The background of the cover is a dark, monochromatic image of various mechanical gears and gears of different sizes, some with teeth and others with smooth surfaces. A thin, red decorative border with ornate scrollwork and floral motifs frames the entire cover. The text is centered and rendered in a white, elegant serif font with decorative flourishes.

THE
STRANGE
CASE
OF FINLEY
JAYNE

The Steampunk Chronicles
Kady Cross

The Strange Case of Finley Jayne

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Finley Jayne knows she's not 'normal'. Normal girls don't lose time, or have something inside them that makes them capable of remarkably violent things. Her behavior has already cost her one job, so when she's offered the lofty position of companion to Phoebe, a debutante recently engaged to Lord Vincent, she accepts, despite having no experience. Lord Vincent is a man of science with his automatons and inventions, but Finley is suspicious of his motives where Phoebe is concerned. She will do anything to protect her new friend, but what she discovers is even more monstrous than anything she could have imagined...

An ebook exclusive prequel to The Steampunk Chronicles.

CHAPTER ONE

London, The Age of Invention, late April 1897

“You’re the very spawn of Satan and I’ll not have you darken this door ever again.”

Finley Jayne jumped as the door was slammed in her face, leaving her standing alone in the small, damp flagstone square that acted as the servants’ entrance to the town house.

She’d been fired—well and good—by Mrs. Brown, the housekeeper. Normally being called the spawn of Satan would upset Finley, but lately she’d begun to wonder if the sentiment wasn’t true. This was, after all, the second job she’d been let go from.

At least the old crone could have let her collect her things.

Just like in a stage-comedy, the back door opened once more and Finley’s carpetbag sailed out of the dim interior. She caught it before it could strike her in the face.

“Oy!” she cried, but the door slammed shut again—and this time Mrs. Brown locked it from the inside. She heard the tumblers fall into place as the bitter old woman turned the wheel engaging the mechanism which could only be opened once again by a punch card.

Mrs. Brown had taken Finley’s punch card from her room before firing her.

Of all the bloody rotten luck. Tossed out without a reference for something that wasn't even her fault. She hadn't been the one to slap young master Fenton hard enough to make him cry when he tried to take a fourth biscuit from the tea tray. That had been the governess—Miss Clarke—who had a particular habit of striking small children.

Miss Clarke slapped the boy, and then Finley punched Miss Clarke.

How was she to know the woman's teeth were so brittle that they'd fall out? They'd certainly been healthy enough to cut Finley's knuckles. And not having much experience with violence, how was she to know that "normal" girls weren't supposed to have the strength to send a full-grown woman, three stone heavier than herself, flying backward several feet?

As she lowered her bag to her side and walked toward the stairs to the street, Finley had to be serious long enough to realize that she hadn't been fired for striking the governess—Mrs. Brown struck the maids all the time. She'd been fired because there was something wrong with her.

She wasn't *right*. Was it the work of the devil? She didn't feel evil. Even when that darkness came over her and made her do the things she shouldn't do, it didn't feel wrong or bad. And she wasn't going to apologize for knocking Miss Clarke on her fat behind when the older woman had brought a child to tears.

The memory of it made her grit her teeth as she climbed the cracked and crumbling stairs. Even the smells and sounds of Mayfair didn't dent her anger. And now she had to walk through Grosvenor Square

with hair frizzy from working a steam press all morning. If she'd known she'd get sacked she would have hit the cow harder.

She stopped two steps from the street. This was exactly what was wrong with her. She'd be thinking—could be about nothing in particular—and she'd have a dark thought, like hitting someone, or saying something true, but cruel. But unlike regular people, sometimes she couldn't help but give in to temptation.

Perhaps it was the devil, after all.

Just like that, her anger receded, leaving a ball of fear and dread in her belly so cold and hard it felt like lead. She was unemployed in a city where good jobs for a girl were scarce, and without a reference.

She was, as her stepfather would often say when he thought she couldn't hear, "buggered."

The thought of her parents only brought her mood down lower. How was she going to explain to them that she'd lost her position because she couldn't control herself? They didn't know about these strange incidents. When she was younger they were so infrequent she barely gave them a thought, but they started getting worse shortly after she got her first monthly, and now happened regularly enough—and without warning—that oftentimes she wasn't even aware anything had happened until it was far too late.

She couldn't tell her parents the complete truth, but she had to tell them something. As of today she had no place to stay, and proud as she was, even she wasn't foolish enough to spend the night on the street.

There were things far more dangerous than her in

London.

Her mother made hot chocolate.

Finley smiled guiltily at the steaming mug. She knew it would taste like heaven, even when the toast she dunked in it left a buttery haze on top. “You didn’t have to do that.”

“Nonsense,” her mother, Mary, countered, taking a seat at the table. She had her own mug, as well. “We haven’t done this for a long time.”

It really hadn’t been that long, but sometimes it felt like years since she’d left home. “I’m sorry to intrude upon you like this.”

Her mother’s warm hand closed over one of hers. “Dearest, this is your home, and it always will be. You could never intrude upon Silas and me.”

Finley stared down at the scarred, yet polished tabletop. Her mother and Silas weren’t poor, but they weren’t wealthy, either. The bookshop they ran did a solid business, but life would be easier for both of them without the burden of an extra body to clothe and feed.

If only she hadn’t hit Miss Clarke. If only she could bring herself to feel badly for it. She didn’t. She felt badly for being here, leeching off her parents, but she didn’t feel one ounce of remorse for what she had done—only the consequences of it.

“You’ll find a new position,” her mother added, giving her hand a squeeze. “And they’ll be glad to have you. Only next time, try to keep your mouth closed.”

Finley glanced up in time to catch her mother's smile. She hadn't been completely honest, nor had she lied precisely. She told her parents that she had lost her job because of an altercation with the governess who was favored by the mistress of the house. That was all true. She simply left out the part about causing that same servant to swallow her own teeth.

"I will, Mama," she promised, trying to force her own lips to curve.

Slowly, her mother's smile faded away, replaced by an expression of concern that tightened the corners of her pale blue eyes. Finley had often wished her eyes could be that color, but as she grew up she began to appreciate that she had something of Thomas Jayne about her.

"Has something else happened?" her mother asked. "Is there something you want to talk about?"

Words teetered on the tip of her tongue, just waiting to spill out and confess everything, but Finley bit them back. "No. I'm just disappointed in myself."

"Learn from it and then let it go. Dwelling never helped anyone." A strange expression crossed her face. "You must believe me in this."

For a moment Finley wondered, as she often did when her mother was particularly cryptic, if she referred to Finley's father. She had never known her real father, and though Silas had been as good to her as any father could, she often wondered about the man.

She wondered if she looked like him—her mother said she did. She wondered how many things that she enjoyed or disliked had come from him. And she

wondered, of course, if he might have been a little mad. Her mother never came out and said such a thing, but there were secrets where her father was concerned. Finley had never even been to his grave. Her mother claimed she wouldn't know where to find it in the graveyard, she'd been so grief stricken, but Finley sometimes thought that was a lie.

Perhaps it was better that she didn't know the truth.

"I will try not to dwell on things, Mama," she promised. "And I will begin to look for a new position first thing tomorrow morning."

Her mother gave her fingers a light squeeze. "I know you will, but I want you to find something that suits you, so don't rush in to the first employment you find. You may stay here as long as you want, and take time to find a post where they will treat you well." A slight smile curved her lips. "One where they hopefully do not employ a governess."

Finley laughed. Laughing made it seem like everything was going to be all right. She would find a new job and there was nothing wrong with her. If only she could keep laughing, she might just believe it.

CHAPTER TWO

Fate, it seemed, also had an odd sense of humor, because Finley didn't have to go looking for new employment the next morning; new employment came looking for her.

She was in the small parlor in their apartments above the bookshop, taking tea with her mother and mending a tear in one of her best dresses with the small steam-powered sewing engine, when Silas came up from the shop, his lean cheeks pale.

"Silas," her mother began in a concerned tone. "Whatever is the matter?"

"There's a Lady Morton in the shop," he told them. "She says she's here to see Finley."

Finley's hand froze on the lever that operated the machine's engine. She looked from her mother's surprised face to Silas's and then back to her mother. They knew of Lady Morton, of course; she was frequently mentioned in the society pages. "What could she want with me?"

"She didn't say," Silas replied. "And I'm embarrassed to say I didn't know how to ask."

Slowly, on knees that trembled ever so slightly, Finley rose to her feet. Lady Morton was a friend to Lady Gattersleigh—mother of little Fenton, whose governess she had jobbed in the mouth just the day before.

Was the lady there to make her life even more

unpleasant? Tell her mother and Silas that she was unnatural? Perhaps she was being overly pessimistic, but she didn't see how this visit could possibly end on a positive note.

"Should I bring her up?" Silas asked, turning now to his wife, who looked horrified at the prospect of entertaining an aristocrat in her humble home.

"No," Finley answered, partially because she didn't want to embarrass her mother, but mostly because whatever Lady Morton had to say, her parents didn't need to hear it. "I'll attend to her ladyship downstairs. Excuse me."

She didn't look at either her mother or Silas as she made her way to the door that led downstairs to the shop. She held her head high and shoulders back and tried to keep her knees from visibly shaking. She would not be afraid. This woman could do nothing to hurt her any worse than Finley had already done to herself.

When she reached the bottom of the stairs and peered out around the entrance to the shop, she saw the lady standing in front of a shelf of leather-bound volumes of poetry by Byron. Ladies always seemed to enjoy the romantic poet's work. A few feet away from her, Silas's automaton assistant, Fanny toiled at dusting the packed shelves.

Fanny was a little shorter than Finley, but had arms and legs that could lengthen if needed. She was programmed to do menial tasks around the shop—such as dusting and shelving books. She had no voice box and did not respond when spoken to. Still, Finley felt as though the skeletal machine was part of the family.

Lady Morton was perhaps in her mid- to late thirties. A handsome woman with dark hair and pale green eyes—or rather, one pale green eye. The other was a curved, smoky lens that fit beneath her top and bottom lid. It was like looking into a storm cloud and seeing your own face reflected. Finley didn't know how it worked, but apparently the lens worked much like an eye did, only better.

She wore a dark plum day gown with a pearl-gray shawl and matching hat. Finley glanced down at her own stockings, boots and short skirt and grimaced. Her clothing was very modern—not the sort of thing one wore to receive polite company.

Nevertheless, she was not going to put this off any longer. Better to just get it over with, like tearing a bandage off a cut.

“Lady Morton?” she inquired as she stepped into the shop.

The woman stopped her browsing and turned. Her strange gaze swept over Finley from the toes of her boots to the tip of the pencil she'd used to hold her hair in place on the back of her head.

“Miss Finley Jayne, I presume?” Her voice was low and crisp.

“Yes, ma'am,” Finley replied with a curtsy. “My stepfather says you wished to speak to me?”

“I do. Is there some place where we might speak privately?”

Well, it didn't seem the lady was there to cause trouble for Finley with her parents, so that was a relief. “We could use my stepfather's office if you like.”

Lady Morton actually looked relieved, as well. “That would be fine, thank you.”

Since she was already close to the back of the shop, it wasn’t much of a distance to Silas’s office. Finley stood near the threshold and gestured for her ladyship to enter first, as was polite.

Silas’s office was normally a chaotic terrain of papers, books and coffee cups, but the woman who came once a week to help her mother with some of the cleaning had been there just that morning, so the office was bright, neat and smelled of lemon furniture polish. There was even a chair for Lady Morton to sit upon without Finley having to remove a pile of books first.

Finley perched on the edge of her stepfather’s desk as she couldn’t bring herself to actually sit behind it in his chair. Plus, this position gave her a height advantage, and helped her feel less intimidated by her guest, whose foggy eye seemed to peer right through a person.

“Would you like something to drink?” she inquired. Her mother always offered guests refreshment, even if she didn’t like them.

Lady Morton smiled. It seemed a genuine expression, not a rude one. “No, thank you. I will get right to the point of my calling upon you, Miss Jayne, because I suspect you are naturally quite curious as to why I am here. I wish to offer you a position within my household.”

Finley blinked. “I’m sorry. Did you say you wished to offer me a job?”

The lady nodded. She looked as though she did this sort of thing all the time, sitting there with her

matching bag clasped in her lap between her gloved hands. Normally, it was the housekeeper or the butler who took care of the hiring of staff within a large household, so this strange circumstance made Finley leery.

“I wish to hire you as companion to my youngest daughter, Phoebe.”

A frown squished Finley’s brows together. “Why?” She wasn’t the most intelligent of girls, but even she knew enough of how the world worked to know she was completely unacceptable as a companion. For one thing, she hadn’t been born into the right social class. Companions were often poor aristocrats, or at least of good to noble birth. She could claim middle class if she was bragging. She knew nothing of society and how to behave in it, but she’d seen enough of the girls who lived there to know that she’d rather cut her own throat than spend time with one.

Lady Morton’s eyebrows rose. “Why? My dear girl, from what I hear you are hardly in the position to question such an opportunity.”

“I know that, my lady,” Finley replied. “That’s why I have to ask. Why would a lady such as yourself want to hire someone as lowbrow as me to spend time with your daughter? Surely Lady Gattersleigh told you why I was sacked.”

“She did.” Her tone was strangely chipper and dismissive at the same time. “I have no interest in discussing your previous post, Miss Jayne. Suffice to say that I find the kind of girl who would defend a child at the risk of her own welfare to be *exactly* the

sort of person I wish to have in my employ.”

How was it possible that this woman seemed insulted that Finley didn't think she was good enough to work for her? Shouldn't she be flattered? And should she really argue with the woman? She needed a job. She wouldn't get too many people who would be as tolerant as Lady Morton after hearing what she did.

“May I inquire as to what my wage will be?”

Lady Morton's shoulders relaxed slightly, as though a large weight had been lifted off them. “You will have food, lodgings and clothing provided for you. In addition to that I am prepared to offer you the sum of twenty-five pounds per annum.”

Twenty-five pounds a year? Finley's jaw sagged at the amount. That was more than most ladies' maids earned in a year!

“Fine,” the lady said in a clipped tone. “Thirty, but that is my final offer.”

How many times had her mother cautioned her that when things seemed too good to be true they often were? “When would you like me to start?” She fought to keep the excitement out of her voice.

Lady Morton smiled. “Is tomorrow morning too soon?”

“No, not at all.” She hadn't even fully unpacked.

“Excellent.” The older woman rose gracefully to her feet. “My carriage will come by for you at nine o'clock. By the time you are settled Phoebe should be awake. We're off to a charity event hosted by Lady Marsden and her nephew the Duke of Greythorne tonight.”

A duke, Finley thought. That was only a step down

from prince. She imagined he was a plump, pasty-faced creature with bad teeth. Rarely, from what she'd seen and heard of English nobility, were aristocrats handsome or fit—too much inbreeding. Still, it sounded romantic.

“I shall be ready, ma'am.” And all she could think was how wonderful it would be if, as the daughter's companion, she could sleep in past nine some mornings, as well. Perhaps even catch a glimpse of a duke.

“I trust you will be,” Lady Morton retorted as they left the office. Finley walked her to the front door of the shop, where the woman paused for a moment. She looked at Finley with a gaze that was both kind and somewhat...shrewd. “Thank you, Miss Jayne.” Then, without waiting for a reply, she exited the shop into the overcast morning.

Finley watched after her, still battling her astonishment.

She had never heard an aristocrat say “thank you” before.

“I'm not sure I like this,” Finley's mother said for what had to be the one hundredth time at quarter of nine the following morning. “This whole situation smells unsavory.”

Finley rolled her eyes, taking her gaze off the street in front of their home for a few seconds. She was anxious, nervous and excited. And grateful. She was so unbelievably grateful. “Mama, it will be fine.”

Her mother, however, was so not easily convinced. "What do we know of this Lady Morton other than what little mention she's had in the papers? There's an air of desperation about the entire affair."

Finley turned back to the window, feelings stung. "Meaning she'd have to be desperate to hire me?"

"No, dear," her mother replied with forced calm. "I am simply worried for your welfare. She didn't even ask you for references."

"She's friends with Lady Gattersleigh."

"Exactly!" A pale finger was pointed in Finley's direction. "Why would she hire you after that woman no doubt disparaged your character?"

"She couldn't have made me sound too bad, Mama. Lady Morton's hired me to spend time with her daughter."

"Makes me wonder how many other companions this girl has gone through if her mother thinks a girl who punched a governess would be a good match."

"Mother!" Finley stared at the older woman in affront. How did she know she'd actually struck Miss Clarke? Was the woman a bloody mind reader?

"Did you think I wouldn't find out?" her mother asked without anger. "One of the maids brought a few of your belongings that got left behind. She told me."

Finley bowed her head. "I didn't want you to know."

"Know what? That you defended a helpless child? I might not approve of the violence, but I approve of the sentiment, my dear. Though, in the future you may want to exercise better control over your emotions." She sighed. "You're a smart girl, Finley. Surely you

wonder why Lady Morton is so adamant to have you.”

“Of course I have,” Finley replied with more indignation than she ought. “I also know I can’t afford to be too picky. Lady Morton has offered me a generous wage and all I have to do is play shadow to her daughter. If the girl is too difficult I can always quit, but I cannot afford to refuse this opportunity, Mama.”

A sigh was her only answer. Words were unnecessary, however. The rush of her mother’s breath spoke volumes. The woman made guilt-inducing irritation an art form.

“It will be fine,” she insisted once more. Perhaps this time it would stick. Perhaps if she repeated it enough times she would believe it herself. Her mother was right; there was something strange about this situation. More than likely, however, Lady Morton’s daughter was simply a spoiled brat, as many aristocratic girls were. Nothing she couldn’t handle.

The clock was still chiming the hour when a black lacquered carriage pulled up on the street below. White puffs of steam rose from the gleaming brass pipe atop the roof, and the buttons on the driver’s uniform sparkled in the sun. It was horseless, operated entirely by engine—she could hear the gentle chug of it.

“Now that’s just excessive,” Finley’s mother remarked, as she glanced outside.

Finley smiled. She didn’t know what had brought on her mother’s general distrust and suspicion toward the upper class, but she’d always harbored it as far as

Finley knew.

“It looks comfortable,” she replied, easing away from the glass and picking up her coat from atop her luggage. “I’ll come to call on my first half day, and send a note on before that.”

“You’d better,” her mother said with a watery smile. She was going to cry, Finley just knew it. A person would think Finley had been home for months instead of a couple of days.

She hugged her mother, patted her on the back when she began to sniffle. Silas came round and took up her trunk, leaving Finley with a carpetbag and valise to carry downstairs.

The driver of the carriage stood on the sidewalk. He immediately came forward to take Finley’s bags and the trunk and loaded them onto the back of the vehicle. While he was doing this, Silas turned to Finley and offered her a small, paper-wrapped package.

“What’s this?” she asked, plucking at the string tied around the paper. Of course it was a book. Silas always gave her books on what he considered important occasions.

“Just a little something,” he replied with a warm smile. “I know how much you like the gothic ones. I reckon you’re old enough for this now.”

Finley arched a brow. “It must be truly frightening then.”

“Your mother certainly thought so when she read it. I found it an interesting and provoking look at human nature.”

Her lips curved. “Now you make it sound utterly

boring.”

Laughing, he patted her shoulder. “You’ll like it. Of that I’m certain.” His smile faded, but the loving glint in his eye did not. “Take care of yourself, my dear girl. If it’s not what you want, you can always come back here and work with me in the shop.”

Finley hugged him. “I will, thank you.” But they both knew she wouldn’t. Silas managed to make a comfortable living for himself and her mother with just the two of them working in the store. It wouldn’t impinge upon them much if she did work there and lived at home, but she wanted to support herself. Silas had always been good to her, but there were situations when she was painfully aware that she wasn’t really his daughter—this was one of those.

He released her and she turned toward the coachman who had put down the steps and held the carriage door open for her. He assisted her into the carriage and then closed the door.

The vehicle was as fine inside as out, lined with rich, maroon velvet. Finley ran her palms over the fabric. The seat was so soft she sank into it. She’d slept in beds that weren’t as comfortable.

As the carriage lurched forward, so did she, peering out the window to wave goodbye—first to Silas, then to her mother, who was still in the upstairs window, a crushed handkerchief in her hand.

Poor Mama. Finley wiped at her own eyes, which were inexplicably starting to water, and leaned back to enjoy the drive to Mayfair.

The rhythmic noise of the engine was strangely

relaxing. She leaned her head back against the cushions and closed her eyes. She must have dozed because it seemed like she had been in the carriage for only a few minutes before it came to a stop. Jerking upright, she peeked out the window and saw a grand, gray stone mansion looming in front of her.

The carriage door opened. This time there was a footman to lower the steps and assist her to the gravel drive.

“Welcome to Morton Manor, miss,” he greeted her cordially. “Mrs. Gale will show you to the parlor where Lady Morton will receive you. I’ll see to your belongings.”

Mrs. Gale had to be the housekeeper. “Thank you,” Finley said. She turned toward the house. It was huge. Stately. Silas’s shop could fit dozens of times over into this grand estate—one of many the family probably owned.

Even if Lady Morton’s daughter turned out to be a cow, living in a house this fine was definitely a benefit.

Mayfair was like a different world from the bustling area around Silas’s shop. That was in Russell Square, where people lived, worked and shopped. Mayfair was where rich people idled through their days, entertained in the evening and let other people clean up after them.

Perhaps she had inherited some of her mother’s prejudice, but that didn’t make her opinion wrong.

Before she reached the top step leading up to the servants’ entrance, the door opened to reveal the kind face of a woman old enough to be Finley’s

grandmother. She wore a black-and-white dress and a white cap that identified her as the housekeeper.

“Good morning, dear. I trust you had a comfortable journey?”

“Good morning,” Finley replied. “I did, yes. Are you Mrs. Gale?”

Apple cheeks lifted in a smile. “I am indeed. Come in, come in.”

Finley moved past her, into the foyer. It was small, but clean and smelled of freshly baked bread.

“Kitchen’s down below,” Mrs. Gale said, nodding at a partially opened door that led down a flight of stairs. Finley could hear the clang of pots and chattering voices.

“Smells wonderful,” she commented.

“You go down there when you’re settled in and Cook will give you bread and molasses. I declare it’s the best thing I’ve ever eaten. Now, follow me.”

Finley trailed after the portly woman. Along the way they ran into various other staff, who nodded and said hello. Mrs. Gale introduced her to all of them, and Finley tried to remember all their names.

“I’ll show you to your room, then take you to Lady Morton,” Mrs. Gale informed her, her sturdy form moving with surprising speed toward what had to be the servants’ staircase. It was fairly wide and well-worn, partially hidden not far from what Mrs. Gale told her was the door to the corridor that led to the laundry building.

“Her ladyship requested that you be given a room on the family floor.”

There was no censure in the older woman's voice, but Finley was uncomfortable all the same. At her last job she'd slept on the top floor, in a room she shared with three of the other maids.

"Why?" she asked.

Mrs. Gale lifted her shoulders in a tiny shrug and smiled. "I suppose so you'll be closer for Lady Phoebe. Lord and Lady Morton are good people, Miss Jayne. I've worked for this family for almost thirty years and I've never felt as though I had been treated ill."

Too bad her mother wasn't there to hear that, Finley mused. It might ease her misgivings. "I'm already a little overwhelmed by her ladyship's kindness."

"Rather sad, isn't it? That we're surprised to be treated well."

"Yes," Finley agreed. "I'm a little ashamed of myself for it."

The housekeeper gave her a gentle smile and a pat on the arm as if to ease her mind. A few moments later, they reached a landing on the stairs and turned left, into a long, wide corridor with cream walls, delicate plaster scrolls and rich red carpet.

"Your room is here." Mrs. Gale stopped in front of the first door on the right and turned the knob.

Finley walked in first. The room was large—larger than the room she shared with three other girls at the Gattersleigh residence. Decorated in shades of sage and cream, it was bright and airy and smelled of freshly cut grass. They must have aired it earlier, while the gardeners attended to the foliage below. She had a

lovely view of the grounds from her window.

She removed her hat, checked her reflection in the mirror and smoothed her hands over her hair and skirt. She should have worn a proper gown instead of her more modern kit of stockings, boots, short ruffled skirt, blouse and leather corset. But there was neither time, nor the privacy to change. Mrs. Gale bustled about showing her the armoire, dressing table and adjoining bath.

“It’s been outfitted in the latest innovations,” the housekeeper told her. “The tub even has a burner to keep the water hot.”

And a fancy commode, too—one that flushed with water.

Two footmen arrived with her luggage as they exited once more.

“If you wish, I can have one of the maids see to your belongings,” Mrs. Gale offered.

“No. Thank you. I’ll see to my own unpacking. I’d feel strange letting someone else do it.”

For that comment she was rewarded with another smile. Back down the stairs they went, but instead of returning to the kitchen, they turned in the opposite direction.

The main part of the house was just as impressive as the outside, with cathedral ceilings, marble floors and classical statues. Finley paused for a moment to take it all in. She clenched her teeth to keep her jaw from dropping—wouldn’t do for her to show her awe. Standing around with one’s mouth open made one look like a lowbrow commoner, which she might very

well be, but was determined not to look it.

Down another corridor. Mrs. Gale stopped and knocked on a partially open door, and when she was given permission from the lady within, she opened the door the rest of the way. "Miss Jayne has arrived, my lady."

"Send her in."

And then Finley was on her own, wishing she had the sturdy housekeeper to cling to. She crossed the threshold into a small, pretty blue parlor and found herself being stared at by three identically green eyes, and one stormy one.

"Miss Jayne," Lady Morton greeted with a smile. "How lovely to see you again. Allow me to introduce my daughter, Phoebe."

"Hello, Finley," the girl said. She was about the same age as Finley. At the oldest she might be seventeen. She was about the same height, with a similar build, but her hair was auburn and her skin as pale as milk, with just a hint of pink along her cheeks. "How do you do?"

Finley was prevented from curtsying, as she had been brought up to do, by the girl offering her hand. Was she to be treated as an equal then? She closed her fingers around Phoebe's and tried not to squeeze too hard. The girl's grip was firm.

"I'm well, thank you. It's a pleasure to meet you, Lady Phoebe."

"Just Phoebe," she was told. "We're to be friends after all. Please, sit. Tea?"

"Yes, please." Finley sat on the edge of the sofa beside Phoebe and watched as the girl fixed a cup for

her. She even placed a couple of biscuits on the saucer.

“We’re to a party tonight, Miss Jayne,” Lady Morton informed her. “You will accompany us. I assume you haven’t an evening gown?”

“You assume right, my lady.” Embarrassed, Finley took a sip of tea to hide her flush. Would the lady think twice now about hiring her?

“No worries,” Phoebe said with a wave of her hand. “I have plenty. You may borrow mine until we can get you some of your own. We’ll go to the dressmaker’s tomorrow.”

Finley paled. If the cost of gowns came out of her salary she’d still be poor next year.

Phoebe chuckled. “It won’t be that horrible, trust me. I’ll make certain they don’t put you in anything horrendous, and Papa will pay for it. You don’t have to do a thing but stand there and hope they don’t stick you with a pin.”

Any minute she was going to wake up from this amazing dream and find herself in a workhouse or something equally awful.

“You’re too generous.”

Phoebe laughed again and flashed a smile at her mother, who also looked amused. “You won’t think that this evening when you’re bored out of your skull.”

She’d never been to an aristocratic function before. What if she made a fool of herself? Or worse—of Phoebe? The thought made her biscuit taste like ash in her mouth. “What sort of party is it?”

Was it her imagination or did Phoebe turn even paler? Her smile certainly followed. “I thought Mama

would have told you. It's my engagement party.”

CHAPTER THREE

Engaged? The very idea continued to baffle Finley for the remainder of the day, long after she'd unpacked all her belongings and had taken a quiet luncheon in her room reading the book Silas had given her.

It was *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley, a book Finley hadn't been allowed to read prior to this because her mother thought she was too young. The mention of "evil forebodings" in the first line grabbed her attention and she sat by the window reading until teatime, when she joined Phoebe and Lady Morton for tea, sandwiches and tiny cakes so delicious it took all her willpower not to eat six of them.

They didn't speak anymore of the engagement then. In fact, they didn't speak of it at all until that evening, when Phoebe came to Finley's room.

"Am I late?" Finley asked. She was just putting on the earrings Phoebe had loaned her. In fact, everything she wore except for her undergarments was on loan from Phoebe.

"No, I'm early," the girl replied, pearls shining in her thick, upswept hair. "I've been assured by many of my friends that constant punctuality is a failure of the worst kind."

Finley smiled at the humor in her voice. "Are most of your friends constantly late?"

Phoebe returned the grin. "Exactly! You look lovely, by the way."

“Thank you.” Finley blushed. She wasn’t used to compliments, and she wasn’t accustomed to wearing such beautiful gowns as the deep plum silk one she wore now. It made her eyes brighter—like the amber her mother compared them to. The color brought out the honey in her hair, as well, which she had always thought of as plain dark blond.

“You’re stunning,” she told the other girl. Most debutantes wore pale colors, but Phoebe was dressed in a rich peach that really made her green eyes stand out.

“Thank you. One of the perks to being an engaged woman is that now I don’t have to wear pastels all the time.”

Finley shuddered at the thought. She adjusted the earring and rose from her dressing table. “Have you been engaged for long?”

“Just a fortnight,” Phoebe replied. “Hold on, you’ve got a loose pin.” Finley watched in the mirror as the girl walked behind her and attended to her hair. She didn’t even wince when her would-be maid shoved a pin deeper into her coiffure.

“There.” The paler girl admired her work with a faint smile. “Now you’re gorgeous. All the eligible gentlemen at the party will line up to dance with you.”

“Not me,” Finley argued. “I’m just a companion.”

Phoebe’s smile faded, only to come back twice as bright—and a little forced. “Didn’t Mama tell you? We’re telling everyone that you’re my cousin from the country. No one will know you’re not filthy rich or connected.”

A wave of dizziness washed over Finley. For a

moment, she felt that other part of her struggle to come to the surface, but she pushed it back down. “Why would you do that?”

Phoebe frowned. “I’m not certain. It was Mama’s idea. I reckon she thought we wouldn’t look so pretentious if it seemed that you were family. Since I’m engaged I no longer need constant chaperoning, so perhaps she simply wants someone watching over me at all times. I’m not certain what sort of trouble she thinks I’ll get myself into.”

Finley almost suggested she ask her mother, but then thought the better of it. Phoebe’s relationship with her mama was none of her business.

“I suppose being from the country will provide an excuse for any ignorance I might have for proper social behavior.”

Phoebe waved her hand. “You have more manners than most lords and ladies I’ve met. Trust me.”

Finley did, oddly enough. She didn’t think Phoebe or her mother were trying to harm her in any way, but the entire situation was very strange. She suspected there was more to it than either she, or Phoebe had been told.

“We’d best take ourselves downstairs,” Phoebe remarked with a glance at the clock on the mantel. “Mama will be waiting.”

Dutifully, Finley followed after the girl, despite the lump in her stomach. How on earth was she to pretend she was of the upper class? To be sure, Silas and her mother had instilled good manners in her, and her vocabulary was such that she could certainly speak

properly, but she had no idea what that sort of life was like, outside of observing it. She had more of a “mongrel” look to her than aristocratic features—a fact she was more often happy for than not, as some nobles seemed to have been bred out of having any chin to speak of.

Well, there was no getting out of it. She would just have to do as well as she could and hope for the best.

Phoebe had been right, her mother was indeed waiting for them, along with the butler, whose name Finley couldn’t remember, if she’d been told at all. He helped first Lady Morton, then Phoebe and finally Finley into their wraps. Hers was yet another loan from Phoebe.

“Thank you, Tolliver,” Lady Morton said with a smile. She wore tinted spectacles that partially concealed her odd eye. “We will be home by four at the latest.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He bowed. “Have a lovely evening, ladies.” Then he opened the door so that the three of them could march out into the cool night air. A footman stood by the carriage to hand them in one by one.

As the carriage gingerly lurched into motion, Finley held her clenched hands in her lap and drew deep, even breaths. She could do this. All she had to do was follow Phoebe’s example and behave as she did. It would be easy.

So long as she never left Phoebe’s side.

It was a short drive to their destination, which was but

a few streets away. The metal horses that pulled them moved faster than their flesh-and-blood counterparts. Finley couldn't remember the last time she'd taken a coach such a short distance when she had two feet perfect for walking.

That was exactly the sort of observation she had to remember to keep to herself. Aristocrats did not walk to social events.

As they stepped from the carriage, Finley took a deep breath. There were familiar scents in the air—the smell of real horses, of heated metal, of steam and grass—that calmed her pounding heart somewhat. Relief flooded through her as the anxiety waned. Intense emotions were not conducive to keeping control of herself. The darkness inside her loved to come out at those times.

The house they entered was huge—an old Gothic structure that had to have been built at least two centuries earlier. The stone had probably once been beige, but it had darkened to black in some places, giving the entire structure a sinister feel.

It instantly made Finley think of *Frankenstein* and the castle where the doctor conducted his scientific experiments.

“It’s like something right out of a novel,” Finley whispered to Phoebe.

Her companion didn't seem to share her enthusiasm. “Yes. It’s rather antiquated on the outside, but the inside has every modern convenience, I assure you.”

Finley glanced at her, uncertain as to why the girl

sounded almost defensive. “I’m sure it does, not that it matters to me. I don’t have to live here.”

Was it her imagination or did Phoebe just shudder? Perhaps she shouldn’t continue reading Mary Shelley’s novel if it was going to make her mind so foolish.

They joined a handful of other guests walking up the stone path to the front door. Flickering torches illuminated the way, but that wonderful gothic feeling was lost as soon as they stepped inside.

The interior was just as Phoebe had promised—modern, which caused a peculiar disappointment in Finley’s chest. Had she hoped for a spooky run-down ruin?

Chandeliers sparkled overhead, and wall sconces bathed everyone in a warm glow. She didn’t hear the hiss of gas, which meant that the house—or at least the lighting of it—was powered by the “battery” manufactured by the Greythorne Corporation. The last house she worked at had been in the process of converting to the power source invented by a previous Duke of Greythorne long before Finley was born. He’d discovered an ore that, once refined and properly treated, could power an entire house for months off one small battery that could then be exchanged for another once it was depleted. Amazing discovery, it was. And somewhat expensive, though she’d heard that the current duke was taking measures to make the batteries more affordable so everyone in Britain could light their homes without worrying about fire—or the whole thing exploding.

There were ladies in all manner of beautiful gowns and jewels. Gentlemen were dressed in black and

white, some with brightly colored neck cloths. Human servants and gleaming brass automatons milled around the guests, bearing trays of champagne, lemonade and other refreshments.

Finley had never seen so many automatons under one roof except for an exhibition she'd visited a few years ago with her parents. She had to remind herself not to stare.

"Impressive, aren't they?" came a voice from her left.

She turned as an older man, perhaps a few years older than Silas, walked up to stand beside her. He gestured with his champagne toward one of the smaller machines collecting empty glasses. "This one knows his route. He'll move in a precalculated pattern throughout the room, collecting empty crystal, which he'll then take to the kitchen to be washed."

Finley glanced at the man. He had a nice face, and was probably very handsome when he was younger and his dark hair not touched with gray. "Are you not worried about having so many, given the recent accidents?" There had been two or three mentions in the papers over the past few months of automatons acting against their programming. People had been injured, though not seriously.

He smiled at her. Yes, he must have been handsome as a young man. He was handsome now. "Of these beauties? Of course not. You see Miss..."

"Bennet," Finley supplied, remembering the name Phoebe told her to use, and her manners. She offered her hand. "Finley Bennet. I'm here with Lady Morton

and Lady Phoebe

Blue eyes brightened. "Are you? How lovely. A pleasure to meet you, Miss Bennet. I am Lord Vincent, creator of all the automatons you see around you."

Finley flushed. Of course he wouldn't be nervous of them. "Forgive me, my lord. I am new to town." How easily the lie rolled off her tongue. "Am I to understand then, that this is also your home?"

Lord Vincent nodded as he continued to smile at her. "No need to be embarrassed, dear girl. I am surprised that neither Lady Morton or Lady Phoebe mentioned you to me when last we spoke, and that they seem equally remiss in mentioning me to you."

There was nothing dark in his voice when he spoke, but the base of Finley's spine tingled at his words. Why would Lady Morton neglect to inform their host that she would be bringing an extra guest? And why would either she or her daughter feel the need to tell Finley about his lordship?

Suddenly Lady Morton and Phoebe were there, inserting themselves so Finley was forced to step back from the man.

"Forgive me, Lord Vincent," Lady Morton said, a flush in her cheeks. "I was caught up in conversation with Lady Marsden, else I would have made introductions. I see you've already met our cousin, Miss Finley Bennet."

Indeed I have," Lord Vincent replied as he bowed over each of their hands. "You are lovely as always, Lady Morton. Lady Phoebe, allow me to say that you are more beautiful each time I see you."

Phoebe blushed at his praise. Finley didn't blame

her—it was a pretty racy thing for him to say to someone who was engaged.

Then Phoebe raised her gaze, and Finley saw something in her bright eyes that she could not identify. Was it fear? Panic?

“Forgive me, cousin,” Phoebe said to her, her voice low and a little shaky. She slipped her arm around Lord Vincent’s, her face now strangely pale. “I should have been the one to make the introductions. May I present Harris Spencer-White, Earl Vincent, our host for the evening and my fiancé.”

CHAPTER FOUR

An hour later, Finley was still reeling. Lord Vincent was Phoebe's fiancé? She knew large age differences weren't uncommon amongst the upper crust—or the lower for that matter—but the man was more than twice Phoebe's age!

She watched them on the dance floor. Lord Vincent had a limp, but that didn't stop him from whirling Phoebe through a waltz. If he were only younger, or she older, they would make a handsome couple.

It was warm in the ballroom—too many bodies in one space. The smell of cologne and perfume mixed with heat and sweat gave Finley a headache. She hadn't been asked to dance the waltz, and her card was blank for the next few selections—thankfully, as she wasn't the best dancer—so she took this time to slip from the loud, stifling room.

She was nosy by nature, but her hurting head and pinched toes—Phoebe's shoes were a titch too small—kept her impulse to look about under control. Rather than remain in the corridor, where she might have to socialize with other guests coming and going, she opened the door of the first room she found and stepped inside.

Finley waited a moment before closing the door behind her. She was in a parlor or a gentleman's study—decorated in rich mahogany and dark blue. She'd read that such rooms were perfect places for a lovers' tryst at these sort of parties, and wanted to

make certain she hadn't interrupted one.

"If there's anyone in here, just clear your throat and I'll go back where I came from," she said. Better to feel foolish for talking to an empty room than accidentally spy a gentleman's naked backside. Some things could not be "un-seen."

The lighting in the room was mellow, easing the pressure inside her skull. She went to one of the windows and found it controlled by a strange apparatus. Instead of simply flipping the latch and opening the casement, she had to wind the key set into the window frame. Then, she watched as thin brass "arms" attached to the latch pulled it to the open position, and then slowly drew the glass toward her. When the breeze was exactly how she wanted, she merely turned the key back to its starting position and the mechanism came to a halt.

Lord Vincent certainly seemed to like his clockwork and automata. The house was positively crawling with scuttling metal creatures designed to do all manner of tasks. There were human servants, as well, but Finley had never seen such an abundance of brass and steel.

She turned her back to the window so the refreshing spring breeze could cool her nape. She rolled her neck, sighing as it popped and snapped, further easing the tension in her head and shoulders. When she opened her eyes she found herself staring at a portrait of Phoebe and Lord Vincent.

No, wait. That wasn't Phoebe. Finley didn't have to move closer to view the portrait in detail, but she did

anyway. At this moment she didn't trust her own eyes—which had become uncannily keen over the past few months. The improvement to her sight had been so gradual that she often forgot she could see much better than the average person. She walked toward the large, gilt-framed canvas, her eyes widening with each step.

It was a portrait of a much younger Lord Vincent—she'd been correct, he had been quite handsome in his youth—and the woman with him must have been his first wife, or at least a betrothed. The woman wore a large sapphire ring on her left hand—the same hand that covered one of Lord Vincent's.

She looked so much like Phoebe it was eerie.

Of course, on closer examination it was easy to pick out the differences—Phoebe's eyes were not quite as dark, her hair a bit more red, but the shape of her face was a perfect match, and her features so close they could have been twins, or at least sisters.

It was unsettling. Disturbing. And Finley wondered if Phoebe knew. She was also overwhelmed by the need to find out just what had happened to this woman.

“Robert, I said no!”

The cry came from outside, carried to her keen ears by the breeze through the open window. It was Phoebe's voice.

Portrait forgotten, Finley quickly crossed to the window. From there she could see into the garden below. Flickering torches cast soft golden light over Phoebe and her companion—a young gentleman. Neither of them looked very pleased.

“I have to go,” Phoebe said. “Mama and Finley will

be looking for me.”

The young man grabbed her by the arm. “You can’t leave. Not yet.”

Perhaps it was guilt that she hadn’t been doing her duty that flicked the switch inside Finley, or perhaps it was the way he grabbed Phoebe like he had a right to. Maybe it was a little of both. Regardless, one moment she was watching them from the window and the next she vaulted over the sill and dropped two floors to the grass below.

The two gaped at her as though she had just fallen from the sky—which she supposed she had.

“Let her go,” she told the young gentleman. He was tall and slim with thick dark hair and rosy cheeks.

He scowled, his amazement clearly faded. “This is none of your business.”

“Wrong.” Finley clapped her fingers around the wrist of his hand holding Phoebe. “My friend wants to leave and you won’t let her. Not very mannerly, Robert.” As she spoke she tightened her grip, stopping when his handsome face began to contort in pain. She let go as soon as she felt his fingers release Phoebe.

Robert cradled his arm close to his chest. Phoebe immediately brushed past Finley to stop at his side. Her hands touched him as though he were precious or fragile. “Robert, dearest. Are you all right?”

Dearest? Finley scowled. She’d been *this* close to giving Robert the thrashing she thought he deserved when he’d let go. She had seen Phoebe try to pull free of his grip, and now the girl was all over him wondering if he was all right?

“What did you do to him?” Phoebe demanded, glaring at her.

Finley raised her brows. “I heard you tell him no and then I saw him grab you. I thought he was trying to do you harm.”

“I would never hurt Phoebe,” Robert informed her indignantly. “I love her.”

“Love her?” Finley repeated dumbly, before pressing a hand to her head—which had started to ache again. This job was beginning to take on more twists and turns than one of those “sensation” novels.

Lips tight, she looked from Robert to Phoebe. “Someone had better explain to me just what exactly is going on here.”

The explanation was truly the stuff worthy of Mr. Dickens—simple, but oddly convoluted. Phoebe loved Robert, and Robert loved Phoebe, but Robert had yet to reach the age of majority so they couldn’t marry without their parents’ consent. Robert’s parents might have been persuaded to allow it, but Lord Vincent had gone to Phoebe’s father and asked Lord Morton for her hand. Her father said yes.

Finley’s gaze slid back and forth between the two as she struggled to regain her composure. Did this young buck know just how close he’d come to having her fist down his throat? The thought of it made her stomach twist and roll. She’d thought he was hurting Phoebe, and in return that dark part of her had wanted to hurt him. It still wanted to hurt him, even if just a very little.

“So why don’t you break the engagement?” she asked Phoebe. “Seems a simple enough solution.”

Phoebe glanced away, and even in the murky darkness Finley could tell that her cheeks were red. “I cannot do that.”

All right. She could accept that weak-arsed explanation for now, but the other girl would have to explain in detail the next time they were alone.

“You could elope,” she suggested.

This time Robert shook his head. “That would bring shame down on both our houses, dishonor me and ruin Phoebe’s reputation.” The look he directed at the girl embarrassed Finley—it was so warm. “I couldn’t do that to her.”

Finley grimaced. “So if I’m to understand you, the two of you are desperate to be together, but are unwilling to make the necessary sacrifices?”

Robert frowned at her. “You mock us with your ignorance.”

She probably should have pleaded the contrary, but Finley didn’t like being called ignorant, especially when she would do whatever necessary to be with the boy she loved—if there was such a creature. “Yes,” she replied honestly. “I do. I would mock anyone who whines about their situation yet can’t summon the bollocks to fight for who and what they want.”

“Finley,” Phoebe began.

Robert cut her off, looking down his nose at Finley. “Of course you would say something so coarse. You know nothing of the ways of our world.”

He made it sound like that was a bad thing. Finley

shrugged. “You’re right, and I don’t want to know them if this foolishness is any indication of what your world is like. Now, you have two choices—we return to the ball now before someone starts to wonder where the two of you have made off to, or, I can run inside and tell all the wrong people that I found you together in the garden and the scandal will ensure you have to marry each other. What will it be?”

The hopeful glint in Robert’s eye almost won Finley over—almost. She still thought he was more of a prat than Phoebe deserved. Then Phoebe said, “You can’t do that!”

Poor Robert. He looked as though she’d broken his heart. Of course he had to know rationally that such a scandal would bring about the dishonor he so wished to avoid, but it was nice to know that he truly cared for Phoebe.

Finley didn’t question it. She arched a brow at the other girl, who looked away, not only from her, but from Robert, as well. “Then we’d best get inside.”

The three of them returning to the ballroom together would attract little interest. They would simply be a group of young people returning from catching some air out-of-doors. Never mind that they could have been up to all manner of mischief while out there.

“Phoebe,” Robert murmured as they crossed the threshold. “I...”

She barely turned her head to look at him. “I think it’s better if we don’t speak again, Robert.” Her voice was so cold, Finley thought she might get frost-bite. “It will be better for both of us that way. Goodbye.”

Robert's face drained of all color. Finley was glad no one paid them any attention, because if they did they would all see the exact moment that Phoebe broke his heart, and that would entertain a few gossips just as much as if they had been caught kissing.

"Come along, Finley," Phoebe instructed and began to walk away. Finley shrugged—in what she hoped was a sympathetic manner—to Robert, who in her mind was now not nearly as poncey as she first thought, and hurried after Phoebe. Her opinion of the girl had dropped a little right then. There was no need to be mean, and yet, another part of her—the dark part that sometimes seemed smarter than her or rather possessed of a better sense of intuition—wondered if perhaps Phoebe hadn't broken her own heart at the same time.

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Finley didn't see much of Phoebe for the remainder of the evening. Lord Vincent took up much of her time—especially after the announcement of their engagement was officially made.

Maybe she was naive in her thinking that love was more important than honor and family and all that nonsense, but any envy she might have felt toward Phoebe and other girls of her class was greatly diminished.

Wasn't living your life based around what people thought and expected of you a little... well, stupid?

Hypocrite, a voice whispered inside her head. *You always worry about what people think of you.*

But that wasn't quite the same thing, Finley told

herself firmly, and that was the end of the conversation, because everyone knew only mad girls talked to themselves.

She danced another two times before the evening finally came to an end. She couldn't remember the young men's names, but they had been pleasant and polite enough. She was fairly certain they only danced with her because they thought she was Phoebe's cousin and their mothers told them to.

"Did you have a good time tonight, Finley?" Lady Morton asked in the carriage on the way home. She had removed her spectacles and her 'odd' eye glowed a little in the dim light—like a cat's.

Finley stifled a yawn. "Yes, my lady." She could hardly admit that her feet hurt and that she'd spent the last hour of the party praying for it to end.

Lady Morton seemed pleased. "Excellent. The Duke of Greythorne was in attendance. Did either of you happen to notice him?"

Finley shook her head. Phoebe yawned delicately behind her gloved hand. "I did not. I'm sure it was because His Grace was surrounded by frenzied young ladies vying for his attention."

One of Finley's brows rose. "Is he that handsome?"

Phoebe grinned. "And that rich. He's only a little older than us, so I doubt he'll be eager to marry anytime soon. They're wasting their energies trying to catch him."

This was an odd concept to Finley, girls trying to "catch" a husband. Her mother always made it sound as though it was the man's duty to woo the lady. Perhaps it was something introduced by the Suffrage

movement.

She was about to ask how old Robert was, but caught her tongue just in time. That was not something to discuss in front of Lady Morton. Besides, Phoebe had laid her head back against the cushions and closed her eyes, almost instantly falling asleep.

Lady Morton shot Finley an amused glance. "She's been able to do that since she was a baby. It seems you and I are left to amuse each other as we contend with the crush of traffic, Finley."

And what traffic! The carriage would roll a few feet and then stop, caught up in the steady throng departing the party, clogging the narrow street.

"Lord Vincent has a very lovely home," Finley offered awkwardly. At least it was safe conversation.

"Yes," her ladyship agreed. "All the modern conveniences, as well. The earl is a very interested in progress. He's always supported the scientific arts."

"What happened to his leg?"

Lady Morton's expression sobered. "A carriage accident. He and his wife were on their way back from holiday in Scotland. His leg was destroyed and she was killed."

"That's terrible." Finley felt awful for asking.

"Yes. He made himself an automaton limb—one that moves and behaves just as a proper limb would. Is that not amazing?"

Finley murmured in agreement. "I saw a portrait of his wife earlier this evening."

"You did?" A wrinkle appeared between Lady Morton's brows. "How did you happen to see that?"

“I had a headache and needed quiet. I slipped into an empty room and saw it hanging on the wall.” She had said this much, she might as well press on, “She looks like Phoebe.”

“Yes.” The older woman clasped her hands in her lap—tightly, as though to keep from fidgeting. “Cassandra and I were cousins.”

So that meant that Lord Vincent intended to marry his wife’s cousin. There was something ...icky about that.

One glance at her ladyship and Finley suspected she shared the feeling. She also looked like she dared Finley to cast judgment in a strangely fragile manner.

“It’s a good match,” Finley said instead.

“Yes.” There was an element of relief in the word. “It is.” Then she turned her attention to the window, and all conversation came to an end.

The carriage jerked into motion and picked up speed. They were home within a few minutes. Phoebe woke up so quickly and brightly that Finley wondered if the girl had been asleep at all.

CHAPTER FIVE

The next few days were filled with shopping as Lady Morton and Phoebe were determined to see Finley well dressed. She refused to allow them to buy her extravagant clothing, and instead set her mind to simple, well-made garments.

“I’m supposed to be from the country,” she argued. “Country fashion is much more practical than City dress.” She was right, of course, so they gave in. The result was a modest wardrobe of good, modern pieces—nothing too fine or fussy, but nothing so drab that they’d be ashamed to be seen with her in public.

If she needed something superfine, it was agreed that she could borrow something that Phoebe had already worn and alter it. Being raised by a seamstress had its advantages.

But all this shopping and stopping for tea, more shopping, stopping for luncheon and visiting, and then more tea, followed by dinner and an evening at the theater—in Lord Vincent’s box—meant that it was days before Finley had the chance to talk privately with Phoebe, and quite late at night at that.

Before changing into her nightclothes, Finley went to the other girl’s room. She dismissed the young maid for the night, so that she could help Phoebe get ready for bed.

Finley felt as though they had become quite close over the past few days. Perhaps not the best of friends,

but at least confidantes. She hadn't told Phoebe her secret, and the girl hadn't asked, but Finley definitely felt comfortable around her.

They made small talk for a few moments, talking about the play they'd seen—a production of Oscar Wilde's *The Ideal Husband*, which had been equally hilarious and surprisingly serious. Finley had quite enjoyed it.

“May I ask you a question?” Finley asked, as she loosened the laces of Phoebe's damask corset.

“Only if I may ask one of you,” the girl replied, holding on to one of the posters of her bed. “Good lord, Finley, you're going to lift me clean off the floor!”

“Sorry.” Sheepishly, Finley gentled her actions. Sometimes she forgot her own strength.

Phoebe smiled over her shoulder. “What is it you wished to ask?”

“Why are you marrying Lord Vincent?”

“How is it you can leap from a second-floor window and not even twist an ankle?”

“Usually how this sort of thing works is that you answer my question before asking your own.”

Phoebe shrugged. “I will answer yours after you answer mine.”

Oh, for pity's sake. Finley sighed. “I don't know how I'm able to leap out a window and remain unharmed, only that I can.” It was an honest answer, if a poor one.

Dark eyes narrow, Phoebe turned to face her, popping the hooks in the front of her corset, beneath which her chemise was stuck to her skin. “What else

can you do?"

"I agreed to one question," Finley dodged. "Now you must answer mine. Why are you marrying Lord Vincent? You obviously don't want to, so why?"

Phoebe glanced away, clenching her jaw in an almost petulant manner.

"Are you going back on our agreement?" Finley demanded.

"I agreed that you could ask me a question. I did not promise to answer it."

"Oh, that's honorable of you." She should keep her mouth shut. This girl was not her social equal. One word to her mother and Finley would be out on the street—again. But she was hurt, insulted and a little pissed. "I tell you something I've never told anyone else and you won't extend the same courtesy. That's just lovely. Good night."

She made it perhaps two steps before Phoebe reached out and seized her by the wrist. For a second, Finley was in a poor enough temper that she was tempted to catch the girl's wrist in her own hand and squeeze until the delicate bones rubbed together.

"Finley, wait." An expression of real distress crossed her face. "Don't go. Please."

With a mulish set to her jaw, Finley turned, relaxing her posture enough that Phoebe dropped her arm. "I'll stay."

Phoebe's thin shoulders sagged. "Good. Why don't we sit down?"

They sat beside one another on the edge of the bed. Phoebe had slipped into a robe to protect her bare arms

from the slight spring chill in the air. Finley waited patiently for her to begin.

Licking her lips, Phoebe tangled her fingers in her lap, thumbs rubbing together nervously. “Surely you noticed that Papa did not attend the theater with us this evening?”

“I hadn’t given it much thought to be honest.”

“No,” Phoebe said softly. “I suppose you wouldn’t. And it’s not as though it’s unusual for an engaged girl and her mother to attend the theater with the girl’s fiancé.”

Finley wouldn’t know what was unusual and what wasn’t with the upper classes—not really. “Did your father’s absence upset you?”

Phoebe’s pale cheeks flushed a deep rose. “No. You asked me why I’m marrying Lord Vincent?”

It took a second for Finley to realize that her companion was waiting for her confirmation before she replied. Raising both brows, she gave a small nod. “Yes. I did.”

“My father...” Phoebe frowned, tucking in her lips. “My father prefers to spend his evenings at his club or with his cronies.”

Finley shrugged. “All right.” What the devil did this have to do with Lord Vincent?

“He enjoys horse racing and cards.” Dark eyes darted away from hers. “Perhaps too much.”

She could have smacked herself in the forehead with the heel of her hand. Lord, but she could be dense at times! She should have already made this assumption—because it made the most sense.

“Lord Vincent paid off your father’s debts in return

for marrying you.”

More pink flooded Phoebe’s cheeks. She was quite flushed now. “Yes. So you see now why I cannot simply break the engagement to be with Robert.”

Finley nodded. “I assume that Vincent has also agreed to continue covering any debts your father racks up?”

“Yes. It is very good of Lord Vincent to do this.”

Who was she trying to convince? Finley or herself?

“No matter how much your father owes, it’s not what you are worth,” Finley remarked.

The dark-haired girl turned to her. There were tears in her green eyes. “Thank you,” she whispered before dissolving into sobs.

What the devil was she to do now? Finley didn’t have a lot of experience with crying—her own or that of others. Slowly—and a bit awkwardly if she was truthful—she slid her arm around Phoebe’s shoulders and patted her back a bit.

The sobs subsided after a few moments, and Phoebe reared up and off the bed in search of a handkerchief for her eyes and nose. When she turned to face Finley again it was with puffy eyes and a red nose. “Forgive me.”

“Whatever for? For being upset over a situation that rots? I think you have every right.”

“Lord Vincent has been nothing but gentlemanly and kind to me through the entire process, and I know that I am extremely fortunate to make such a match. I’ll be a countess.”

“But?” Finley prodded, sensing there was more.

Twisting the crumpled linen handkerchief in her hands, Phoebe's shoulders slumped. "Perhaps you'll think me naive, but I always thought I'd marry for love. Lord Vincent doesn't love me. In fact, I think he only wants me because I look like his dead wife. I know you saw her portrait."

So she hadn't been asleep the entire carriage drive. "So your father makes a mess and you get to clean it up. You're a better person than I, Phoebe. I don't think I could do it."

"I'm not doing it for my father," came the firm reply. She sounded a little angry, but she didn't rush to her father's defense. "I'm doing it for Mama—and for myself—so neither of us has to suffer through the whispers and stares, the social downfall that happens when ones debtors come calling. I would save us both that humiliation. This way if Father ruins himself, I will be in a position to care for my mother."

Wanting to protect her mother was something Finley could relate to, though she still had no idea what role she was to play in all of this. Had Lady Morton hired her to make certain Phoebe went through with the marriage and didn't run away with Robert? Or had she been hired because Lady Morton was uncomfortable putting her daughter in the hands of a man old enough to be her father?

One thing for certain, she was beginning to like Phoebe, and she didn't want to see anything happen to her. That meant she was going to have to find out all she could about Lord Vincent. Lord Morton, as well.

"I should let you get to bed," she said, rising to her feet. "Thank you for confiding in me. I want you to

know that I'll do whatever I can to help you."

A shaky smile curved Phoebe's lips. "Thank you, but I'm not sure that there's anything you can do. Although, you never did tell me just what else you are capable of doing."

It was meant as a lighthearted comment, and Finley tried to react as such, but it struck just a little too close to home for her find it funny. She turned her head to meet Phoebe's gaze past the corner of the door. "I'm not sure either of us wants to find out," she replied. "Good night, Phoebe." And then closed the door behind her.

Finley woke to utter darkness and a sense of determined purpose, which could mean only one thing, though it never occurred to her—her other self was awake, as well, and in control.

It wasn't fair that Phoebe had to marry Lord Vincent, though Finley was aware that life was full of things that weren't fair. That wasn't the issue crowding her head right now. What she wanted to know was why a man Vincent's age wanted to marry such a young girl—other than the obvious, of course. Old men always leered at younger women, always wanted someone new and fresh to give them an heir and make them feel young again.

If the old earl had nefarious plans for her new friend, he was in for a rude awakening. Friendship was a rare thing, and Finley liked Phoebe, she really did.

As much as she could like a girl without much of a

backbone. Honestly, she didn't even like herself all that much at times.

She tossed back the blankets and swung her legs over the side of the bed. Ten minutes later she was dressed in a short skirt, striped stockings, heavy boots, black shirt and serviceable leather corset that tied in the front. She pulled on a long black coat, secured her hair on top of her head and opened a window.

It was quite a drop to the grass below, but luck was on her side in the form of a trellis a few feet over. All she had to do was ease her body out of the window and stretch an arm and a leg toward the trellis, while maintaining her balance with her remaining limbs. When she had a solid hold on the trellis, she let go of the window casing and swung as gracefully as a monkey.

Quickly, she clambered down the side of the house and dropped to the soft grass. She glanced around to make certain no one had seen her before jogging toward the garden wall. It was better to keep to the shadows than the street—and faster.

She ran toward the wall, pushed up against the moss-covered stone with the toe of her boot and vaulted herself up to grip the top edge. She pulled herself up easily, and crouched there a moment before jumping down into the neighboring garden. When nothing came at her, she took off running, the thick soles of her boots a blur over the grass. She vaulted another wall, and then another, working her way toward Lord Vincent's estate through a shortcut of back gardens and shadows.

When she reached the top of the wall around his

lordship's garden, she paused, barely winded. Every instinct warned her not to charge in like a bull chasing a red flag. Lord Vincent was a technologically minded man. He had automatons for servants, and automatons never slept.

Just as the thought crossed her mind, her sensitive ears picked up a faint grinding sound that seemed to grow louder and louder. A small light shone through the darkness, and then she saw that the light came from a bulb implanted in the chest of an automaton. The bright beam swelled to illuminate the garden like a torch, sweeping a radius of perhaps seven feet in front of the graceful machine.

A sentry. It had pistols mounted on its shoulders and pincers on the end of its humanoid hands. It was made to maim, perhaps even kill intruders. Finley frowned. She understood that Lord Vincent was a rich and powerful man, and that his house was full of things thieves would love to steal, but the Watch kept an eye on this area, and Lord Vincent already had iron grates over his lower windows, and top-notch locks on all the doors—she had noticed them the night of the ball.

Which begged the question: what was Lord Vincent trying to protect? Or better yet, what was he trying to hide?

Finley stayed where she was until the automaton had navigated around the side of the house; it gave her time to figure out a way in. She jumped down from the wall, thighs slightly tight from crouching so long, and bolted toward the house. She didn't have much time.

The automaton would eventually make its way back, and if her estimation of Lord Vincent's secrecy and intelligence was even half of what it should be, the metal would sense her from a distance.

She was strong and fast, but a bullet could kill her just as easily as it killed anyone else.

Speed gave her momentum and she leaped up at the house, fingers clutching at the top of a window casing. Toes and fingers dug in as she pulled herself up. Was she getting stronger? She felt even stronger than she had before punching that idiot governess.

That silly part of her that worried too much was not going to be happy about that, but *she* was! Quickly, she scampered up the side of the house, sometimes using nothing more than breaks in the mortar for purchase. Past the ground floor, then the first. She stopped at a second-floor window—one without shutters—and pushed.

There was a slight popping noise as the latch broke, bits of it hitting the floor. The window swung open and she pulled herself over the sill just as the automaton approached far below.

As a precaution, she closed the window once more. It gaped slightly without its latch, but as far as she was concerned that wasn't her dilemma.

She was in a bedroom. As she surveyed her surroundings in the dark, with nothing but moonlight and her keen eyesight to guide her, she saw that she was in what must have been the late countess's bedchamber. Either the earl had never closed the room up after she died, or he was in the midst of preparing it for his new bride.

She picked a brush up from the vanity. Auburn hair clung to some of the bristles, answering her question. He had never closed the room up after his last wife's death.

Did he plan to move Phoebe in here without changing a thing? Or would he put her elsewhere, so this room might remain a museum of sorts? Whichever he chose, it was still...creepy. Marrying a girl who looked that much like your dead wife was just unsettling. Surely society thought the same way? But no one would dare tell an earl that he was clearly on the short list for Bedlam, the lunatic asylum.

Flesh prickling with goose bumps, Finley made for the door. She couldn't stay in this room any longer, cryptlike as it was. Why, her overactive mind could almost imagine the husk of the former Lady Vincent beneath the bedcovers.

Her heart was pounding as she slipped out into the corridor. It was dark and quiet here—not a mechanized servant to be seen, nor a human one. The only light was what peeked from beneath a door at the end of the hall.

Finley crept toward that light, wincing when the floorboards creaked beneath her feet. She froze, scarcely daring to breathe. Nothing. No metal guards, no weapons flying out of the walls, no trip wires designed to maim or kill. Lord Vincent put all of his energy into keeping people out of his house rather than taking precautions against a stranger romancing the inside—thankfully.

At the end of the corridor, she crouched down and

put her eye to the keyhole.

Please, don't let him be naked, she prayed. She might have to gouge out her own eyes if Lord Vincent was prancing about in his flesh pajamas on the other side of the door.

She needn't have worried, she soon realized. This wasn't a bedroom—or at least it wasn't anymore. It might have been at one time, but now it appeared to be a laboratory of some sort. Lord Vincent stood with his back to her—fully clothed. He seemed to be fiddling with some sort of cabinet with a glass top. She couldn't quite see it all because he was in the way.

The room was brightly lit, and the odor seeping from underneath the door smelled vaguely of chemicals and smoke, and was moist with steam. Jars and beakers sat on shelves and workbenches. Strange tools that looked like things a dentist or surgeon might use hung ominously from hooks in the walls. If it wasn't so clean and bright, she might think she was spying on Dr. Frankenstein himself.

Lord Vincent was probably building a new automaton, or working on one of his inventions. She'd been foolish to be overly suspicious of him. At worst he was an eccentric, dirty old man eager to marry someone almost a third his age.

Finley was just about to move away from the door and go home, when Lord Vincent moved away from the cabinet. Sitting on top of the wooden base was a large glass tank filled with a viscous pink liquid. Coils of wires ran from various apparatus and switches into the tank, bobbing as whatever it was they were attached to moved—or rather *twitched*—in the fluid.

The movement brought the thing flush against the glass....

Finley barely covered her mouth in time. Swallowing her cry, she rocked back on her heels, gripping the wall for support as prickles of heat swarmed her mind. She did not shock or surprise easily, especially not when the weaker side of herself was asleep, but what she had seen horrified her.

She peeked through the keyhole again despite her better judgment. She had to know if her eyes had deceived her. Her heart hammered as she turned her attention to the tank.

It was still. The wires leading into it did not move, nor did the jellylike contents. There was nothing bobbing like an apple in a barrel of water, only stillness—like a jar of jam.

Could she have imagined it? She wondered as she rose to her feet. Her limbs trembled and her heart continued its throbbing rhythm, even as she doubted her own eyes.

The sound of footsteps grew louder on the other side of the door, spurring her into motion. She had barely ducked into the eerie bedroom at the end of the hall when she heard the door of the laboratory open. Through the crack, she spied Lord Vincent walking down the polished floor toward that room. Whirling on her heel, she raced toward the window and squeezed out onto the ledge, closing the glass behind her. She quickly climbed down to the grass and sprinted toward the wall, narrowly avoiding the patrol automaton.

The vision of that tank haunted her all the way back

to Lord and Lady Morton's, and continued to plague her as she lay in bed, wishing for a fast and dreamless sleep. She could not forget the image no matter how hard she tried. Not for the first time she doubted her own sanity, because she couldn't have seen what she thought she had seen. But still...

She had seen something similar in an anatomy book Silas had in the store, and though the thought made her stomach churn, she could have sworn that what she had seen in the tank at Lord Vincent's was a human brain.

CHAPTER SIX

The bright light of day made everything so much clearer.

When Finley woke up the next morning, mortified that the other part of herself had taken over and broken into Lord Vincent's home, she told herself of course there hadn't been a brain in that tank. It had only looked like one—not that she had any experience with brain examination. It had probably been something his lordship was working on—something machine related, and not human at all.

That was what she told herself, and part of her believed it enough to decide not to give it any more thought. Even when she went down to breakfast and found herself alone with Lady Morton, she said nothing.

“You look tired this morning, Finley, my dear,” the lady commented, her tone sincerely concerned. “Are you quite all right?”

“I'm fine, thank you. I didn't sleep well last night.”

Lady Morton concentrated on spreading jam on her toast and did not look at Finley. “I thought I heard you come in quite late last night.”

Finley froze. “I... I went for a walk in the garden. I'm sorry to have disturbed you.”

“You didn't. I thought perhaps you might have gone out.” Now she raised her pointed, and somewhat unsettling gaze.

Frowning, Finley could only stare back. Was she correct in suspecting that her ladyship had hoped she had gone somewhere, or was the woman merely trying to control her anger? It was difficult to tell, but a little voice in her head—a voice she recognized as her “other” self, urged her to trust her instinct. Against her better judgment, she listened to the voice.

“Where do you suppose I might have gotten myself off to? Had I gone out, that is.”

The lady smiled and poured hot coffee into the delicate china cup in front of Finley before topping up her own. “Oh, I don’t know. Perhaps around the neighborhood? Perhaps you might take a walk around Lord Vincent’s?”

Finley swallowed. Hard. Had Lady Morton spied on her? She hadn’t seen anyone follow her—not that she could remember. Sometimes when her darker half took over the details were fuzzy. “Why ever would I go to Lord Vincent’s?”

This time her ladyship lost all pretense. She set aside her coffee and her toast, and leaned in. “Because you have become a friend to my daughter, and because, like me, you have an unsettling feeling about Lord Vincent.”

This was unexpected. Finley’s fingers trembled as she picked a piece of bacon from her plate and lifted it to her mouth. She took a bite of the salty, crispy goodness and chewed thoughtfully before answering. “He wants Phoebe to replace his dead wife.”

“Yes.” The older woman looked relieved to hear it said aloud. “But there is more. There is something in the way he looks at her, something that makes me

shiver. It's as though he has plans for her, Finley. Like she's just another one of his inventions."

This was obviously something that had been bothering Lady Morton for some time. "What does Lord Morton say about it?" It was impertinent for her to ask, but she didn't think the lady would mind.

Lady Morton rubbed the back of her neck. She looked tired. "He says I'm being foolish, but he would sell Phoebe to a gypsy caravan if they offered to pay his debts." She pressed her fingers to her mouth, a horrified expression on her face. "I should not have said that."

But she had, and now Finley had a better idea of what the woman thought of her husband. And what Phoebe's father thought of her. Poor thing. Finley might not have grown up in a fine house with servants and pretty gowns, but at least she'd always known that her mother and Silas would do anything for her—including lay down their own lives. Silas would never sell her off to protect himself.

"Why did you hire me, Lady Morton?" An unsettling suspicion had begun to form in Finley's stomach. "It wasn't merely to be a companion to Phoebe, was it?"

The lady wrapped her fingers around her cup of coffee, as though trying to warm them. "No. I heard from Lady Gattersleigh about your...altercation with that dreadful governess of hers. I knew you would protect anyone you cared about, and how could you not care about my Phoebe?"

That was true. "She's easy to like, ma'am."

“Yes.” She smiled faintly, but proudly. “She’s a good girl. Lady Gattersleigh also told me that she thought you were *unnatural* in regards to your strength. Is that true?”

Finley swallowed the rest of her bacon. Since she’d begun to change she’d had to hide what she was, because people always reviled or feared her for it. Now, someone actually wanted her to be different. “Yes. I am unusual, but Phoebe is not in any danger from me. I want you to know that.”

“I have seen enough to know you would never hurt my daughter. Your excursion last night proves to me that you are exactly as I hoped.” She reached across the table and took Finley’s hand. “You will protect her, won’t you? If his intentions are nefarious, you will find out before the wedding?”

The wedding was to take place closer to the end of the Season, in late June. “I’ll do everything I can,” Finley promised with a solemn nod.

The older woman squeezed her hand once more before releasing it. “Thank you. I want you to know you have my permission to come and go at all hours. So long as you do not neglect Phoebe or raise her suspicions, I will gladly make excuses for your absence.”

Finley thanked her. She didn’t know what she could do against someone as powerful as an earl, but maybe she could find a reason for Phoebe not to marry him. That would please everyone.

“Three evenings from now we are expecting Lord Vincent to dine with us,” Lady Morton informed her, returning to her toast. “If you should happen to

develop a headache immediately after the meal and need to lie down, I shouldn't hold it against you."

One of Finley's brows rose. The woman was actually encouraging her to lie in order to sneak away from the house and break into Lord Vincent's! Why, it was enough intrigue to make a girl's heart race. And yet...and yet that dark part of her relished the opportunity. Even underneath all her misgivings, Finley wanted to do this.

"That's good to know," she replied. "I believe I am due for a headache that evening."

They shared a conspiratorial smile, but it was the relief and thankfulness on the woman's face that meant more to Finley than anything else.

"What are the two of you talking so quietly about?" Phoebe asked as she came into the dining room looking brighter than anyone had the right to when just out of bed.

Her mother smiled at her. "You, of course."

The girl laughed. "Because I'm such a fascinating topic."

Finley smiled, as well, and when Phoebe joined them at the table, the conversation turned to happier, lighter subjects, which suited her just fine. She felt almost like a normal girl sitting there with Phoebe, discussing parties and dresses and who was caught doing what in the scandal sheets.

But the part of her that wasn't normal kept thinking about Lord Vincent and how something just wasn't right with him. After all, it took a monster to know one.

That afternoon Lord Vincent came calling to take Phoebe for a ride in Hyde Park. It was a fashionable pastime, though one Finley thought ridiculous. Imagine, a bunch of rich people all swarming the park at five o'clock just so they could be seen there? Why not go when it was less busy? At least then a body could enjoy themselves.

Finley was *not* enjoying herself. While Phoebe and his lordship rode in a comfortable open carriage pulled by gleaming brass automaton horses, she was forced to follow behind on an actual smelly horse.

She had only ever been on a horse twice in her entire life, and the first time she had cried until her mother took her down from the saddle. Horseback was a long way up when you're five and city-raised.

At least she was able to ride astride. It wasn't terribly fashionable, but it wasn't considered as scandalous as it had been years ago. A famous horsewoman from Astley's Amphitheatre had started a trend for it and it had only taken a few noblewomen to follow suit for the rest of society to catch on. It was supposedly much safer than riding sidesaddle, for which Finley was greatly thankful.

She wore a black split skirt—wide-legged trousers that had a panel that could be brought about in front to make it more resemble a skirt—and a purple riding jacket with matching hat. She felt like a great eggplant atop the chestnut mare, despite Phoebe's assurances that she looked "smashing." The ostrich plume in her hat kept bobbing in her face no matter how many times

she blew it out of the way.

She followed behind the carriage at a discreet distance, obviously a chaperone for the couple. If that wasn't bad enough, many of the young men she had danced with at the engagement party tipped their hats and said hello to her as they rode past in their modern vehicles, calling even more attention to her eggplantishness.

Still, she could hear whatever Phoebe and her fiancé said to one another. No "usual" person would be able to at this distance, but since she was unusual the same rules didn't apply.

"I have something for you, my dear," Lord Vincent said.

"Oh, you shouldn't have, my lord," came Phoebe's pleased reply. She might not want to marry the old man, but who didn't like presents?

There was a space of silence, probably the time it took Phoebe to unwrap or open the gift. "Oh, they're beautiful!"

"Champagne pearls," Lord Vincent explained. "They'll look lovely with your skin. They were Cassandra's favorite."

The dead wife. Finley winced. Not the sort of thing you wanted to say to your future bride. *Oh, I bought you this gift that my dead wife loved.*

"I can see why," Phoebe replied politely, but Finley could hear the stiffness in her voice, the disappointment. No one wanted to be compared to someone else.

"I thought you might wear them on our wedding

day.”

“I should be delighted to, my lord.”

And that was it for the conversation. Personally, Finley thought Phoebe handled it very well. For a man who was a genius with machines, his lordship didn’t know much about women.

The silence gave Finley a chance to look around—and to enjoy the ride. It was easier now. Her body seemed to adapt to the mare’s natural rhythm. She was comfortable enough to notice how beautiful the day was as the sun began its slow descent. The grass was green, birds were singing. Voices carried on the breeze, the sounds of conversation and laughter mixing with the smells of grass and horses and machine oil.

Occasionally a young man or woman would pass by on a penny farthing, the large front wheel so funny when compared to the tiny back one. Others rode mechanical horses much like Lord Vincent’s, only their metal had been dulled so it didn’t glare so under the sun. Finley preferred these to his lordship’s. Some of them had fancy scrollwork on them, as well, unlike Lord Vincent’s hammered and embossed plates.

Given a choice, Finley would rather ride one of those new velocycles—a two-wheeled vehicle better balanced than the penny farthing, and much faster as each was powered by an engine. They weren’t allowed in Hyde Park however, because they scared the horses—the real ones, that is.

The carriage came to a halt in front of her, so she rode up alongside it. Lord Vincent had just climbed down when she reached Phoebe’s side.

“A gentleman from the Scientific Academy,” the

girl explained, tipping back her head so Finley might see her face beneath the wide brim of her hat. “Lord Vincent wished to say hello.”

Finley nodded. She didn’t care and didn’t need to know about his lordship’s social life. “What’s that?” she asked, knowing the answer as she nodded at the box in the other girl’s lap.

Phoebe glanced down, a flush spreading through her cheeks. “A gift. Pearls.”

Finley waited for her to continue, but she didn’t. Perhaps she was too embarrassed, for which Finley couldn’t blame her.

One of the mechanical horses attached to the carriage began to make an odd whirring noise. Frowning, Finley glanced at it, then Phoebe. “Is that normal?”

Phoebe frowned, as well. “I have no idea.” She turned her head—presumably to ask Lord Vincent if the horse was going to explode—and then was gone.

It took Finley a split second to realize that the carriage had taken off, with Phoebe still inside.

Lord Vincent looked horrified—which he should. “How do I stop them?” she demanded.

White-faced he turned to her, obviously in shock. “There are foot controls on the floor of the carriage, and a stick brake on the right.”

That was all she needed to hear. She dug her heels into her horse and fell low over its neck. The animal shot forward at breakneck speed. Finley was a fast runner, but not this fast.

“Come on, darling,” she urged the mare. “Just a

little faster.”

People cried out as she sped past. Some had already stopped to watch the runaway carriage as it careened out of control with Phoebe screaming inside it. Did the girl not think to try the controls? She must have seen Lord Vincent use them. Perhaps she was too frightened to think.

Odd, but Finley found that fear always made her mind that much clearer. Her horse picked up the pace as though she realized what was at stake. As she closed the distance between Phoebe and herself, she pulled her feet free of the stirrups and began to lean to the left.

She came up on the carriage on the right side. As soon as she was convinced her horse could keep pace, she reached out and grabbed the side of the vehicle. Phoebe’s cries of panic grated her nerves and urged her on. She would stop this carriage if for no other reason than to shut the girl up. She refused to think of what might happen if she failed.

Up ahead there was a curve in the track. The carriage would run off the gravel, onto the grass and head straight for the Serpentine. The weight of Phoebe’s skirts would be enough to drown her if she wasn’t tossed from the carriage and crushed by the metal horses before that.

Finley let herself be pulled free of the saddle and swung her legs toward the shiny lacquered vehicle. Narrowly she managed to avoid getting her foot caught in a wheel. She would not think about how badly her leg could have been broken if not for her reflexes.

She heaved herself over the side, onto the padded

seat. Phoebe screamed hysterically beside her.

Righting herself, Finley slammed her foot down on the first pedal. Nothing. Then the second. Nothing. She seized the steering mechanism and tried to turn it so the carriage would stay on the track. Nothing. She pulled the brake.

Nothing. It was like pulling on a ribbon hanging by a thread. No resistance.

They were, she realized, bugged.

They were going too fast to jump, and her horse had given up the chase shortly after she leaped from its back. The turn in the track was closer now.

And Phoebe still screamed.

Finley whirled around and slapped her. Instantly the girl stopped screaming and stared at her in shocked indignity.

“Pull it together!” Finley shouted at her. “I’m going to see if I can disengage the horses. I need you to see if you can get the brake to work. Can you do that?”

Her cheek was turned an angry red, but Phoebe nodded. She was still terrified, but at least she wasn’t screaming.

Finley crawled over the other seat, legs dangling over the side as the ground rushed by below. If she fell now, the best she could hope for would be to live. More than likely she would be caught beneath the frame and dragged to her death. Lovely.

She took a breath and cautiously extended a foot toward the bar that connected the two metal horses to one another. At least she’d have a perch. She pushed forward, wavered for a heart-pounding second, and

then found her balance despite the terrible bouncing and swaying of the vehicle.

The horses' exteriors were made of plates, so she dug her fingers beneath one and pulled. It resisted, having been welded in place, but she ground her teeth and yanked.

The plate flew into the air and spun backward. Phoebe ducked just in time to avoid being brained by it. Finley didn't take the time to even consider how bad that could have been.

"Duck!" she shouted this time, and repeated the maneuver with the other horse. She didn't check to make sure Phoebe did as she bade. They were almost at the turn.

Inside each horse she could see pistons and gears pumping and spinning. If she grabbed the bar that seemed to be the part that drove the legs...if she broke that, the horses should stop.

But it was a solid metal bar. No, wait! It had a rotating piece attached at the end for the back legs. She could jam it if she had a tool....

Each horse had a metal tail—more for appearance than any real use. She snapped the tail from each horse, and holding each like a spear in either hand, drove them into the open drive works. Sparks flew up, but she didn't flinch, even when the molten metal landed on her clothes and skin.

The carriage lurched as the horses made the most horrific noises—grinding that sounded almost like a woman screaming. Steam rose all around them as the metal beasts staggered and stumbled. They were coming apart.

At the last second, Finley realized she was in the wrong spot. She turned and dived toward the carriage, taking Phoebe to the floor with her as the horses came apart. She sheltered the other girl with her body as they slammed to a standstill, pieces of metal raining down around them. Something hard slammed her in the back of the head. She saw stars but didn't pass out. Warmth ran down her scalp and neck. Drops of crimson plopped onto Phoebe's pale green jacket.

There was a heaviness on her back as everything finally stilled. As Finley pushed up, she realized it was the head of one of the horses. It must weigh a good three and a half stone. Hopefully none of the people racing toward them saw her toss it aside like it was no more substantial than a jug of milk.

She offered Phoebe a hand. "Are you all right?"

The girl nodded, face so white she might be a ghost. "You're bleeding."

Finley nodded. "I'll heal." And she would—quicker than she ought.

Suddenly they were surrounded. Voices demanded to know if they were all right. Finley tried to reassure them all, but the sight of her blood only added to the frenzy.

Lord Vincent appeared, his face almost as white as Phoebe's. His relief to find her whole and unharmed might have been touching if he hadn't then turned to look at his precious horses. His brow furrowed when he saw the damage. Something strange flickered in his eyes when he spied the tails sticking out of the open sides. He turned his gaze to Finley, and what she saw

there sent a shiver down her spine.

He knew what she had done. It was there for everyone to see, but only Lord Vincent knew just how impossible it should have been for her to get those panels off, let alone rip off the tails and jam up the works.

Suspicion, and the understanding that she was not as she ought to be, turned his eyes flinty and dangerous—just like the villagers turned against Dr. Frankenstein when they realized what a monster he had created. Lord Vincent looked at her like she was that monster.

So Finley did what so many rich girls did when confronted with a situation they did not want to face. She rolled her eyes back into her head and pretended to faint.

CHAPTER SEVEN

“It’s almost completely healed.”

Finley shrugged at the awe in Phoebe’s voice as the girl examined her scalp where she’d been injured during the carriage accident. “I know.”

She pointed at her cheek where Finley had slapped her. There was a red mark on her cheek with faint bruising. “But I’m stuck with this.”

“I’m sorry, but I couldn’t think of any other way to calm you down.” Finley really did feel bad about it.

Phoebe waved a dismissive and impatient hand. “That’s not what I meant. Of course you were right to strike me. I was an absolute hysterical mess. A little powder will cover it. What I meant is that you should have more than a fading scar.”

Shoulders sagging, Finley sat down on her bed. “I should, but I don’t.” Was this the moment that Phoebe finally turned on her? “I’m not normal.”

The other girl laughed. “No, you most certainly are not.” She plopped down beside her, dark eyes wide. “You are extraordinary, and you saved my life. Thank you.”

Finley stared at her, jaw loose. “You’re not afraid of me?”

More laughter. “Of course not, silly! I might be a little nervous around mechanical horses for a while, but I could never be afraid of you.”

Heat pricked the back of Finley’s eyes. She blinked

away the sting. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Now—” she gave Finley’s leg a slap “—why don’t we get Mama and go out for a bit? I’ve a craving for chocolate from that little shop on Bond Street.”

Chocolate was good, and getting out of the house would be good, as well. If she was distracted, perhaps she wouldn’t think of the look Lord Vincent had given her. It scared her and angered her at the same time. Part of her was afraid of him now, while another part of her wanted to grab him by the throat and thrash him until he cried like a baby.

But it wasn’t really herself she was worried about. She was worried about Phoebe. Phoebe was more breakable than she was.

They found Lady Morton downstairs. She agreed that an outing sounded delightful, and insisted that Finley allow her to treat—a thank-you for saving her daughter’s life.

“You don’t need to thank me, Lady Morton,” Finley told her.

The lady put her arm about Finley’s shoulders and squeezed. “When you are a mother, my dear girl, you will realize that I will be beholden to you for the rest of my days.”

That was a strange concept for Finley to wrap her head around—that someone might feel indebted to her for so long.

They called for the carriage and collected their coats. The day was slightly overcast and a little cool, but still pleasant. The city bustled with activity. Vehicles filled the cobblestone streets with pedestrians

threading in and out of traffic. The steam-moistened air was filled with the scents and sounds of London as ladies in bright walking gowns mingled with the drably garbed lower classes.

Bond Street was one of the most fashionable locations in the West End. A place Finley rarely ever haunted before coming to the Morton household. There were many fine shops catering to any number of tastes, and little coffeehouses and tearooms where ladies might stop to rest their shopping-weary feet.

Their destination was a small shop with a bright blue awning and sign that read *Chocolatier*. As soon as Finley crossed the threshold, her stomach growled in appreciation. Here, there was nothing but the smell of chocolate—warm and delicious.

They sat at a table near the window and ordered a pot of hot chocolate along with a selection of sweets, such as chocolate-filled croissants and tiny, decadent cakes.

Finley glanced out the window and spied two men on the opposite side of the street. They were a little rough looking—not normally the type that one saw in this part of the city—and they seemed to be looking directly at her. Her heart gave a nervous kick at their intent gazes, and she quickly turned her head.

“He’s so handsome,” Phoebe commented just as Finley directed her attention at her.

“Who?” she demanded.

“The Duke of Greythorne,” came the reply. “He just left.”

She glanced out the window, but all she saw was a

tall gentleman with reddish-brown hair and wearing very fashionable clothing as he walked away from her. “Well, he has a tolerable back,” she commented drily.

Phoebe snickered. “Looking at his *backside* are you, Finley?”

Lady Morton chuckled, as well. A slight heat crept up Finley’s cheeks. Why she was embarrassed escaped her. It wasn’t as though she could actually see his *derriere* with his coat in the way.

“He’ll make a fine catch for a debutante one day,” Lady Morton commented. She wore her dark spectacles, but Finley could see a twinkle in one eye. “Rich as the devil, handsome and polite.”

“Not much for society, though,” Phoebe rebuked. “Whoever marries him will have to be content to go to balls alone, or stay at home for the most part. He’s not out and about very much.”

Her mother raised her cup of chocolate to her lips. “He may grow into enjoying society.”

“Well, it hardly matters to me. It’s not as though I’ll have a chance of ever marrying him.” Phoebe’s tone was surprisingly sharp, and drained the color from her mother’s face.

“I don’t have a chance with him, either,” Finley jumped in, hating that guilty look on her employer’s face. “All I’ll ever have is the memory of his *backside*.”

Phoebe’s smile broke first, then she chuckled. Her mother followed suit, and the tension at their table lessened. By the time they’d finished their treats—the croissants were to die for—they had been in the shop for more than an hour, talking, laughing and indulging

in more chocolate than was wise.

They bought croissants to take home with them for breakfast the next morning. Personally, Finley thought they'd be lucky if the pastries made it to midnight. They were to attend a musicale that evening, and might be in need of a snack when they returned home.

As they left the shop, Finley glanced across the street. The men she'd spied earlier were gone, much to her relief.

They barely made it half a block before an arm snaked out of the alley they were passing and grabbed Lady Morton, snatching her into the narrow space. She cried out, but her abductor slapped a hand over her mouth and pointed a pistol at Finley and Phoebe.

It was the ruffians. She'd been right to be suspicious of them.

Phoebe gasped, and looked as though she was about to scream. The second man pointed a knife at her. "Make a sound and I'll slit yer mum's throat."

The color drained from Phoebe's face, but Finley was most concerned with Lady Morton. The woman was terrified—to the point where she might pass out.

"What do you want?" Finley asked, a strange calm settling over her. The other part of her had come to call, and she was glad of it.

Both men looked at her. "Yer money and yer valuables," the larger of the two—the one with the knife—informed her. "You come over here and take off Lady Posh's glittery bobs."

Slowly, Finley advanced toward them. How dare they terrify Lady Morton so. How dare they be so

brazen as to accost them in broad daylight on Bond Street!

She stopped directly in front of her employer, and gave her what she hoped was a reassuring glance before turning her attention to the man with an arm around her shoulders. He had yet to pull back the hammer, so that gave her a little room to play.

“You ought to be ashamed of yourselves,” she told both men. “Picking on harmless, defenseless women.”

“Gotta eat, girly,” Lady Morton’s captor replied with a sneer.

Finley’s lips twisted. “That’s going to be difficult for you from now on.”

Before he could ask or utter a sound, her first flew into his mouth with all her strength. Blood and teeth sprayed the air as he screamed in pain. She snatched the pistol from his hand and pointed it at the man with the knife. Then, she gently nudged Lady Morton behind her, pushing her toward Phoebe.

The bully with the blade gaped at her. He barely glanced at his friend, who was laid out cold on the ground, blood dripping from his slack mouth.

“It’s not loaded,” knife man announced just as he lunged for her.

Finley didn’t think; she simply acted. She caught him hard across the jaw with the pistol and dodged out of the way of the knife he swung at her. The tip of the blade sliced through the fine wool of her coat, but did not touch her flesh. She caught his arm before he could swing again, and gave his wrist a sharp twist. He dropped the knife, crying out as his friend had as she snapped the bones in his arm like they were as brittle

as matches.

Finley let him go when his knees buckled. He fell to the ground, clutching his wrist, calling her names that she had never heard of before.

“Maybe I am all those things.” She sneered at him, pocketing the knife. “But I’m still the girl that kicked both your arses.”

She turned then, toward the two women near the mouth of the alley. Both of them rushed to her, crushing her in their fierce embrace. Lady Morton might have actually been crying.

“There, there,” Finley consoled them. “Enough of that. Let’s get out of here before we attract attention, shall we?” The last thing she needed was some nosy Peeler—the nickname given to those on the London police force—coming by asking how a girl like her managed to debilitate two very large, full-grown men at least eight stone heavier than her.

She hustled them out of the alley and then down the street to where their carriage and driver waited.

“Home, please,” Finley said as the man helped them inside. She sat on the back-facing bench, giving the two of them the front facing one just in case either of them felt ill.

“You deserve a raise,” Lady Morton murmured, her voice oddly high.

“I’ll settle for a handkerchief,” Finley replied, holding up her bloodstained hand.

Immediately her ladyship pulled a square of linen from her reticule and gave it to her. Finley wiped as much blood away as she could, but some had already

dried, and she wasn't about to spit on herself in front of her companions.

"Can you teach me to do the things you can do?" Phoebe inquired.

Finley's head snapped up. She frowned. "You don't want to be like me."

"Oh, I assure you I do."

She shrugged. "I suppose I can teach you how to throw a punch, but the other stuff I can do...that's just me."

"Extraordinary." Lady Morton practically sighed the word. "What's your favorite food, Finley? I'm going to demand Cook make it for you."

Finley grinned. They didn't hate her. They liked her. They thought this part of her was wonderful. Wouldn't her goody-goody half choke on this?

"I'm partial to chocolate croissants," she replied.

Her companions chuckled, and Phoebe offered her the paper bag that held their purchase from the chocolate shop. She reached in with her clean hand and took one out.

This being extraordinary really worked up an appetite.

Lord Vincent glared at the men who sat across from him in the cab. One had blood all around his mouth and down his front, and the other held his wrist, moaning like an imbecile.

"You mean to tell me that a slip of a girl managed to incapacitate you both?"

"She weren't no ordinary girl," the moaner replied.

“Slip or not, she weren’t natural. Snapped me wrist like a chicken bone.”

Chicken, Lord Vincent thought, sounded like the appropriate term. He took out his purse and tossed them each several coins. “Get out. I don’t want to see or hear from either of you again, and if I hear that you’ve mentioned this little task to anyone, I’ll have your guts for garters. Am I understood?”

The men nodded and fled the cab as quickly as their bulk would allow. Lord Vincent knocked on the ceiling with his cane and the carriage lurched into motion. He almost groaned. Flesh-and-blood horses were so damn slow.

He drew a deep breath and pushed it out, trying to free himself of this frustration and rage. He never used to be an angry man. Never used to be a violent man. Before Cassandra’s death he never would have dreamed of hiring ruffians to accost a young girl, but he had to know what he was up against. He hadn’t been able to believe what she’d done to his beautiful automaton horses. He’d been too relieved that she saved Phoebe’s life, but afterward, when he’d had time to really examine the damage...well, it had been an astounding revelation.

Finley Bennet was not normal. In fact, the only thing he’d ever seen able to wreak so much damage was an automaton—a large one at that. No, she was not usual, and he’d wager his entire fortune that she was not a cousin to Lady Morton and the lovely Phoebe. He’d seen the way his future mother-in-law looked at him when she thought he wouldn’t notice.

She knew his intentions were not as pure as he pretended. Not that it mattered. Lord Morton had sold the girl and signed a contract. She was his, and he would marry her, whether her mother liked it or not.

And no one was going to stop him now that he was so close to having his hopes and dreams realized, especially not a freakish little girl.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Dinner with Lord Vincent was one of the most uncomfortable situations Finley ever found herself in.

First of all, she was wearing one of the gowns that Lady Morton had insisted on buying for her. It was lovely and a gorgeous shade of plum satin, but the little sleeves were snug and didn't allow for much movement, and Phoebe had laced her into her corset so tightly she thought her lungs might come out her nose.

Secondly, there was the fact that Lord Morton was there, as well, and he was about as pompous and self-important as she could stand. He practically ignored his wife and daughter, and had the table manners of a Newfoundland dog.

Most obviously, there was Lord Vincent himself. Oh, he was all manners and decorum, but Finley caught him looking at her several times with a gaze that was anything but polite. He looked at her like she was an insect he would like to pin to a board and dissect.

"I heard you ladies were set upon by ruffians the other day," he remarked—rather casually.

Lady Morton's head snapped up. "Oh? Where did you hear that, pray tell?"

The earl smiled gently. "Lord Morton informed me when he called upon me this morning."

Finley didn't miss the flush that crept into Lady Morton's fair cheeks. It was obvious from the way that

she looked at her husband she suspected he had called on Lord Vincent for more money.

“My valet told me,” Lord Morton explained with a sniff. “Damn fine kettle when a man has to hear about his wife being accosted from the servants.”

The most caustic and bitter smile Finley had ever seen curved the lady’s lips. “I knew how you’d worry if I told you.”

A similar expression crossed her husband’s face. “You’re always so considerate, my dear.”

Good lord, these two despised one another! Finley glanced down at her plate. Aristocrats were a queer lot—marrying for money, staying with spouses they couldn’t stand, living by all manner of foolish rules.

Selling their daughters to save their own hides.

“I also heard,” Lord Vincent continued, as though the tension between Lord and Lady Morton didn’t exist, “that it was Miss Bennet who fought the bounders off.”

Finley lifted her head and met his cool gaze. “You shouldn’t believe everything you hear, my lord. I’m hardly a heroine.”

“So you didn’t return home with bruised and bloody knuckles from striking one of them?”

She glanced at Lord Morton, but he had gone back to his plate and paid her no attention. The man certainly liked to talk—at least when he was begging for money.

She held up her hands, palms toward herself, so that he could examine them. “Not a bruise nor a cut.” There wasn’t either. They had disappeared earlier that day.

Lord Vincent's lips pursed. "I see I was mistaken." He didn't cast an accusatory glance at Lord Morton, but still he seemed perturbed. Perhaps it was a reach, but the thought flittered across Finley's mind that perhaps he hadn't heard details of the altercation from Lord Morton. What if he had gotten his information from a more reliable source, such as the thugs themselves?

No, that was too much. Wasn't it?

"Although it would be extraordinary if I had fought them off, wouldn't it?" she asked with a cheeky smile. "They'd write novels about me then—stopping runaway automaton horses, fending off ruffians. I'd be a sensation."

Lady Morton and Phoebe chuckled—and sounded almost genuine, though Finley didn't miss the look Lady Morton shot her. It was a look that demanded to know if she had lost her mind.

"Indeed," Lord Vincent replied, then he dismissed her and turned to Phoebe. "You look lovely in the pearls, my dear."

Phoebe had worn his gift to dinner. He was right; she did look lovely. She also, Finley imagined, looked like a younger version of his dead wife. It was enough to make a body shiver as though an icy hand trailed down her spine.

"I'm afraid I've developed a terrible headache," Finley announced suddenly, pressing her fingers to her forehead. "It's been brewing all day. I think I might lie down for a bit. Will you all excuse me?"

The gentlemen rose as she did—Mr. Morton looked

rather put out about it. He also had beef in his moustache, but Finley didn't point it out. Let him wear it for a while. Hopefully it would still be there when he went to his club later.

"I hope you feel better soon, Miss Bennet." Lord Vincent sounded sincere, but she didn't trust it.

"Thank you, my lord."

Both Lady Morton and Phoebe wished her a quick recovery. As far as Phoebe was concerned the excuse was legitimate. Only Lady Morton and Finley knew exactly what she was truly about to get up to.

And she got up to it quickly. As soon as she entered her room she squirmed out of the gown, corset and underclothes. Then, she redressed in fresh bloomers, short skirt, blouse and leather corset. She laced up her sturdy black boots and shrugged into a black sweater to ward off the slight chill of the evening.

Then, she repeated the same maneuver she had a few nights before when she last ventured to Lord Vincent's estate, even entering the house through the same window.

This time, however, she did not linger in the countess's old room. It was simply too disturbing. She opened the door a crack and peeked out into the corridor. It was dimly lit, but there was not a servant in sight, which only added to her suspicion that he had something he didn't want others to see up here. Quickly, she slipped into the hall, closing the door behind her. This time she avoided the places where the boards had creaked beneath her feet. It wasn't the middle of the night, and there were people and machines in the house that might hear her mincing

about.

Her heart thumped hard and heavily against her ribs as she turned the knob on the door at the end of the hall. She pushed. Locked.

Bloody hell. What now? She couldn't very well kick the door in—that would cause a bit of a ruckus. She knew nothing about picking locks, although it seemed it shouldn't be *that* difficult.

She turned and glanced down the corridor in the direction from where she'd come. Most grand houses had separate bedrooms for the mistress and master of the house, but those rooms were almost always connected. Down the corridor she went, again taking pains to avoid creaking floorboards. This time she stopped one door before the countess's room—approximately halfway down.

This door was not locked, and she ducked inside the darkened room. There was a lamp on the wall beside the door. She found the switch and flicked it, bringing light to the room. How fortunate she was that Lord Vincent insisted on having his entire house outfitted with modern conveniences.

His room was large and very masculine, the walls cream with lots of wood paneling and trim, the air filled with the scent of Bay Rum and hair pomade. It made him seem a far nicer man than she believed him to be.

She didn't have to look hard. Sitting atop his dressing table was a key attached to a ladies' hair ribbon. The ribbon was dark blue, slightly frayed and creased. It had to have belonged to the former

countess. He was still in love with her.

For a second—and only the one—Finley felt sorry for him. Then she remembered that he was marrying Phoebe, and why, and her pity faded. She snatched up the key and crept back to the room at the end of the hall.

Satisfaction blossomed in her chest as the key turned and kicked the tumblers into place. She slid the key into the pocket of her sweater and turned the knob. Tiny beads of sweat formed along her hairline. She was a little scared to go in.

There was nothing that could hurt her on the other side of this door—unless of course Lord Vincent had rigged some sort of trap for people who came spying—like perhaps an automaton with blades for hands, or a pistol set to go off as soon as the door opened.

Perhaps it was just her overactive imagination that made her paranoid, but Finley jumped back after giving the door a push, just in case.

Nothing happened. No blades, no bullets. Cautiously, she peeked around the door frame into the room. Aside from scientific equipment, it was empty. It was a little disappointing, really. As an inventor he could at least have had a hunchback assistant, or perhaps a metal one.

The room was clean to the point of being sterile. The walls were a fresh white, the benches and sideboards a deep walnut. A stack of folders sat at the far end of the counter, near a tray of neatly arranged surgical instruments.

Finley turned her head. There was another

workbench on the other side of the room, and near the window, with a large chandelier over it, there was a table—the kind she'd seen at the doctor's office.

Why would a man who built automatons have a surgical table? Surgical equipment? Lady Morton said Lord Vincent had built his own prosthetic leg, but surely he hadn't installed it on himself, as well? Perhaps he had. But why maintain the equipment? Who was he working on now?

As if in reply, there came a gurgling noise from behind her. She froze. Her heart was so far up her throat she could feel its beat on the roof of her mouth. Cold heat prickled her fingers and toes, and spread up to the nape of her neck.

She did *not* want to turn around, but she had no choice.

Slowly, mouth drying out with every movement, Finley turned toward the tank. She had been able to ignore it until now, when the contents had apparently come alive.

The coils of wires running into the tank were mostly concealed by a white cloth draped over the top. Finley's fingers trembled as she reached for that cloth. Once she removed it she would not be able to put it back, not without seeing what lurked beneath.

She clutched the linen and pulled. Lord, was it possible for someone her age to die of heart failure? Surely the poor thing could not continue this furious beating for much longer.

The cloth fell away, revealing the bubbling pink goo beneath. Revealing what lurked there.

She had been right. It was a brain. Her stomach twisted, threatening to expel her dinner. It was awful and fascinating at the same time, floating there in the goo, wires attached to it. The wires had to be what kept it “alive”—some sort of electrical current? The goo had to be similar to human tissue, perhaps the lining of the skull. She had no medical knowledge, so she could only assume these things, but it made sense to her shocked mind.

What sort of madman kept a brain in a tank?

She turned away, unable to stare at it any longer. It bobbed in the liquid, as though begging for her help, which she had no idea how to give. It had been inside a human once. Did it maintain memories, feelings? Was it suffering?

It was too much.

On the opposite wall there was a large metal door. Finley turned her attention to it instead of the brain. She wanted to run away, but she couldn't. Not until she'd uncovered every secret Lord Vincent had.

It was at that moment that she felt a calm settle over her. She knew at once that her darker nature was taking over, and she let it. It always seemed to come during times of high emotion or stress, and since it was better equipped to handle this sort of situation, she didn't put up a fight.

A couple of deep breaths later and her nerves settled. Fear was replaced with determination, and a healthy dose of righteous anger. Instead of feeling sorry for the thing in the vat, she was angry for it. Instead of being afraid she was determined.

She turned the wheel on the front of the large metal

door. There was a hissing sound, the release of steam. As she turned, gears clicked into place until finally there was a loud thud as the locking mechanism slid free. She pulled the lever to the side and the door slowly swung open.

A wave of cold struck her, fogging the air as it clashed with the warmth of the room. For a moment she couldn't see, the stuff was so thick.

When it cleared she wished she hadn't opened the door. This was obviously an ice chest, and standing in the middle of it, strapped to a board was the late Lady Vincent. She wore a simple robe—which her husband had obviously dressed her in out of a sense of modesty rather than warmth. This poor lady wasn't in any condition to mind the cold.

Finley stared at the corpse, mouth grim. There was a large, unhealed slash across Lady Vincent's forehead. She didn't have to be a genius to know it went all the way around.

At least she knew now who the brain in the tank belonged to.

“You're a very nosy girl, Miss Bennet.”

CHAPTER NINE

Finley swore under her breath—the kind of swearing that would have made her mother wash her mouth out with soap.

How could she not have heard him coming? He'd sneaked up on her like a cat on a deaf mouse.

She turned, and met the glittering gaze of Lord Vincent.

“So, what’s the plan?” she asked. “Are you going to attempt reanimating your wife?”

He arched a brow, gazing down that big nose of his at her. “That might cause some issue, considering the world knows her to be dead.”

Frowning, Finley glanced at the brain in the tank. It was bobbing furiously now. He kept the brain alive, so he must be planning on using it for something....

It was as though a giant hand of ice reached inside her and seized her heart. “Oh my God,” she rasped. “You’re going to put her brain in Phoebe’s head.”

It was a horrible assumption, one she hoped was wrong, but the second the accusation left her lips, Lord Vincent smiled an awful smile. “Nosy and smart. Never a good combination, my girl.”

Rage swelled up inside her. Who did he think he was, God? “I can’t let you do this. I won’t.” She clenched her fists at her sides.

More of that self-satisfied smirk. “And I won’t allow you to stop me.” Suddenly he had a pistol in his hand, pointed at her head. It was one of those six-

shooters like the cowboys in America used. It was deadly, but at least it wasn't one of his fancy inventions. "I know you're fast, and much stronger than you ought to be, but even you aren't faster than a bullet."

Hadn't she thought the same thing the other day? "You don't know anything about me."

"I know you destroyed my precious horses in a way even a circus strong man would not have been able to. I know you single-handedly fought off men armed with a pistol and knife."

How did he know exactly what weapons they had? Neither she nor the other women involved had mentioned that—hadn't wanted to bring more attention to her than necessary.

"You hired them to attack us." Disbelief dripped from her words. "You could have killed your own fiancée."

"They had strict orders not to harm Phoebe, but you and Lady Morton, not so much. Don't look at me like that. I had to know what you were capable of. I had to know what I was up against so I could protect what I've worked so hard to achieve."

"You're bloody mad."

"Perhaps. Have you ever been in love, Miss Bennet? No, of course not. You're but a child. What do you know of love?" He sneered at her, but there was pity in his eyes, as well. "I loved my wife. I love her still. And now I have been given a chance to make everything right. I can make her forgive me."

“You think she’s going to thank you for shoving her brain in someone else’s body?” He really was insane.

“It will be like having her own body back. Phoebe is the spitting image of Cassandra when she was young. Once I give life back to her, she’ll forgive me for taking it away from her in the first place.”

That was a surprise. Had he killed her? “Lady Morton said it was a carriage accident.”

“It was, much like the one you and Phoebe almost had. We were driving home in the snow, and the horses I’d built malfunctioned. We went over a small ravine. I survived. Cassandra did not.”

“That still sounds like an accident to me.” Not that she felt sorry for the lunatic, but he hadn’t been in control of the situation.

“If I had been more intelligent...” His voice cracked. “If I had done a better job, the horses would not have malfunctioned.”

She shrugged. “They malfunctioned at the park, too. What did you do wrong there?”

He shook his head, scowling. “I don’t know.”

“So, if you’re not ‘intelligent’ enough to make metal horses work, do you really think you can make a brain transfer work?”

Lord Vincent stilled, all of the frustration in his expression melting away to pure, determined rage. “I will bring Cassandra back.” He raised the pistol once more, so that it was pointed right at her forehead. “I will have my wife’s forgiveness, and you will not stop me.”

Some deep instinct told Finley to duck even before he pulled the trigger. As it was, she felt the bullet as it whizzed above her, just inches from her head. She hid behind the metal door of Lady Vincent's frozen tomb.

"How are you going to explain my death, Lord Vincent? Lady Morton knows where I am."

"Let her go to the police. They will think she's mad. And they wouldn't dare search my house. Even if they did, I could have all of this easily concealed. No one will care about you, Miss Bennet. Or should I say, Miss Jayne?"

Finley didn't react to the sound of her real name. It didn't matter how he had found out. All that mattered was getting out of this alive. She shrugged. "Whichever you prefer, my lord."

His smug expression mixed with irritation. "It's not as though you are really of noble blood, are you? You're just some freakish little girl Lady Morton hired because she doesn't like me."

"That might have something to do with the fact that you plan to give her daughter a new brain!" Finley shouted.

Another shot. This one bounced off the door. She bolted from behind it and dived behind the surgical table. She had to get to him, overpower him.

He fired off three more shots, each of which ricocheted off equipment. One grazed Finley's shoulder, drawing blood. She cried out.

"Got you, did I?" came Lord Vincent's pleased tone. "Come on out, dear girl, and I'll make your death quick."

One more bullet, Finley thought. *That's all he has.* There was a spindly sort of stand next to her that looked like a skeletal coatrack on wheels. She kicked the base of it and it went flying across the room. Startled, Lord Vincent fired another shot at it.

Six. That was it. He was out of bullets.

Before he could reload, Finley lunged to her feet and threw herself at him. He looked up from shoving more bullets into the pistol with a horrified expression.

She hit him hard, sending both of them crashing into the workbench. The tank shuddered. Lady Vincent's brain bobbed wildly. Suddenly, Finley knew what to do. There was only one way to end this without either she or Lord Vincent dying.

Grabbing him by the coat with one hand, she hauled him close and punched him twice in the face, hard. He fell back with a groan, the pistol falling to the floor.

Finley didn't waste any time, she grabbed a handful of wires leading into the tank and yanked. There was a squishing sound as they pulled free of the brain, and she winced. Then, she seized the tank with both hands.

"No!" Lord Vincent screamed.

Finley pulled. He grabbed her just as the tank crashed to the floor, splattering its gruesome contents all over the lab.

Everything went eerily quiet—even Lord Vincent. He clung to Finley for a moment, like a child clinging to its mother, before slowly sinking to the floor, sobbing. When he crawled toward the destroyed grayish-pink mass in the middle of all the glass and goo, Finley made her escape. Lord Vincent's plaintive

wails rang in her ears as she ran. “No,” he cried. “Cassandra, no.”

It was heartbreaking—or it would have been had he not tried to kill her, had he not been prepared to kill Phoebe for some mad experiment that probably wouldn’t have worked.

Finley shuddered as she burst through the door of the countess’s bedroom. She hoped it wouldn’t have worked.

She crawled out the window just as servants clamored up the stairs—about time they came to investigate all the shots. When she hit the grass, there was another shot, and she froze. Had Vincent shot one of his servants?

There was screaming from inside the house—lots of it. Lights began to come on in the upstairs windows, and one man shouted for someone to fetch the Watch. That’s when Finley broke into a run. She did not want to be there when the police arrived.

Lady Morton and Phoebe were waiting for her when she returned. The relief on the older woman’s face touched Finley.

“I was so worried when Lord Vincent decided to leave early,” she explained. “I had no way to warn you.”

“She was so distraught I made her tell me what the two of you had been up to,” Phoebe added, with a stern glance at her mother. “Finley, that you would do that for me is humbling, but I would never have forgiven myself if you had been harmed.”

“He tried,” Finley replied. “He had a gun and shot at me, but he wasn’t very good at it.” The spot where he’d grazed her shoulder was already healing, and her dark clothing concealed the blood stain.

“Thank Heaven,” Lady Morton whispered, hand pressed to her chest. Her artificial eye gleamed, as though expressing its own relief.

Finley flopped against the back of the settee. She was exhausted.

“What was he up to anyway?” Phoebe demanded, sitting on a nearby chair. Her posture was much better than Finley’s.

Staring at her, Finley wondered how much to tell. If the police had taken Lord Vincent into custody, how much would be in tomorrow’s papers? Would it be worse for Phoebe to read about it and have people whisper about her? Or would it be better to know the truth?

“He wanted to use you to bring his dead wife back to life,” she explained. In such cases, the truth had to be the best course of action.

Phoebe’s normally smooth brow furrowed. “How did he plan to manage that?”

Finley glanced at Lady Morton, who was suitably horrified, and drew a deep breath. “He was going to put her brain in your head.”

“But that—” All the color drained from Phoebe’s face. She swayed a little on her chair, and Finley moved closer to catch her in case she swooned. “He planned to kill me?”

Grimly, Finley nodded. Phoebe’s reaction to the news was unexpected. She threw herself at Finley and

wrapped her arms around her so tight Finley could scarce draw breath. “Thank you, Finley. Thank you so much.”

They were still sitting like that a few minutes later when Lord Morton stumbled in, drunk. He took one look at the embracing girls and his pale wife, and said, “You’ve already heard then.”

“Heard what?” Lady Morton inquired.

The portly earl swayed on his feet, face flushed and his eyes glassy. “About Vincent. Seems shortly after he left here he went home and killed himself.”

A collective gasp rose from his audience. Finley’s heart stopped for a second. The shot she heard before all the screams broke out. That had been Lord Vincent taking his own life. When he realized he would never resurrect his wife, he decided to join her in death. It was almost romantic, in a mad-inventor sort of way.

She looked at Phoebe, who was staring at her, big green eyes filled with tears and shock.

“You’re free,” she whispered to her. Tears streamed down the girl’s face, and Finley hugged her close once more. Lady Morton joined them on the settee and wrapped her arms around them both.

“Women,” Lord Morton muttered. “Well, at least there’s a debt I won’t have to pay back.” With that profoundly sensitive remark, he staggered out of the room, leaving the three of them alone once more.

He wasn’t missed.

Finley stayed on long enough to attend the funeral, as was proper. As Lord Vincent's fiancée, Phoebe was socially obligated to observe mourning protocols, but she was determined to spend the shortest amount of time possible at it. Since she wasn't going to be out and about much for the next few months, Finley didn't see much point in continuing on as her companion.

Besides, every time the girl looked at her, Finley knew she was a reminder of all that had happened. Aside from Lady Morton, Finley alone knew what Vincent had planned to do to her, and that was the last thing the poor girl needed.

"Are you sure you won't stay?" Lady Morton asked her, pen poised over her checkbook.

Finley nodded. "I'm sure. Thank you, though. And thank you for the letter of reference."

The lady smiled. "Thank you for saving my daughter's life." A tear glistened on her lashes and she wiped it away. "Here are your wages."

The check was generous—more than Finley was due, but she took it regardless. It would be an insult to Lady Morton if she argued. "You're very kind."

Lady Morton set aside her pen and straightened her spine. "A friend of mine's daughter is returning from Paris tomorrow and is in need of a lady's maid. It doesn't require much in the way of social appearances, but it does pay well and affords more freedom than most domestic posts. I told her about you. Should you like, you can stop by on Wednesday morning for an interview. Here is her address."

Stunned, Finley took the card she offered. "Lady August-Raynes," she read aloud.

Lady Morton nodded. "I know nothing of the daughter, but she had a son with a bit of a reputation as a rogue. If you accept the position, you keep an eye out for him. Swat him about a bit if he steps out of line."

Finley grinned. "I'm sure I can handle him." She thanked the lady again. Then she went and said goodbye to Phoebe, which was more difficult than she thought it would be.

"I hope it works out with you and Robert," she said.

Phoebe nodded. "Me, too. Thank you, Finley. For everything." She grabbed her then, in a tight embrace that robbed her of breath and threatened to bring big fat tears to her eyes. Finley let it continue for as long as she dared, and then she pulled away.

"Take care," she murmured before walking away.

And that was it. A few weeks together spending more time together than sisters, and it was over just like that. Who knew if the two of them would ever see each other again. It made Finley a little sad.

She climbed into the carriage that would return her to her mother's house, check tucked into her glove. Lady Morton and Phoebe waved to her from the step as the vehicle pulled away. Finley waved back, and then turned away before either of them could see her wipe a tear from her cheek.

She'd go home and spend a few days with her mother and Silas, have her faith in love and human beings in general restored. She'd buy her mother something nice with the extra money she'd been

paid—maybe even treat herself to a new pair of boots. And maybe she'd tell Silas that she'd prefer something by Jane Austen next time he gave her something to read. She'd had her fill of monsters for a while.

She gazed out the window at the passing city and hoped that Lady August-Raynes offered her the position within her household. She could use long-term employment.

And hopefully the darkness inside her would be content with that, as well. She wasn't too worried. In fact, she was looking forward to it. How much trouble could she get into as a lady's maid?

The End

How much trouble can Finley get into as a lady's maid? Find out in THE GIRL IN THE STEEL CORSET, the first story in Kady Cross's exciting new miniseries THE STEAMPUNK CHRONICLES.

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The Girl in the Steel Corset

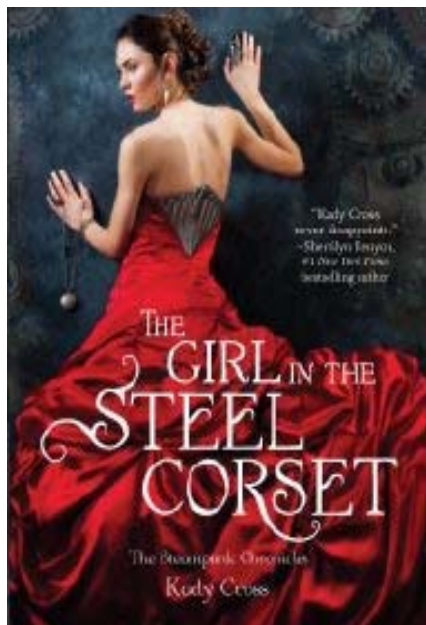
In 1897 England, sixteen-year-old Finley Jayne has no one...except the "thing" inside her.

When a young lord tries to take advantage of Finley, she fights back. And wins. But no *normal* Victorian girl has a darker side that makes her capable of knocking out a full-grown man with one punch....

Only Griffin King sees the magical darkness inside her that says she's special, says she's one of them. The orphaned duke takes her in from the gaslit streets against the wishes of his band of misfits: Emily, who has her own special abilities and an unrequited love for Sam, who is part robot; and Jasper, an American cowboy with a shadowy secret.

Griffin's investigating a criminal called The Machinist, the mastermind behind several recent crimes by automatons. Finley thinks she can help—and finally be a part of something, finally fit in.

But The Machinist wants to tear Griff's little company of strays apart, and it isn't long before trust is tested on all sides. At least Finley knows whose side she's on—even if it seems no one believes her.



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never disappoints."
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bestselling author

THE
GIRL IN THE
STEEL
CORSET

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In her other life, **Kady Cross** is a USA TODAY bestselling author of more than twenty books. She is lucky enough to have a husband who shares her love for the slightly twisted and all things geek, and a houseful of cats with whom she shares her darkest secrets. When she's not listening to the characters in her head, she's either trying to formulate the perfect lip gloss or teaching herself to solder. She has a weakness for all things girly, sugar skulls and boots. Her love of books and makeup borders on addiction—of which she never, ever wants to be cured.

For more about Kady and her books, please visit her website, www.kadycross.com.

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The Strange Case of Finley Jayne

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