between them gave her courage. Imogen's eyes glowed with love for her, and she felt held by it, surrounded and protected. It took her a few moments to realise the light was as real as the mesmeric sounds had been. Warm and affirming, it radiated from Imogen's skin, bathing her. She lay still. Whatever had taken control of her body could not touch



her now. The figures around the bed circled closer, menacing. They seemed part of the darkness beyond. They were masked, but she guessed these people had sat down to dinner with her. *So much for Isobella's sanctuary.* She had plunged into a new insanity, far too akin to Melerton's twisted games.

Hands reached out and she had no way of escaping their sordid touch.

"You want me," Imogen said, her voice uncannily loud. "You want what I am." Hands grasped the young woman, pulling her down into an unkind embrace.

Jemima watched, horrified, as Isobella's hood fell back and the woman forced a brutal kiss upon her captive. In all that had happened, Jemima's right hand still circled Imogen's, and she gripped it tightly, willing her beloved to find reassurance from that clasp. Her head swam but she righted herself, staring furious hatred at the figures around them. Masks stared back, cold and inhuman. Although exposed, Isobella's face offered no more than the others. Their host gripped Imogen, and the two struggled against each other. The scene made no sense, but demanded action.

With rage possessing her, Jemima lashed out, striking Isobella's jaw and sending the woman staggering backwards, foul words spilling from her lips. Imogen lost her balance and fell against Jemima. In the moments when they clung together, Jemima found fresh hope. Whatever madness this might be, they could survive it.

When their hostess regained her balance, her eyes burned with unnaturally dark fire.

"It's no good," one of the men in their number said. "The moment has gone. It will not come again."

"It must!" Isobella's voice rose fractionally above its usual whisper, her expression vile.

"No." Imogen responded, calm amidst the chaos. She stood on the bed, naked and splendid, looking down upon them all like a goddess. "You want my song? I will give it to you." She threw back her head and the music poured from her.

Around the bed, the various figures became still. Imogen's unearthly music washed over them all, sweet and unstoppable. Masks slipped down, hoods fell back. They could not hide from her. Held by her music, they seemed so much less of a threat – just foolish men and women playing at occultism, but not understanding it. The song changed. Fingers tore at clothing, tugging on buttons. Jemima gaped at the unfolding scene, as an abundance of bare skin emerged from beneath various guises. Imogen's finger's touched the top of her head and she felt protected. Whatever happened here would not affect her.

Alfred Melerton raised his hands, as if pleading for mercy. Under Imogen's spell, he had apparently lost his voice. His skin writhed over his bones, twisting his features into ever more hideous shapes. Agony showed too plainly in his eyes, and he clawed at the air, powerless to protect himself. Then the bones beneath his tortured flesh began shifting as well. Unable to watch any more, Jemima turned her face towards Imogen's silken thigh and closed her eyes. Fear prickled over the surface of her exposed skin as she felt the enchantments at work. A low howl assaulted her ears, and she risked another glance.

Where before there had been half a dozen people, now there were hounds. Imogen jumped lightly from the bed to the floor, and opened the door to let them out. The sound of their claws on the floorboards carried for some time. One

whimpered at the door, another barked from the stairwell, and then quiet descended.

Cold and shaking, Jemima remained where she knelt on the bed, terror in her heart as she looked at Imogen.

"Jem!"

Then those gentle arms were around her shoulders, and despite what she had seen, the dread of it evaporated. "How..." she began, but found the rest of the question impossible to shape.

"Hush." Imogen's hands soothed the tension from her back.

All the rage and fear that she had carried in her heart broke free, emerging first in a low keening that grew to tormented wails. She shook with it, fighting for breath and shuddering violently until her arms gave way and she dropped down onto the covers. Throughout it all, Imogen held her, answering her pain with tender caresses. When finally she had no more terror to vent and lay still, Imogen covered her over and stroked her hands.

"Why did you let Argent and the others hurt you? Why didn't you stop them? Why did you let Melerton take you, and Isobella and... I don't understand!"

Imogen smiled at this. "I did not think to."

Her simple explanation silenced Jemima for a while, but soon the barrage of doubts returned. "What are you?"

Imogen laughed and shrugged, casting the question aside. She bent to kiss Jemima's cheek.

"Sleep Jem. Sleep."

Waking from nightmares full of dogs and reaching hands, Jemima realised she still had Isobella's gift strapped to her body. With trembling fingers, she tried to undo the knots, and at last pulled the wretched thing from her and threw it onto the floor. Pale wintry sun filtered through the open curtains, showing Imogen silhouetted against the glass. The sound of the dildo landing caused her to turn. For a while, the two simply looked at each other, wordless.

"I am sorry," Imogen said. With the daylight making her hair gleam, she seemed the lost girl again. No hint of strange powers clung about her, and her large eyes spoke of vulnerability.

Jemima nodded, unable to shape her thoughts coherently much less put them into words. "I need time to think," she said.

Imogen nodded and slipped from the room.

Pulling a sheet around her, Jemima stepped up to the window. There were untidy piles of clothes strewn across the floor, and she had to step over them. Through the smutty pane she could see the length of the garden and the trees secluding it. Bare branches swung in the wind, and to her eye they seemed mournful. Images from the previous night played through her head, but none of them seemed more believable than her troubled dreams.

Half a dozen hounds ran across the long lawn, barking and snapping at each other as they went. The sight of them made her shiver and she pulled the sheet closer to her cold skin. The thought of Imogen's hair, distractingly soft against her lips, filled her mind. Soft, sweet and delightful. When they were together, nothing

else mattered to her. The last weeks had been like something from a fever dream; crazy and impossible. She hardly knew herself any more. Imogen had changed her, turned her into another, gentler woman with unfamiliar passions and needs. Leaning against the glass, she let its coolness ease the troubled heat in her brow. Part of her wanted to run away. It seemed the easiest option, to run from the madness surrounding her and start a new life.

*What kind of spell have you cast on me? Am I any different from the dogs out there? Did you sing me into being other than myself? What are you, Imogen? And who am I now that you have had your will of me?*

Whatever her rational mind offered, her traitorous heart sought only to return to those magical arms. She could lose herself in Imogen, in the joy of sensual contact and the immediacy of desire. It would be so easy to ignore the anxieties and go to her for solace.

A light rap on her door drew her attention. "Excuse me Miss Southerby, but there's a gentleman here, and I can't find anyone in the house but you and Miss Imogen. I've no instructions."

Jemima went to the door, opening it a little way. The servant girl's gaze never once rose from the floor – she had been trained not to look, it appeared.

"Have you shown him into one of the reception rooms?"

"I have, Miss. Mistress Isobella didn't say there was anyone coming, and she doesn't have surprise guests, Miss, not ever. I can't find her. It's all very odd. Forgive me speaking out of turn, Miss, but I don't know what to do."

"It's all right. Tell the gentleman I will be down shortly."

"Thank you, Miss."

"Did he give you a calling card?"

"No, Miss. A bit irregular, but we don't get much that's regular round here."

"No."

Jemima dropped the sheet on the floor and dressed hurriedly. With memories of the previous night's insanity still on her mind, the room made her edgy. She pushed the large bed back against one of the walls, which helped a little. Gritting her teeth, she searched through Isobella's fallen attire, pocketing the keys she found. Trotting briskly down the stairs, she wondered what to say to the visitor, and how to explain the absence of the mistress of the house.

The servant girl directed her into an unfamiliar drawing room. As soon as the wiry little man rose from his chair she recognised him, and her heart sank. All pretence at manners forgotten, the two stared at each other. Eventually, he spoke. "I had not expected to see you again, Miss Southerby."

"Nor I you, Mr Sakely. What brings you here?"

"I came to see the lady of the house, but gather she is absent today."

"I don't think she will be seeing anyone imminently," Jemima observed.

"Perhaps you would like to leave a message for her?"

"I suppose I shouldn't be surprised by anything anymore. I assume you were in on it from the first? Melerton was a fool."

"I was given a message for you, Mr Sakely, from your friend Mr Argent. Did it reach you?"

"Alfred sent me a note. That is the reason for my being here. I came to plead for mercy." He shook his head. "Argent and Melerton are both dead."

"And you are afraid you will be next."

"At first I did not believe she could do it." He sighed heavily.

"Talk to me, Mr Sakely. There is a great deal I do not understand. Perhaps if you enlighten me, I will be able to assist you." The thought of helping one of Imogen's abusers did not appeal to her, but she had little else to bargain with and if he thought her in league with Isobella, he might imagine she had influence.

"What do you wish to know?"

"How you and your friends got hold of Imogen in the first place, for a start."

"We stole her, is the short answer. I have been a student of the occult for many years, and involved in a number of dedicated societies. Learning of her existence, I had to see her with my own eyes, and from that moment I was lost. I had to have her. A rash and base impulse, but one I believe you will understand. I convinced Percy and Francis to join in the escapade. They thought it was a grand game, more interested in tormenting a pretty girl than any notions of stealing her power."

"But you wanted her power?"

"I wanted everything. I also want to live and I realise I made a serious mistake in crossing a woman like Isobella Leathe."

"I do not get the impression she is a forgiving woman. What precisely is Imogen?"

"I do not know with certainty. I told the others she was an angel because it is a simple and familiar idea. As I did not summon her, I am uncertain. I believe she is a spirit of some kind."

"But she could in fact be an ordinary girl, kidnapped and abused."

"I grant that is possible. But I have seen her, as have you. Whatever she is, I do not believe her to be mere clay as we are."

Jemima nodded at this. She had seen far more than she intended to tell Sakely.

"Mr Sakely, I cannot promise to divert Isobella's wrath from you, but I will speak with her on your behalf. If you survive the week I think you may assume I have been successful. But the condition must be that you stay away from this house and never seek Imogen's company again."

"I give you my word. Whatever that girl is, she drives people mad, and I want no more of it."

Jemima said nothing, but reflected that he was probably right.

"Good day, Mr Sakely. I hope for both our sakes that we do not meet again."

"Then as the French say, it is adieu, Miss Southerby."

After he had gone, she rang for a servant and offered up a carefully considered lie. "Mistress Isobella is away on business for a few days. I have had a note from her, and we are to continue as normal."

"Very well Miss. Just two for dinner then?"

"That is so."

She thought they could easily stay for a few days, while she considered the next move.

Imogen retreated to the conservatory, losing herself amongst the luscious plants there. Having no idea how to speak with her or what to say, Jemima kept her distance, taking the opportunity to explore the house. With Isobella's keys, every door opened to her. Many of the rooms were unremarkable, or simply full of old books. Several were empty, with designs painted on the bare floorboards. The sight of it made her shiver, remembering the cruelties of Harrington Nunnery.

There were desks and drawers full of paperwork, revealing a wealth in property and land. Jemima considered the ethics of her situation at some length. She did not even know the identities of all the people Imogen had turned into dogs, nor did she know if it would be a permanent transformation. Interestingly, Alfred Melerton seemed to have left rather a lot of his property in Isobella's care, and she had to wonder if the woman had demanded it of him. She had a great many questions about the now-canine circle of people, and what they had been about. There might be answers amongst the paperwork, but she had no idea how to start finding them. Nothing she found told her about Imogen – offering no clues as to true name, origins, nature or intended fate. There were many names, many files, but if any of them belonged to her girl, she could not tell. The longer she spent exploring, the more troubled she felt.

Dinner came and went with barely a word spoken. She could not face going back to that room and everything it represented. The house seemed even more ugly, and she could barely stand to remain. There were decisions to be made, and until she had taken them, she could hardly go running off. Imogen should be compensated for all she had suffered, but there was no source of justice that could be turned to in such a bizarre case. No one would believe their story. She had the option of taking matters into her own hands, securing their future and getting some recompense for all the girl had suffered. The line between theft and justice proved a hard one to judge.

She woke at Isobella's desk, neck aching and back sore, having fallen asleep with her head on her arms. The room lay in semi-darkness, and she had no sense of what had woken her.

"Jem?" Imogen's voice betrayed concern.

"I'm sorry. I must have fallen asleep." The oil in her lamp had almost gone, the small flame dancing erratically towards its death. She managed to light a candle from it.

"Please Jem."

"What is it?"

"Hold me?"

For all that Imogen could do, she seemed like a lost and needy child in that moment. Jemima gathered her up, stroking her as she might an alarmed kitten.

"What will we do?" Imogen asked.

"I have some ideas. What do you want?"

"To go."

"As do I. But it is not as easy as that. The world out there is a complicated place. Where will we live? How will we feed and clothe ourselves?"

"I don't know."

"Neither do I. Right and wrong don't seem quite as clear as they once were. Nothing seems clear any more."

"Sleep."

Jemima shuddered, unable to face the prospect of that bed and its unsavoury memories.

"Come!"

Imogen pulled away, and she followed, curious. The girl had made a nest in the glasshouse, using cushions and blankets. This space, with its green smells, held no horrors. It had been a haven for them. Grateful beyond expression, Jemima sank into the makeshift bed, sleeping in her clothes.

As theft went, it could have been a lot worse, she supposed. With so many documents and so much money lying about the house, she doubted anyone would notice what had gone. The horses might be missed, but there were others in the stable, and who would claim them? Even so, it troubled Jemima that she had broken the law so knowingly. In the past, she had always been honest, even if her trade was a miserable one. The horses had been pure indulgence – she loved to ride, but had not been able to afford her own mount for a long time. Imogen took to the saddle easily enough, the creature as seduced by her presence as any other being who encountered her. She rode ahead, her fair hair falling loose to her waist, a narrow jacket over her shift. They were an odd looking pair, but no one they encountered seemed bothered by it.

At last, the road turned the final corner and through the trees, a familiar building became visible. Imogen slowed her horse, glancing back with a questioning look on her face. "Here?"

"I've stolen the deeds," Jemima said, all too aware of them inside a pocket of the equally-stolen jacket. Harrington had not been an entirely happy place for either of them, but she had no idea where else to go.

"Yes," Imogen said, and at her word the horse leaped forward, covering the final distance at an uncanny speed.

Jemima followed behind, absorbing the view and the various emotions it inspired. She imagined that they would grow vegetables, keep some animals, live simply. What else was there to want?

She had keys from Melerton's room, and eventually one of them opened the front door. The house smelled musty and damp, having lain empty for several weeks. Imogen ran around opening windows, letting in the wintry air. It would not be easy, Jemima realised, conscious of how little she knew about the necessities of life. With this miracle of a girl to care for, she would find a way, she felt certain.

"Jem!"

She responded to the summons, running up the stairs and finding Imogen in her old room. Her few possessions were much as she had left them and she stared about in surprise. The remnants of her former life seemed like things from a dream. It took her a moment to recognise the corset Imogen held.

"Wear it?"

"Now?"

"Yes."

She shrugged, pulling off the jacket and shirt that had once belonged to Alfred Melerton. She had taken a few of his things when they set out. Being a dog, he hardly had any use for them.

"And those."

The trousers slipped from her hips and she presented her bare skin.

Imogen helped her into the corset, proving she had paid attention to some of those early lessons after all. Her fingers danced over the ties, pulling them tighter than Jemima ever set the garment herself. When she could barely draw a proper breath, Imogen held the ties in front of her, then secured them around her wrists. There was something all too familiar about the scene, but Jemima could not yet place it. As her lover tied her to the wardrobe door, it occurred to her that this had happened before, with their roles reversed. She had been so full of anger and pain then, and the memory of her former self shocked her.

The blow made her squeak. Imogen's palm set her exposed rump tingling. Several more hard slaps followed. She knew what must come next. The hair brush. She had pummelled Imogen with it not so very many weeks ago, venting her frustration. Now the same hard surface landed on her skin, bringing bright flashes of pain. She made no protest, accepting the punishment. And the peculiar relief it brought. There was no stopping the tears that filled her eyes with each fresh sting of the brush. They flowed freely down her cheeks and onto the tops of her squeezed breasts. All the bottled-up pain seeped from her. Surely she had never beaten Imogen this harshly? The blows made her pant, legs shaking, until she dropped to her knees, arms held above her head by the ties of her corset.

Still the barrage continued, each swipe sending a wave through her body. A lifetime of unshed tears threatened to break free. All that rage and fear, the world had inspired in her. She remembered beating others, subjecting their bodies to all kinds of torments for her own amusement. Whatever she said about following orders and doing her job, she had relished the power, finding solace in the suffering of others. Now at last she took her turn to weep and moan, her soul broken open by the pain she felt.

Her tears dripped over the wood of the wardrobe, flowing down to the floorboards and beyond. Head reeling from this beating, her thoughts tumbled in unfamiliar ways. She imagined her tears washing through the house, cleansing it of the wrongs done here. If she cried enough, all trace of Melerton and his friends would be eradicated. She gasped for breath, succumbing to the seductive power of the violence she endured. Imogen had always seemed such a gentle creature, so compassionate, but Jemima realised she barely knew the girl at all. Beneath the velvet, there could well be iron, shards of glass, fatal spikes. Given what had been done to that beautiful body, she supposed she should not be surprised if Imogen had learned too much about suffering.

The bindings slipped away. Her arms wilted and she could no longer keep her body upright. Jemima slumped, aware of the cold wooden floor against her thigh, and little else.

"My beauty," Imogen crooned, fingers soothing on battered skin.

Jemima drifted, barely conscious. Never had exhaustion felt so delicious before. She floated in it, not needing to think. Arms held her, hands caressed her and

she felt safe, possessed. Purged and blessed by her angel. *Fallen angel*, she corrected herself. Imogen did not belong to the sexless decorum of Heaven, she suspected. If she had ever come from such a place, she would not qualify to return.

Opening her eyes, she found her lover smiling down benevolently. With her golden hair framing her face, she looked angelic and entirely innocent. Jemima remembered enough from sermons to associate angels with fiery swords and not with hairbrushes. *No angel's skin would feel so sinfully good, surely?* No angel would slide her fingers in that sensuous way, working them inwards. Jemima sighed happily at this penetration, wet and shameless in face of her lover's advances. She imagined how they would re-consecrate the cellar, making its troubled walls echo to the cries of their shared pleasure. They would drive out the ghosts of selfish men, until the walls glowed with joy. She thought of the nuns who had lived here in ages past, devoted to god and denied all earthly pleasure.

"No one could resist an angel," she said aloud, imagining the chaos Imogen would have caused such women.

"No angel."

"No?"

Her fingers delved deeper, making Jemima shiver with pleasure.

"No angel." The smile on her face was pure wickedness then. Jemima opened her thighs a little wider. Sensation built and rolled inside her, and no matter what Imogen proved to be, Jemima had no desire to resist.

"Come Jem!"

Tumbling, spiralling, she lost herself utterly.



## About The Author

English author Bryn Colvin has a longstanding fascination with all things gothic and a growing interest in steampunk. Victorian England does seem to lend itself to dark fantasy and to gothic stories. She has written several other lesbian tales for the Femerotica line – Enchanted Waters, and First Blood along with Girl Wanted, which includes m/f and f/f/m scenarios.

The title Beauty In Tears is the name of an especially lovely O'Carolan tune, which the author is fond of playing. It seemed like a good name for a story, and is in fact the seed from which the entire narrative grew.

In the rest of her life, Bryn reads omnivorously, gazes out of the window a lot, drinks too much coffee, celebrates the cycle of the seasons with Bards of the Lost Forest and busks sporadically.

You can find her online in a number of places - [www.brynneth.org.uk](http://www.brynneth.org.uk)  
<http://thepaganandthepen.wordpress.com/>  
[www.myspace.com/brynneth\\_n\\_colvin](http://www.myspace.com/brynneth_n_colvin)  
[www.youtube.com/mistressnimue](http://www.youtube.com/mistressnimue)  
<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/brynsbookgroup>  
[www.twitter.com/Bryn\\_Colvin](http://www.twitter.com/Bryn_Colvin) and <http://www.hopelessvendetta.wordpress.com>

Bryan Colvin

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