



The Charlotte Olmes Mystery Series

Volume One:

*Of White Snakes
&
Misshaped Owls*

Debra Hyde

Of White Snakes and Misshaped Owls
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To Laura Antoniou, a dear friend who never fails to inspire me. This one's for you, Laurie!

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Fists met flesh, thudding deep and without restraint. The victim staggered, his mouth gaping but unable to catch air. If not for an alley wall, he might've fallen but, cornered, neither could he escape. His assailants rushed him, fists flying. Bone cracked against brass knuckles, blood spilled and teeth flew, and the man slumped to the ground, barely conscious.

Watching it all, hungry for the bare-knuckled feel of flesh against crushing fist, a young man flexed his hand, wanting it for himself. But he had to wait. He had made his plan and he was determined not to deviate from it.

Barely winded, his companions lit into their downed quarry, stomping and kicking. Stout and bullish, they were all fight compared to their taller, wiry compatriot. They were coarse roughs to his cleaner, crisper appearance—soldiers to the mastermind. And when he told them to hold up, they stepped back, panting and finally having broken a sweat.

One of them wiped spittle from his mouth. “What now, boss?”

“Bring him to,” he said. *Let him see who's done this to him.*

One of the bullies grabbed a bucket, dunked it into a rain barrel's stale water, and poured its content over the sprawled man. The man sputtered to consciousness upon inhaling, his body instinctively reacting to the sensation of drowning.

“Haul him up, boys.”

They brought the beaten wretch to his unsteady feet. Blood seeped from a shattered nose and a split lip. One eye had already swelled shut. He spat, then leveled a half-swollen eye at the dandy standing before him, moonlight bright enough to cast shadows aiding him. His one good eye widened in shocked recognition.

“You!” he rasped, blood flying. “Why? What you mean by this?” He clutched his side. His words pained him in more ways than one.

The young man removed his hat, a show of respect reduced to mockery. “Because you wouldn't leave well enough alone. I told you to let me be.”

He tossed his hat aside and, in the same motion, flew at the poor man and made good on his violent desire. His upper cut took the man out. Finally, the first of two satisfactions was his.

“You know what to do,” he told his fellow brutes. “I'll meet you in ten minutes.” He retrieved his hat, brushed it free of the alley's dirt, and set it right before stealing out of the alley.

He wandered about the Bowery, making himself conspicuous among dollies and good fellows alike, checking his pocket watch only after downing a draught and kissing a gaiety girl. He slipped into the background, then slipped away completely, heading for Mott Street and his final satisfaction. He rendezvoused with his fellows in an alley there, finding one of them in mid-blow as the other was dragging their victim from a roughshod hand cart.

“What's this?” he demanded. He'd told them to lay no further a hand on their captive.

“He was coming to,” they claimed. “We was knocking him out, nothing more.”

They let the man slump to the ground, his body hitting wet filth in a squalid-sounding squelch. Their mastermind went to the man and knelt there. A cruel smile snaked across his face as he reached into his coat and drew from it a long, slender weapon that gleamed in the moonlight.

When he turned his victim face down in the squalor and aimed the sharp tip of the ice pick at the wasted man's neck, his companions gasped with horror. He pressed the pick home, pushing it through flesh and between vertebrates, twisting and wiggling it until the deed was done.

His mortified fellows crossed themselves and called upon the saints to cleanse them of this man's sin. It was one thing to slip the knife into your enemy or to beat him to a pulp or to fire

upon him with a gun, but to kill a man like a butcher? One of your own no less? This man, they decided, was Satan come among them.

He rose gloating, exalted and jubilant. He'd removed the obstacle to his freedom and he'd done so in a way that no man would deny him his due. He'd have his place among the Whyo gang. *And anyone who denies me will have to face me*, he thought, gripping the ice pick in triumph.

But he failed to see what fell from his pocket as he pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped clean his barbarous needle.

I was not surprised that I had slept through the morning sun and birdsong of the fine spring morning on which this exceptional adventure had started, but how I escaped the sounds of Madison Square Park and the nearby Sixth Avenue El, I still do not know. Coming to our table for breakfast, I found Charlotte's nose buried deep in the day's penny press. Without fail, she started and ended each day perusing Manhattan's most dreadful news accounts, paying close attention to the brawls between swells, what dead bodies were pulled from the nooks and crannies of the city, and things even more violent and horrid. I prayed she would tell me nothing gruesome this morning.

I preferred my first cup of tea without word of the city's more morbid distractions.

"Good morning, my dear Miss Wilson," Charlotte said, her eyes still glued to her paper.

"Good morning, Miss Olms," I countered. However formal our salutations, they were first and foremost an affectionate routine, an irreverent jest aimed at how society expected us to act and not a reflection of how we really felt about each other.

And, daring to remind Charlotte just how I preferred our interactions, I leaned over and placed a kiss upon her cheek, one soft enough to suggest I'd welcome more. It earned a chuckle from her and a quick, sly glance of promise.

A bustle from the kitchen told me that Mr. East had heard me, and our man's man who preferred serving women came laden with a full meal of eggs, bacon, and toast. Joining that bounty, a libation of some strange concoction—no doubt, another of Charlotte's attempts to fortify the temples that were our bodies with the fruits of exotic flora from God only knew where.

While I should have rued the presence of the strange beverage, it was the larger meal that caught my true attention. A big meal meant one of two things: We either had something physical to do that morning or a case to investigate.

Seated, I sipped my tea and tried to ignore the message inherent in my breakfast.

Halfway through my meal—the eggs scrambled to perfection, made better with a splash of maple syrup, the drink concoction decidedly not so—I caught Charlotte snapping her crisp newspaper and swiftly folding it with a flourish so dramatic it rivaled the sweep of a magician's hand. I shook my head, thinking of our poor butler, Mr. East, always having to iron the paper to Charlotte's perfection.

Charlotte caught my reaction from the corner of her eye. Without taking her gaze from the small corner of the paper she now consumed, she remarked, "He had no compunction about ironing my newspapers when we interviewed Mr. East for the position, Joanna. A crisp paper makes for a precise read, my dear."

With Charlotte Olms, precision was paramount.

My eggs and bacon gone, I mopped my plate of syrup with my toast. "Dare I ask what this morning brings?" I hoped she would let me finish a third cup of tea and have a proper pinning of

my hair before dashing us out the door.

“Training, dear Joanna, training.”

I suddenly felt overfull. Physical exercise and a full stomach were not well paired for me, no matter how frequently I tried to dissuade Charlotte of that fact. I set down my toast.

“Pick it up and eat,” she half-scolded. “We’re not doing it—we’re teaching it.”

“Teaching what?”

“Parasol defense.”

Charlotte’s obsession with self-defense, especially as it applied to women, had long been a great passion of hers. I resumed devouring my toast, sipping away its dryness with tea and noting how very well the taste of India Black tasted with the sparse left-overs of maple syrup. Perhaps I would suggest Charlotte make a concoction based on those two ingredients. Maybe she would come up with something actually tolerable.

Another time, I thought. “And who are we training today?” I asked.

“Mrs. Philomena Pelton has asked me to introduce several of her peers and their lady’s maids to the practice,” Charlotte answered.

I pulled up from my teacup. We were teaching a lady’s maids?

“However did you finagle that?” The upper crust were not exactly sensitive about the betterment of their help.

Charlotte finally set her paper aside, slapping it onto the table, and leaned towards me, elbows planted firmly akimbo on a fine Italian cutwork tablecloth. Mannish behavior, of course, reflecting a competency that she could not innately express in any sort of feminine way.

“I told them that no matter how well-versed they themselves became in the art of parasol self-defense, they would remain at risk if their help did not become adept as well.”

“Really, Charlotte.”

“No, no, it’s true,” Charlotte claimed. “Mrs. Pelton herself was accosted just last week on the Ladies Mile. Her lady servant was of, shall we say, limited assistance.”

“The Ladies Mile? So now even shopping puts one at risk. Of course you do this entirely for the benefit of the well-off,” I facetiously declared. I swatted at her elbows, smacking hard enough to sting.

Charlotte grinned. She heeded me, removing her elbows from the table. She might forget her manners from time to time, but she always enjoyed my corrections, minor or severe.

We both knew she believed that all women should be skilled in self-defense, regardless of class and station. And I knew that if Charlotte would ever deign to imagine a utopian society, men would be far too civilized to even think to accost the fairer sex. Not that we would carry that dainty an appellation in Charlotte’s utopia.

“Do I have time for Phoebe to pin and lacquer my hair?”

Charlotte waved me off. “Yes, yes, but we should depart in twenty minutes.”

“Twenty minutes, then,” I said.

I rose and made my way across the room, only to stop and turn. “Charlotte?” I said.

“Hmmm?” Her nose was in that paper again.

“Should we not invite Phoebe to join us?”

Charlotte pulled up from her reading, glaring at me. The devil that I should put her high horse on the spot! But one look at me and she knew that I teased said horse with both warm regard *and* hard truth.

“I shall tutor her myself,” she declared, flicking her newspaper dismissively.

Exactly what I wanted. What was good for the geese of Manhattan’s elite was good for the

gander in our own home.

We met the small group of women uptown, Mr. East at our side and ready to play the ruffian. The fashionable lady and common maid alike filled the room, the ladies at their seats and their attendants standing behind them. Both groups looked uncertain, the former questioning why they were here and the latter uncomfortable from being outside their usual parameters of duty. But the unyielding personality of one Mrs. Pell, descendant of an early English settler whom the Dutch greatly disliked, held this group together, a woman of means who had invested herself in the notion of self-protection after having suffered at the violent hand of a purse snatcher.

“Miss Olms! Welcome!” she exclaimed, rising from her seat. “I am delighted that you consented to instruct us today. We are in much need of your expertise.”

“Mrs. Philomena Pelton,” Charlotte returned, “may I introduce to you my colleague and companion, Miss Joanna Wilson?”

She met me with reserved politeness—women rarely knew how to accept me as Charlotte's colleague, let alone companion—then took Charlotte's hand and effusively introduced her to all of her ladies. The servants, of course, were left anonymous. I could tell by Charlotte's expression that, had it not been for the time, she would've challenged polite society by insisting on introductions to the lesser-class.

As it was, Charlotte nodded, bit her tongue, and decided, “Let's get to the matter at hand. Ladies, let me introduce you to Mr. East, a man most skilled in the martial arts of the Far East. It was he who taught me what I am about to impart to you and it is he who will play our tough this day.”

His bow barely completed, Mr. East launched into a mean shout and snatched Charlotte's purse so quickly that a dramatic and startled cry went up from the women. No more than two steps in flight, he immediately found the crook of Charlotte's umbrella hard around his ankle and Charlotte pulled back with all her might.

Mr. East came crashing to the ground and, her umbrella flashing fast, Charlotte unhooked him and latched onto the now free purse, retrieving it.

“That,” she announced, “is how one brings down a ruffian.”

Mr. East rose and bowed to her. Charlotte, to the confusion of the women, did the same. She did not waste her time explaining this esoteric courtesy to her audience.

“The instant you feel your purse ripped from your possession, you must spring into action,” she explained. “Hook him and pull with all your might. This is no time for propriety. Do not be a lady about this, for I assure you the purse snatcher has not one single kind thought for you in his miscreant head.”

She looked around the room. No one had fainted. A slight hint of smug satisfaction crept across her face. “Who shall go first?”

No one would meet Charlotte's gaze, let alone raise a volunteering hand but for Mrs. Pelton herself and one particularly nimble lady's maid.

“I'll never let another hoodlum win out over me,” Mrs. Pelton declared.

“I grew up with five brothers,” the lady's maid said. She shrugged matter-of-factly and earned a hearty and admiring chuckle from Charlotte.

Charlotte moved onto to show the group additional means of protection against other kinds of assault—using the point of the umbrella to incapacitate (aim for the Adam's apple or jab up under the chin), bringing your assailant down (crooking him around the neck, pulling him forward, and kneeling him hard under the chin), kicking your assailant when he's down (the

shins) or stopping him when he's up (strike a blow across the bridge of his nose). She concluded her demonstration by inviting them for another session where she would teach them the means of self-protection sans umbrella.

"Be brave," she countenanced them. "Let no man take from you what you are unwilling to give."

After Mrs. Pelton and her ladies left, the building's doorman caught our attention with a gruff clearing of his throat. "A woman, come to see you," he said, nodding towards the back of the building. "She's with my missus." He looked rather put-out, as though he'd tasted a bug. Or worse: someone of an even more detestable station than his own had sullied his threshold.

Mr. East took his leave of us while the dour man brought us to a dull, dingy room, its furnishings little more than his and his scrubwoman of a wife's janitorial necessities. The wife herself was wringing out rags and looked as vexed and inconvenienced as her spouse, but she had at least invited the woman to take seat on the room's lone stool. From which she now rose.

Well-dressed in an afternoon walking dress of light *mousseline de soie* with a touch of pink chiffon at its neck and wrists, she was a striking figure. Small and rail-thin, she barely reached five feet in height. Her black hair gleamed and, despite being pinned and lacquered into the fashion of the day, it was of a kind exotic to all but one people. Her lips were distinctively shapely, almost heart-like; her skin tone as if the sun had kissed it with a moment of its yellow hue, leaving a touch of color so subtle I cannot describe it further. But her eyes! Penetrating, crystalline blue. Exotically narrow, they spoke of a Far East origin—and the blue of Irish eyes. They revealed, too, the reason our doorkeeper had behaved so rudely.

Charlotte, bless her soul, came to the woman with a forthright welcome and blatantly ignored the prejudiced, put-upon couple. She drew the woman from their room, away from their mean spirited scrutiny, and into the hallway.

"Madam," she said, handing the young woman her calling card. "A pleasure to meet you. I am Charlotte Olms and this—" she gestured to me "—is Joanna Wilson."

"Thank you for seeing me, Miss Olms." The young woman bowed slightly, her eyes averted. "I am Miss Lynette Tam."

Her English was as perfect as her name was unexpected. I raised an eyebrow, but Charlotte merely nodded. "And what can I do for you, Miss Tam?"

"It is..." She hesitated, grasping for words. "He is missing. My employer is missing."

"His name?"

"Samuel Owen Keane." She almost whispered the name. Almost reverently, too. "He runs a dispensary on the edge of Chinatown, open to its people. I am afraid for him."

Miss Tam hurriedly offered Charlotte her calling card as if she had very nearly forgotten a decorum unused to her. As she did, her dress sleeve rode up, prompting a quick, quiet gasp and a tug returning it to its place. But not before I noticed a blemish just above her wrist.

Charlotte briefly narrowed her eyes at the strange mark, then suggested we head to the Fifth Avenue Hotel. "We shall have tea," she decided. "Come."

Over tea, Miss Tam revealed that Keane had gone missing some three nights prior after an altercation at the dispensary. Several men had stormed the place after hours—Chinamen, it seemed at first. They had torn the place apart, smashing décor and window alike, and left the lobby in ruin. Mr. Keane had fought them off, but the party divided and some of the men stole upstairs through the back and, finding Miss Tam there, had threatened her at knifepoint before kidnapping three women.

“They had only just come to us,” Miss Tam said, discouraged. “Sick and in need of medical attention.”

“Prostitutes.” Charlotte grimaced.

Miss Tam lowered her eyes. “We help them as best we can.”

“Yes, you do,” Charlotte agreed. “My anger is not at you, Miss Tam, or at your people. It frustrates me that such work is all some women have. Forgive me, please.”

She lifted her gaze then, thankful that Charlotte was not given to the prejudice of the day. “After that, Mr. Keane disappeared,” she repeated.

“Was he given to visiting opium dens?” Charlotte interrupted.

“Never,” the young woman said, “despite the fact that many of the women come from the dens. When people fall prey to the drug and become little more than ghosts, Mr. Lee expects our help.”

Ah, Mr. Tom Lee, the famous, self-declared mayor of Chinatown. The highest-established power broker among its denizens, Lee was a ceaseless self-promoter and anyone who knew of Chinatown knew of Mr. Lee.

“The night Mr. Keane vanished,” Charlotte interrupted, “an altercation erupted at an opium joint on Mott Street. Were you aware of that?”

Miss Tam's eyes widened. Fear filled them. “I had...” she stammered, “had heard. But it was not our custom to enter the dens. Our arrangement was that the Tong would bring them to us.”

That gaze, averted again. Where I previously found it demur and deferential, I now found it chilling. Such a tenuous accord the dispensary had with the Tong.

Charlotte continued her clipped, pointed interview. “Did anyone else work with you and Mr. Keane in the dispensary? Were there other associates on board?” My, but she could be curt when she was hounding out clues. Thank goodness our client—and client I was sure she would be, given Charlotte's nonstop questions—was as unflappable as she was demur.

“A dentist,” she answered. “Mr. Jacob Arthur Soames. He came by once every two weeks.”

“And his work?”

“The usual extractions, draining of abscesses. But he also had surgical experience and Mr. Keane would sometimes call upon him to assist when extra hands were needed.”

Charlotte sat for a moment, thinking. “Did the two men get along?”

A sour expression scampered across Miss Tam's face, quick but we caught it. “Mr. Soames respected my employer well enough, but he thought little of those who came to us for help.”

“You did not like the man.”

Miss Tam nodded. “I did not.”

“But he did his job well enough for Mr. Keane.”

She nodded yet again.

Charlotte asked where she could find Soames and securing that information, she rose, ready to depart from our new client. “We shall do all we can,” I found myself assuring Miss Tam, “to find your Mr. Keane.”

Her gaze met mine, then glancing at Charlotte, her eyes widened. “Wait!” she hastened, “There is one more thing.”

“And what is that, Miss Tam?”

Uncertainty flickered across the young woman's face. “Although it was dark and I could not see well, I could hear the men.”

“Yes?”

“At first I thought I was mistaken, but the more I think about it, the more certain I became.”

“Of what, Miss Tam?”

“Their Cantonese was terrible.”

Like a hound catching the scent, Charlotte shouted and bolted to the door as if it were the fox. “A crucial discovery, Miss Tam! Immediately, Miss Wilson, immediately!”

I was left to patiently take the young woman's hand in my own and offer her our assurances that her concerns were safe with us. “We shall investigate straight away,” I said, “and with the single-minded doggedness you see taking up the chase this very moment.” I could not help but say the latter through a jaw clenched in frustration.

Charlotte struck the street so briskly that I had to trot to keep up with her.

“Charlotte, slow yourself. Really, must I remind you yet again to mind your manners when a case strikes your fancy? Honestly!”

“I am sure you did well by us both, Joanna. You always do.”

“That is not the point,” I huffed, exasperated. “And the last I heard, opium joints never close their doors.”

“We are not going to the joints, dear woman—I wouldn't think to take you there or approach it myself alone dressed as a woman.”

“Then where?”

“The morgue. And I want to get there before Mr. Hazelton reaches the end of his shift.”

Dear God! The morgue! Another woman would have felt the hot bile of dread at the thought of visiting Bellevue Hospital's dead house, but Charlotte had dragged me there enough times that I no longer feared seeing the dead at their worst. Smelling them though was another matter, one that not even my nurse's training and years attending the sick and dying could compensate for.

“Why there and not Mott Street?” I asked.

Charlotte hailed a hansom cab, complaining about the difficulty of cross-town travel. Catching a driver quickly, we climbed aboard and she told me, “You will see, Joanna. You will see.” She drew the blinds and then me, into her arms. Crosstown travel had its advantages.

Her lips found mine and, our tongues meeting, Charlotte coaxed me to follow her, to endure and sweetly suffer at her insistence. She pulled me tight, making her embrace a prison one would never think to escape. Oh, she knew how to arouse me.

“Your kiss this morning,” she murmured. “I have thought nonstop about it all morning.”

Her lips came to my neck, nibbling and vexing me.

“Liar!” I declared. “Your mind never stays pinned to one thing, not even me.”

“True.” She found a sweet spot, sending a shudder of want through me. “Thank goodness Mrs. Pelton and her entourage called us to duty and this case to our attention, or we would have been abed for the entire day.”

Her hand went to my breast, clawing about my bodice. A throbbing rebellion rose up between my legs.

“Unhand me!” I teased.

“Never, you vixen!” she countered.

To my dismay, a jolt pulled us apart, ending our mock melodrama. Horses squealed, distressed. Drivers cursed at each other. Clearly a mishap, narrowly avoided. Charlotte abandoned her sully of me. I sat untouched the rest of the way, stewing in the juices she had set into motion.

We arrived at Bellevue Hospital and walked across its grounds to the morgue. Sitting on an East River pier, it could easily be mistaken for a wealthy man's boat house, but this was no

privileged estate. Indeed, many of the city's dead passed from here to potter's fields, there to be buried and forgotten. We had barely entered the building when I had to put a handkerchief to my nose, so strong was the cloying scent of death.

Charlotte presented her card and, her reputation brought the coroner himself out of hiding. To her disgust, he insisted on escorting us to the bodies. Charlotte had little use for the city coroner and with more than enough justification. Little more than a political appointee and—of the greatest effrontery to Charlotte—a coroner rarely brought any actual medical training to the position. “How can one surmise the truth when one lacks any of the rigors of science?” she often complained to me. Sadly, for all its brilliance, New York City was wanting in rigorous thinkers.

As we entered the morgue, two men gave support to a hysterical woman as they made to leave. There, a deceased woman was laid out, presumably a relative and one of their own. An occasional spray of water from an overhead sprinkler dosed the corpse to stave off decay. Charlotte grimaced as we maneuvered around them. The only thing more troublesome than the dead to Charlotte was people's reaction to the sight of them.

“Show me to the man brought here from Mott Street,” she said.

“Him? Strange one, he is,” the coroner said, his breath foul with whiskey. Charlotte grimaced but did not interrupt him. “Found in an alley outside of an opium joint.”

“Outside,” she commented. To others, it would appear absent enough a comment, but I knew my dear Miss Olms. I saw her mind at work. “And what address exactly?”

This, the coroner seemed to know right off the bat. “The alleyway near 40 Mott Street.”

Charlotte raised an eyebrow. “Are you sure, good man?”

He roused himself like a rooster whose feathers had been ruffled. “This one's an odd duck enough to remember.”

“Really? Why?”

“He ain't the type we usually pull from opium joints.”

Charlotte nodded. “I dare agree. Was anything found on his person?”

“Just a bit of opium paraphernalia,” he said and shrugged.

There, as overhead sprinklers sprayed the dead with water cool enough to delay decay, the coroner pulled back a sheet that revealed Mr. Samuel Owen Keane. In his mid-thirties, of dark, thinning hair, moderate height and weight, he appeared far too fit to come to the slab out of destitution or dissipation. Bruises covered his torso—the contusions of having been set upon—and a particularly nasty one marred his left cheek, leaving it grotesquely swollen and deeply purpled. Even worse, the blood had settled throughout his body leaving it mottled in ghastly shades of blue. I had seen lividity during my time as a hospital nurse, but the start of the process was nothing compared to its full flower.

Charlotte quickly examined Keane's arm and discovered it bore the same mark that Miss Tam carried. It was not a blemish, as I had supposed, but a small tattoo, little more than a half of an inch in length on the inside of the arm, just above the wrist.

“Could you be so kind as to roll the body over onto its stomach?” she asked.

Coroner's jaw dropped. “Madam!”

“Please, good man”—Charlotte would fawn if it served her inquisitive purposes—“this man's wife engaged me to find her husband. I can hardly bring her to claim him without some explanation as to how he came to be here.”

“How?” the man challenged her. “I'll tell you how. He nosed about he should not have and the Tong got him.”

Charlotte scoffed at his assertion, but held her tongue. A completely thorough examination

was far more important than arguing with a man who knew more about Tammany Hall than he ever would about a dead body. With an equally inebriated assistant as his side, the coroner managed to get the dead man face down. Charlotte brought her gaze close along his neck and skimmed his hairline with her fingers. The coroner watched her with a barely feigned disgust—a woman of some gentility, touching a dead body and one not of her own relation.

“Ah-ah! Here!”

I knew triumph when I heard it.

“Come see,” she coaxed the coroner. When he leaned over the body and gazed at a section of hair she kept parted, she revealed the mark of death to him. It should have been little more than an eighth of inch in diameter, but the mark was much wider and just as grotesque as Keane's bludgeoned face.

“That, good coroner, is your cause of death,” she claimed. “This man was pithed. First, he was set upon and brought down, hence the extensive bruising. Then his brains were scrambled unto death. Furthermore, he was not killed at the opium joint, but his body was dumped in its alley with its coat pockets stuffed to make him look like a habitu . This was a crime of hatred. Of someone wanting to make Keane suffer in his last moments—then to sully him in death.”

“Pithed? What the devil is that?” the coroner challenged.

Charlotte glared at the man, her contempt for his ineptitude clear as day. “The severing the spinal chord by means of a sharp needle-like knife. It is an assassination's tool among the Sikh cult in India—”

“And where would you find an east Indian in this land?” the coroner derided.

But Charlotte continued, unperturbed by his disbelief. “But it is not foreign to butchers and biologists either. And I assure you, sir, we have plenty of those throughout this great metropolis of ours.” Grim and tight-lipped, she concluded with, “We shall bring the dead man's wife tomorrow morning so she can identify and claim his body.”

“Tomorrow?” the coroner complained. “But the body's been here two days already!”

Charlotte stared him down. “If you cannot show any regard for the dead, perhaps you could make an accommodation for a loving survivor.”

He grumbled but agreed to await our return.

Hailing another carriage, I questioned Charlotte. “How the devil did you know Keane would be in the morgue?”

She grinned unabashedly as we climbed aboard. “The penny press, Joanna. There's always someone in the morgue willing to tell a reporter about the bodies that come to the morgue. The more gruesome, the better the payoff, but even an occasional oddity earns a few pennies.”

“And Miss Tam?”

“Hardly a Miss,” Charlotte revealed. “Keane bore the same tattoo as she, an image of Madam White Snake, taken from Chinese mythology. Undoubtedly, it is safer for our Miss Tam to pose as his mistress rather than his wife.”

She turned to the window of the cab and started out as carriages and drays passed opposite us. “Apparently, someone found out they were married. And perhaps that someone failed to appreciate their love.”

From the look on Charlotte's face, I knew she was determined to discover who.

Sunset and a new case made for a bad combination, and Mr. East had no sooner lighted our parlor then Charlotte began her pacing. On a good night, she would have a plethora of clues to mull over. She'd have plenty of possibilities to consider.

Tonight would not be a good night.

The case was too fresh, our yield as yet too small. Charlotte's pacing would not be a productive contemplation but the exercising of a bad habit—one that was likely to stimulate a number of her other bad habits. Remembering her curt exit from Miss Tam earlier in the day, I decided that this would not do. I pretended to read a novel, gave her until the first quarter chime of the clock to indulge herself, and then set myself to action.

I rose from my chair as Charlotte stalked away from me, catching her as she turned to complete her round. I stood in her path, my persona stern and defiant. One cannot be wilting when one has to take down a lioness.

“That kiss I gave you this morning was an invitation to gentle pleasures,” I informed her. “Had our day begun and ended with your self-defense instruction, those gentle pleasures would have remained a suitable option. However—”

I grabbed Charlotte by the ruffles of her bodice and pulled the fabric taut. She hissed at its sudden constriction—and at my sudden command.

“I will not have you fall into the bad habits your impatient mind sometimes allows itself.”

Oh, what bad habits she was capable of, rude behavior being the least of it.

“Upstairs with you,” I demanded, “where I can be thorough about my task.”

I turned her about and aimed her for the doorway and the stairs beyond it, my fingers splayed wide and pressed hard against the region between her shoulder blades.

This was no gentle invitation.

Charlotte mounted the steps and marched up the stairs without complaint. She knew my might would make right. We made our way to my bedroom, where I would keep her from her worst demons.

Undressing Charlotte was never a hindrance to our passion. She insisted on women's wear both practical and made to her specifications—buttons she could reach and accoutrements that did not require a lady servant's assistance—so getting her down to her chemise took little effort or time. But I stopped there, not out of any propriety or prudery, but because I knew that striking a cane over fabric would add a subtle friction better suited to Charlotte's problematic needs.

I pointed Charlotte towards a small oak chair discreetly cornered in the room. The odd little thing faced its corner like a rebellious child wearing a dunce cap, but we both knew why. Its seat hinged, one only had to flip the back of the chair over the seat and bring the hinged pieces together to reveal a hidden step ladder perfect for the caning victim. This, I readied, then led Charlotte there.

Always stoic when I took the lead in such matters, Charlotte winced but did not resist me. She knew this chair well and what would come of her as she mounted it. Charlotte rested her knees on a flat, lower rung and bent over its top rung, gripping its legs and presenting herself to me. I rattled the cane from hiding and saw her flinch. How rare, seeing her poised for surrender. How necessary, too.

Flagellation tales tell us of the sublime beauty of the rounded posterior, ready for the cane or the switch, and I will not deny the truth of it. Before me, Charlotte knelt, vulnerable and waiting for the stinging burn of the cane's bite. But laying into her was not my way. I was not some schoolhouse disciplinarian ready to deploy a swift punishment for a quick return to the lesson at hand. No, not I. I wanted Charlotte to not only suffer pain, but to writhe in pleasure as well.

“You need this, you know,” I told her flatly.

Her breathing hastened at the sound of my voice, anticipating its message.

“If I don't correct you now, your behavior will only become more self-centered...”

I laid my hand on her ass, cupping the flesh of one cheek. Charlotte quivered and a strangled moan answered me.

“More smug...”

I traced my fingertips over her in a gentle ticklish sensation. Charlotte tensed. She hated being tickled, but I knew that once the cane had warmed her flesh, she would welcome the reprieve this light touch would provide.

“Heedless of everything and everyone beyond the perimeter of your busy mind.”

She groaned, weary of waiting and of hearing my litany of her shortcomings. I answered her selfishness with five brief taps of the cane, and the sudden descent of my hand from her rump to the valley between her legs. Charlotte moaned and pushed her rump outward, begging me for more of such attention.

And, finding the fine muslin damp with need, I barely resisted her plea. Somehow, I managed to find the will to pull my hand from her and regain my composure.

“We must rid you of today's faults before I can even begin to consider such a reward as that,” I told her. Yet I felt the swell of my own arousal and knew it could threaten my resolve at any point in this erotic exercise.

I set about landing small, light raps of the cane about Charlotte's ready rump. These would warm her flesh and make her capable of withstanding the brutal strokes yet to come. And they would ensure a long and enduring scene. I steadily increased the force of my strikes and when Charlotte lurched against a particularly strong one, I stopped and ran my fingers over her. Her skin had yet to return the hot touch of the cane but I was in no hurry to achieve that result.

“I wonder, did that last one smart?” I teased. A breathy grunt answered me.

I resumed my efforts with strokes harder and more trying, keeping the tempo even and measured so Charlotte could feel every nuance. From impact to sting to burning dissipation, Charlotte suffered through the fullness of it all. And I had the pleasure of watching the cane send her backside aquiver, seeing her body seize stiff on impact, then wilt as the searing pain faded into welcomed warmth.

On the tenth stroke, I again stopped and returned my hand to her rump. This time, Charlotte was warm to my touch. I slipped my hand between her legs—Charlotte trembled at my intrusion. I marveled at the power that a simple touch had, how it rendered my headstrong and brilliant lover and companion so pliable. Oh, I ached to caress her and bring her to an elysian zenith!

But no. Charlotte had yet to bend to me in complete capitulation.

I caressed her rump briefly, sending her into moaning disappointment when I made vacant my touch.

“You know what is now to come, don't you?” The question, of course, was rhetorical. “And you know what is at stake.” I emphasized *at stake* with a tap of the cane between her spread legs. It was time for her to learn her lesson.

I aimed the flat length of cane over the sweet spot of the rump, the crest of the cheeks just above the thighs. But the blow was anything but sweet. Charlotte hissed and went rigid against its pain. Enough blows there and I'd have her wet and wanting.

Again Charlotte hissed with pain.

“I wouldn't be surprised if that is how others react when you cast them off with your cold callousness,” I observed.

She relaxed, the pain fading to tolerable. I sent another blow, this one across her thighs. No sense striking the same place twice, especially since I had so much area to work with.

“You must remember your manners,” I intoned.

A third strike, hard and above the sweet spot. Charlotte gasped, and then nearly fell into crying. But it would take more to drive her to actual tears and however successful that might make me feel, that was not my true goal.

“You must improve your interactions with others.”

So the litany went. With every blow, I pointed out her misdemeanors, some particular to this day, others common to every case. I planted several strikes to her thighs and calves, but planted most to that sweet spot—cruel kisses, every one of them. And when Charlotte finally surrendered, when her body went limp against the spanking bench, I landed the final blow.

She barely responded.

But I knew what she would respond to. Splaying the fingers of both hands, I stroked the hot, welted flesh of her cheeks with a fairy-light touch. Like the rainbow before Noah, I signaled punishment's end and the promise of forgiveness. When Charlotte rose from her wilted state, lifting her body anew, I returned my hand between her legs.

No amount of muslin could hide the swollen readiness that met me there. Charlotte was primed and I was eager to set her off. Still fairy-light, I played my fingers over her labia, back and forth, my teasing steady but unrelenting, coaxing her to ever higher arousal. Charlotte moaned and trembled at these sensations, but soon acted driven to distraction. She could not come this way.

I relished witnessing her in this erotically delirious state, knowing that I alone had put her there. But I would likewise relish seeing Charlotte reach for the very ecstasy she had endured so much to earn, and, my fingers spidering their way to her clitoris, set to make good my final promise to her.

Too my wonder and amusement, Charlotte responded to my pressing, circling finger like a firecracker with a short fuse. I had barely worked those small, deep pressed circles she liked when she pressed back against my touch and let loose with a bellowing cry of pleasure. She shuddered against the spanking bench, her whole body clenched and spending in tandem with her womanly center. Breaking into a flushed sweat, she rode furiously against my hand. And I let her. She had earned the right to make her climax last.

But when she had completely spent herself and wilted once against across the chair, I grabbed her by the hair and pulled her away from it.

“Don't for a second think that all hunger has been sated,” I informed her. “You may have exhausted yourself but I assure you, you are not done.” I flipped the hinges back of the ladder back into a chair, sat myself down, pulled up my skirts, and exposed myself to pain-addled Charlotte. “Your work tonight is far from over.”

Now my hunger would be appeased.

Come mid-morning the next day, Charlotte's determination faded into jaw-clenching frustration as we undertook a visit to the sixth precinct police station. With few exceptions, the police were, in Charlotte's eyes, the product of patronage and its spoils system, more concerned with lining their pockets than ridding the streets of crime. Lacking in procedural and investigative know-how, they hardly qualified as a “metropolitan force” to her, and she thought most of them capable only of street sanitation, a duty given to the police force.

As it was, the precinct reeked of street odors. The unkept, the vicious, malingers and murderers alike befouled the dingy station, and visiting one was rarely productive. On the best of occasions, we would actually gathered valuable information that supported Charlotte's crime-

solving endeavors. On the worst of visits, we merely made our interest known in a given case; a courtesy hardly worth the effort for the police had often already dismissed our cases as unimportant. But a visit was required; Charlotte considered it a necessity to lay stake to our territory in a case.

We climbed the stairs to the precinct and then found ourselves in its noisy chaos. Several women, clearly of bawdy house origins, were shouting down their arresting officers as the men began escorting the women to their impending detention. Policemen within eyeshot cheered on the brazen doxies and I had no doubt that, given the opportunity, they'd rush to place bets on the ruckus's outcome.

Charlotte and I sidled along the wall to avoid the scene until a brute of a man escaped his handlers and made for the exit. With swift grace, Charlotte pivoted into action, her umbrella seeing action, first grabbing the man about the arm and pulling him off his gait, then hooking him about the collar of his coat. As several policemen took him down, Charlotte rapped him hard over the head and across the ear, her umbrella a flash. One of the younger officers looked up at their prisoner's foiler and recognized Charlotte.

"Miss Olms! I should've known!" He grinned, his hands never leaving their hold upon the prisoner. "If you seek the sergeant, look for him in the back room with the photographer."

We found him not only with a photographer but three other men, all struggling to force an uncooperative man to sit for the camera. Agitated, the malefactor ignored his shackles, requiring four men to hold him in place. Two knelt and held his legs and hands in place while two others—the sergeant included—forced him back against the chair. Threatened to thrash him if he did not hold still, sergeant pulled the man's head back by a scruff of hair and the camera flashed.

We had happened upon the latest in police work, the photographic criminal portrait, brought into being by the city's new chief of detectives, Inspector Thomas Byrnes. The practice earned a thin smile of approval from Charlotte.

"Sergeant," Charlotte called, "a moment of your time!"

The officer boxed the man's ears and pushed him aside, ordering his compatriots to "see him off to the Tombs." But he was no happier to see us than he was to send another criminal to detention. "Who allowed you back here?" he asked gruffly, unhappy to have his domain invaded by the likes of women.

"You had quite a ruckus out front," she informed him. "We simply looked for quieter doings, figuring you would be at its center."

The sergeant, stout and sullen, glowered at Charlotte, looking her up and down. "You sully yourself, coming here. A woman of your caliber—"

"A woman of my caliber has been hired to find a missing husband," she interrupted.

"Why should that permit you to assail my precinct?"

"Because he was found in your ward, dead. Behind 40 Mott Street."

"The opium-eater?" The sergeant brushed past us, eager to be rid of us. "Again, I say: Why should that permit you to assail my precinct?"

"Contrary to the items stuffed into his pockets, he was not an opium smoker. He was Samuel Owens Keane, a pharmacist and doctor working among the celestials. He was murdered."

"He was found when?"

"Two nights ago."

An unfriendly grin overtook the man. "Then a night's roundsman likely found him. Come back at dawn and you will likely find him returning from duty." He moved away from us,

waving us off. "But given the evidence in the dead man's pockets and no signs of foul play, I doubt the roundsman has anything more to tell you than the dead man himself."

He left us then, our presence a receding inconvenience.

"Damn him," Charlotte complained.

We made our way from the precinct and found the young officer outside on its steps. He called to Charlotte, asking if we'd found the sergeant. He seemed disappointed to learn we had had no luck with the man.

"If I can be of service..." he suggested, his offer ending as if in question.

"Then I shall forgo your sergeant, young man, and ask for you," Charlotte said. "Your name?"

"Daniel O'Toole, Miss Olms." He removed his hat and made a kind of clumsy bow. For a moment I thought he would add "at your service," but the young man entreated us no further and let us on our way.

Charlotte said nothing as she stalked off. Regardless of the young man's apparent sincerity, she remained dissatisfied with the day's progress. I resisted speaking to her until we were a good two blocks from the precinct.

"Perhaps young O'Toole's a sample of Byrnes' new recruiting methods," I said.

"Or just not yet corrupted by his surroundings," Charlotte answered.

I did not let her deter me. "Come now, Byrnes is the best chance the city's ever had for overcoming the politics and patronage behind the police."

Charlotte slowed, her stride finally calming. "Of course he is."

"And word has it that the sixth precinct will have new quarters next year as well. Perhaps new surroundings will encourage a new professionalism."

"A new professionalism," Charlotte argued, "will only emerge if Byrnes dismisses every Tammany Hall-connected policeman and replaces him with the likes of O'Toole. That, and keep his promise to bring real detectives to the streets of New York."

Charlotte had me there. I could not debate against the obvious. Resigned, I asked, "Where to now?"

"To Soames," she answered.

Soames. The man Miss Tame disdained and one I would prefer not to meet. But given Charlotte's already frustrated state of mind, I knew she would not let go of the day until she had enough answers to chew on through the night. I quickened my step, willing to follow wherever she deemed necessary.

Stepping unescorted into the famed restaurant in one's own neighborhood was far safer than entering the unseemly tavern Mr. Soames was said to frequent so I was pleased we found the man lurching at Delmonico's. Charlotte might have the courage of a lioness but I was a house cat, confident only in familiar confines.

Charlotte marched right up to the man and announced herself. "Mr. Jacob Soames, I am Miss Charlotte Olms."

The gentleman—such as he was—paused, his knife and fork in his rare and tender steak, and looked up at us. Weathered but clean shaven, he scowled at us, his eyes narrow and suspicious. He had to be fifty years old if to the day. "And what is a Miss Charlotte Olms to me?"

"A woman's detective, hired by Miss Tam of the dispensary in Chinatown."

"Tam?" he challenged. "You must mean Mr. Keane." He resumed slicing his steak.

Charlotte motioned to a waiter for a chair, sitting in it without invitation when it arrived.

“Perhaps I would if Mr. Keane were not missing.” Another chair arrived, this one for me. I took it if for no other reason than to steady myself as Charlotte met Mr. Soames, challenge for challenge.

Soames dropped his cutlery, sending it clattering against his plate. “Missing? What are you talking about?”

“Mr. Keane has gone missing and Miss Tam wants to know why.”

Blunt, she did not blink an eye. Nor was she about to reveal the whole truth of the matter.

As Charlotte pursued her questions, I assessed the man before us. His visage and lean physique suggested he had seen good days and bad, easy times and hard. His dress, while not of the latest fashion, was well-kept and orderly. A small pin graced his lapel, but I could not see its particulars. No doubt Charlotte's keen eye would.

His hands were likewise tidy. Fingernails clean, with digits long and strong. I saw not a tremor and knew many a patient could rely on the sureness of those hands. Odd, though, but his hands were not as worn or weathered as the rest of him. The woman in me told me those were hands that could do a tough job tenderly, and I wondered if my bold and blunt Charlotte would agree.

“You came to work with Mr. Keane how?” Charlotte continued.

Mr. Soames grunted. “Many a Chinaman has bad teeth. It was suggested that I lend Mr. Keane a hand. For a good dollar, of course.” He returned to his steak, determined not to let Charlotte's intrusion keep him from his meal.

“Suggested, you say? By whom?”

“Need I say it? Every Chinaman who finds relief at the end of my pliers has Tammany Hall to thank for it.”

Largesse, that fine old art among the well-enthroned at Tammany Hall. It mattered not that the once eminent Boss Tweed had died in prison but two years ago. The political machine he had constructed had slowed only briefly after his fall before roaring back to life, full of cronyism and patronage. But I could tell from Charlotte's silent, stiff posture, this was not the information she had expected to uncover.

“So you work with Mr. Keane solely for the money?”

“Yes.” He took a long sip from his wine glass.

Charlotte's nose wrinkled, catching it exquisite bouquet. “You are a capitalist,” she said.

He scoffed at her assertion. “A capitalist, Miss Olms, is a rich man. I, on the other hand, simply want a modicum of security and comfort as I go through the rest of my life. If pulling a few Chinamen's teeth or lancing a boil here and there will bring me that comfort, then so be it.”

Charlotte laughed at his answer and he glowered at her, but when she met him with an appreciative grin, he relaxed and joined her with a spirited laugh of his own. Until she sobered, serious again.

He followed suit. Smart woman, she had coaxed him to her side.

“So, Mr. Keane has gone missing,” Soames repeated, his voice soft and respectful.

Charlotte nodded. “Did he have any enemies?”

Soames shook his head. “Not a one. The Chinamen practically worshipped him. And that Miss Tam? She would follow that man to hell and back.”

“What of the neighborhood? Was there ever any anger on the streets for Mr. Keane's care of the Chinese?”

Soames sat back in his chair and contemplated Charlotte's question. He ran his fingers across his upper lip as if he wore a mustache before resting his chin in his hand. “Come to think

of it, no. At least not directly. People may complain about the Chinese—the Irish Catholics on the Bowery near Mott, especially—but when it comes right down to it, everyone wants cheap cigars and clean laundry.”

He invited us to share an aperitif with him, but Charlotte waved him off, claiming we already had other engagements to attend to. Stepping foot into the street, she expressed a mild indignation. “Aperitifs for us while he downs a digestif? He must think me mad.”

I smiled and chuckled. “Or worthy of his attention.”

“Bah!” she spat, stomping off. We would continue our sleuthing until she found some manner of satisfaction.

One needed to only look beyond Chinatown's joss house temple, its tidy laundries and tea parlors to see how rising tenements were beginning to overtake the ramshackle Bloody Sixth Ward. Yes, its oriental inhabitants kept Mott and Pell streets clean and some of its buildings displayed elegant balustrades, but one entered a different world when stepping into Chinatown. Its men filled the streets, suspicious of all who visited, and although the police would tell you they are the quietest of the ward's rowdy peoples, one could well feel uneasy. Those women who did populate the streets were white and suspect—presumably the products of white slavery and opium addictions. Chinese women were few and cloistered, wives to successful merchants who never stepped foot into the light of day.

Here, Charlotte, Mr. East, and I arrived as the day waned, Charlotte dressed as a man, her hair hidden beneath a stiff-crowned bowler, and myself on Mr. East's arm. We looked like a trio slumming about, ignorant of the fading day and the dangers that would soon follow, but we had our agenda and it began with Charlotte ducking into the alley where the late Mr. Keane had met his demise.

“We must make this quick,” she said, her eyes already scanning the mess of refuse that clogged the area. “We've too little light as it is.”

Unlike the well-ordered appearance of the streets, the alley was malodorous and ghastly, filled with the smell of rotting produce most foreign to our senses. Ever the attentive butler, Mr. East handed me a handkerchief, beating by mere seconds Charlotte's gentlemanly effort to likewise assuage my sensitivities. He turned from us to keep guard and I, putting that cloth to my face, held a carriage lantern to illuminate the area for Charlotte to systematically scrutinize.

One never knew what details might turn a case, and one never knew what Charlotte would discover or deduce. I have seen her link the smallest particulate of fiber to a textile rare to all but one Afghani importer. I have seen her sniff out the singular scent of a certain tobacco, naming its origin and likely place of purchase. I have even seen her deduce where a horse—and by consequence, its murderous rider—hailed from by examining the types of hay and grasses in its manure. Charlotte was a woman of intensity, her mind a trap for facts and figures, her mind always penetrating.

“Bring the lantern closer,” she demanded of me. What she pushed away as she spoke was so abominable that to describe it would leave me faint, but I lowered the lantern over the very loathsomeness before us.

She knelt and began to pick through the rot and slime beneath her feet. Regardless of the work gloves she wore, I could not bear to watch her and I closed my eyes, praying the lantern would not waver. For a moment, the sweet scent of the opium pipe escaped from a nearby basement and I almost imagined myself on a magic carpet, blissfully fleeing these foul surroundings.

Charlotte ended my revelry with a triumphant cry. She cupped a small trinket in her hand, its grime now smeared across one of her gloves. Crudely carved but characteristically identifiable, its shape was that of an owl. An odd owl with a monstrously oversized head.

“Whatever does that portend?” I asked.

“It portends nothing,” Charlotte answered, knowingly. “But it tells everything.”

I did not know just how telling one inelegant little figurine would become, but for the moment, Charlotte had her clue. Our day's work could end at last.

He sauntered, smug and celebratory. After all, he was free now and he'd made his mark. Free of the obligations that had threatened to send him west and into a familial servitude he did not want. And hadn't he knocked his man out as required? No one could deny him now.

He stepped into the tavern—The Morgue, it was called—a sordid dive where the gang hung out. He did not intend to be like others of their ilk. He did not pick pockets nor did he plan to extort or pimp. Oh, he'd thrash a man—he loved a good fight if he had his boys at his back and the outcome was assured. But his skills would keep him on the sidelines, away from risky violence. He'd doctor the gang. Stitch up wounds, pull teeth, lance boils, and drain infections of pus. He'd keep the leadership healthy, tending to illnesses and infections. And if a poison was needed to take down an enemy? Well, he knew those well.

Meg the Cat, a moll known for latching onto the next best talent, sidled up to him, fawning and cooing in invitation. She carried a draught, ready to hand it him, should he reject her advances. Laughing, he took them both, the drink by the handle and the woman by the breast. Whether he let Meg dig her claws into him remained to be seen, but by coming to him, he knew he was ascending—and that everyone in the room knew it.

His boys joined him, voiceless and subdued, but he did not notice until he swallowed one last pull from his mug. “What's this?” he demanded. How dare they deny him his praise! He heaved the mug, shattering it against the tavern wall. “We're to celebrate, buckos! Meg, fetch drinks for all of us! Then come sit yourself on my lap.”

However, whiskey arrived before Meg was so much as two steps beyond. “Chief sends his congratulations,” came the word. “Says to have a bully time.” The waiter, such as he was, set the bottle and glasses on the table, and the ice broke. A cheer went up from his boys and Meg poured them solid three-fingers drinks, claiming, “no dregs for you boys t'night.”

But he did not join the rush to down the fiery liquor. He rose to his feet, his gaze going straight to the gang leader's table. There, the ruthless Mike McGloin tipped his hat and gave a smile so slim it could've been mistaken for a snake grinning. Acknowledged, the newest member of the gang removed his hat, raised his glass to the chief, and downed the drink. A crowd surrounded him, congratulating him, while Meg hung on his arm. He let loose a roaring laugh, plopped himself in his chair, and pulled Meg the Cat onto his lap and into his curious hands.

Free. He was finally free. And he'd live his life the way he wanted to, not as others had tried to prescribe it.

Charlotte was exuberant and well-satisfied when she entered my bedroom and shut the door behind her. My maid, Phoebe, was unlacing my dress and carefully avoided looking at Charlotte in her man's dress, perhaps afraid she would turn into a pillar of salt if she so much as glimpsed Charlotte's sin.

“Finally, you rid yourself of that damnable corset,” Charlotte rejoiced. She flopped onto my bed, grinning, her hands behind her head as she came to rest on her back. Yes, she was pleased

with herself, but I saw something more there—a certain glimmer in her eye, a hint of desire held in check. Charlotte was just waiting for Phoebe's exit.

I let Phoebe undress me down to my camisole, and had her braid my hair before I dismissed her. Upon Phoebe's exit, Charlotte needled, “You had to insist she braid your hair?”

I shot her an imposing glance. “I keep up appearances for Phoebe's sake. She's too good a lady's maid to lose.” I came to Charlotte and, straddling her, slapped her thigh. “Bad enough you scare her all the time.”

Charlotte grunted at the impact and her eyes briefly fluttered. She wanted me here, atop her. And, her firm body beneath me, I wanted her too.

“I have followed you all day,” I continued, “and not just during the bright light of day.”

I grabbed her by the hair atop her head and slapped her face. Not hard, nor in cruelty, but for drama—and to arouse. Charlotte gasped, astounded and near surrender.

“I followed you into a loathsome alley, nearly trembling.”

“You are hardly a shrinking violet, dearest.” Nearly a whisper, her voice was hoarse with want.

I slapped her again. Her breath quickened, and I felt her body tense beneath me. Ah, but she ached for me!

“Bring your hands to the headboard,” I commanded, “and don't let go of it.”

Charlotte complied, arching her back as she grasped the headboard. Her eyes fluttered shut as I reached for her neck scarf, pulling it loose and from her neck. She moaned, anticipating me, and trembled when I drew it tight across her eyes. Delicious, she always looked delicious when she yielded to me.

I leaned over her, bringing my lips within a breath of hers. Sensing me, Charlotte's breath hastened, softly heaving as if every breath had the pull of a siren's song.

“You want me, don't you?” I queried, my lips still distant from hers.

“Yes.” An admission, whispered. Of longing's torment.

“Perhaps,” I said, placing the flat of my index finger at her lips, “I should deny you.”

“Please no.” A plea so soft I barely heard it, yet its urgency was clear.

I trailed my finger from her lips to her chin and downward until it rested above the first button of her shirt. The swell of her breasts rested beneath its fabric, nipples hard and inviting.

“You did not bind yourself this time.”

“For you,” the whisper revealed.

“For me,” I concurred. “Then I shall reward you.”

My lips brushed hers, a kiss at last. I savored my lips against hers, mine in command, hers softly receptive. She tasted of cinnamon and, I realized, a hint of bergamot. She must have had tea and a morsel before coming to my room.

I deepened our kiss, lips parting and seeking more. Charlotte trembled, her desire bending to my lead. She opened to my tongue and, when it found hers, an electric urgency overtook her. She widened her mouth and pressed her tongue to mine, not to resist me or to wrestle with me but to *beg* me.

She begged me to take her, to foist my passion upon hers. She begged me to take her to ecstatic heights, to make her climb and reach and plummet, all while never leaving my arms. I kissed her hard, answering her wordless plea with an insistence of my own.

I wanted her breasts.

I reached for the buttons on her shirt—and cursed. Its placard front ran only a three-quarters length, preventing me from spreading it completely openly. And it was a pullover that required

her to let go of the headboard to be free of it.

That, I could not allow.

“You thwart me,” I mocked, pulling from our heated kiss.

“What?” Already the fog of desire had descended upon Charlotte. She could not suss out my meaning.

“You chose a shirt I cannot fully open,” I declared. To prove my point, I slipped my hands between its vertical opening, found her breasts, and awkwardly groped her. “I can hardly get at you, Charlotte. Shame on you!”

She answered my chastisement with a weak whimper, one that acknowledged her oversight and the resulting inconvenience.

“It's not like you to be so thoughtless,” I continued. “There is, I think only one solution.”

I removed my hands, leaving Charlotte aquiver, then buttoned up her shirt and reached for its tucked-away hem. Pulling it free, I pushed the shirt up her torso and Charlotte, thinking her breasts were my goals, shimmied back and forth to help me work it up her back. She moaned when her breasts fell free, round and full, their nipples puckering in the room's cool air. But when I pulled the shirt higher still, she uttered a stronger, wordless sound of surprise.

I made a prison of its sheath, holding captive both her arms and her face. A lesser woman would have panicked, but Charlotte was no ordinary woman and her passion thrived on things dramatic and overwhelming.

My plundering began in earnest. I dove to her breasts, greedy and hungry. Mauling her pliant flesh with my unforgiving hands, I claimed a nipple, sucking its small, hard bead into my mouth. This, I worked with tongue and teeth, a torment that drove Charlotte to buck beneath me. I broke suction and taunted her. “You best not let go of that headboard.”

She cried out, chastised and challenged, and gripped the headboard harder.

Grasping her nipple between my fingers, I drew it and her breast taut. An exquisite, appreciative groan thanked me but I wanted more. I wanted her to growl.

And only one thing would force her there: I slapped her breast. Then again, then still more, working Charlotte until her wanton lust completely subjugated the disciplined, collected woman I knew, leaving me with a ravenous beast. Thrashing wildly, she unseated me. I fell to one side, hitting the mattress hard. Her nipple ripped from my grip and then I saw it—her hands, free, no longer gripping the headboard. I jumped atop her again, this time grabbing her arms and forcing them back into place.

Charlotte fought me—she forgot herself and fought me. We wrestled heatedly and I very nearly relented—but no; she needed this. She needed to let go, to forget this day's saturation of crime and death and dismiss all anticipation of what was yet to come.

I flattened myself against her and pressed hard. “Stop this,” I demanded, using every iota of implacable force I could muster. “Stop or I shall go no further.”

Immediately, Charlotte yielded. Her body wilted under mine and I heard a near sob in my ear. Oh, how she suffered when she failed in her diligence! My poor, conscientious Charlotte, her sorrow so sincere and her plight so genuine. How easy it would be to gather her in my arms and soothe away her every distress!

But I knew better.

“Return your hands to the headboard,” I insisted.

Trembling, her respiration quick and shallow, Charlotte resumed her position. I tugged her shirt back into its sheath-like position, and then sidled up to her. Lowering myself to her nipple, I kissed her there while wandering a hand lower. Her skin was damp with perspiration, warm to

my touch, and sensitive to my roving fingertips.

Beyond delicious now, Charlotte was mine to consume.

I reached the waistband of her pants and unfastened it. "Perhaps your trousers will fall to the wayside better than your shirt did." The fly was crowded with small, compact buttons, but they did indeed give way to my effort. I burrowed under, seeking just a moment's contact, intending to tease Charlotte for but a brief second.

Until my touch met bare skin, the curl of hair, and ready wetness.

Charlotte had skipped all undergarments.

"Vixen!" I hissed.

"For you," she offered.

"For me," I accepted.

Perhaps I should have pulled Charlotte free of those trousers. Perhaps I should have left her naked from the waist down, leaving her vulnerable and exposed, and letting her lose herself even further. But my greed had waited long enough; it would no longer tolerate any slow teasing.

Yes, with my fingers in her nest, their touch barely skimming that cleft of folds within which the seat of her pleasure rested, I could wait no longer. I scrambled my fingers along her labia, through hair slick with her wetness, wanting to plunge into her. Charlotte gasped at my sudden pursuit and, arching against my plying aggression, aided me. I found purchase, slipping into her. Velvet and plush, she welcomed me, and if not for her trousers, I would have sunk deep into her.

But that was not to be. I was too hurried, she too harried. We had both wanted too long. And sometimes, an obstacle hastened the excitement.

"Good God," I moaned, groping about in her valley. "You amaze me."

Overwhelmed by our shared heat, I buried my face in the crook of her neck, crawled my fingers out of her depths, and inched back upward until I found that hard nub nestled amid her swollen desire. Ah, *vel dulcedo!* The sweetness of Venus, alive and ready for my caress.

Circling it with a single finger, my breath heavy against Charlotte's neck, I sought that one miniscule spot of utmost sensitivity and receptiveness. Just as Charlotte focused on whatever minutia might illuminate a case, so too I when it came to her body. There! A shiver from her, while on the left curve of her pearl! I never knew which nerve bundle might flare at my touch, but I always knew when it awoke.

I curried that spot, swirling about with the diligence of a Turkish dervish. Wild and wanton, my own cunt tightened and ached as I pulled Charlotte ever closer to her climax. She arched again, this time, pulling her head back, exposing her neck. The invitation clear, I bared my teeth and bore down on her flesh.

Charlotte tensed and cried out. She ground against my hand, allying herself with the rhythm of my hand. I bore down harder on her neck, matching my grip to the spiraling frenzy of her passion. She was near, so near. I squeezed an iota more strength into my bite.

It did the trick. A jolt struck Charlotte, forcing a deep and throaty bellow from her—her climax, at last. Thrilled, I kept at her with my hand and slowly loosened my bite, and for what seemed like a truly transcendent moment, we lost ourselves in an ethereal joy, a pleasure so perfect that it waxed and waned without any sense of time before landing us back upon the hard reality of our warm bed.

Only then did I realize that Charlotte still gripped the headboard.

Later, while curled against Charlotte, her arms around me now and the headboard all but

forgotten, I pondered the findings of our day while Charlotte softly snored in my ear. Already this case promised things fascinating and fantastic, and I knew Charlotte had barely scratched its surface. She roused then, her hand squeezing my breast.

“Tell me,” I said, “about Madame White Snake.”

A kiss lighted on my neck.

“You aren't familiar with the legend?”

“Of course not,” I countered. “I'm not the sister of a diplomat's wife such as yourself.”

“Pillows,” Charlotte murmured, reaching for those that had fallen from my bed. Together we stacked them and cuddled against them, Charlotte sitting the most upright and I in her arms. Another kiss alighted, this one atop my head.

“It's an odd story, the tale of Madame White Snake. A romance full of strange melodrama that originated in an oral tradition which defied its writing until the Ming Dynasty.

“Lu Dongbin, one of the Eight Immortals, disguises himself as a seller of rice dumplings at the Broken Bridge near a lake in Hangzhou. A boy, Xu Xian, buys and eats some dumpling, unaware that they are actually immortal pills. His hunger vanishes for days and when he returns to question the seller, the Immortal laughs. He flips Xu Xian upside down over the bridge and Xu vomits the pills into the lake.”

“How capricious!” I commented.

“Like many pantheistic gods, it would seem. Returning to the story: a white snake spirit lives in the lake. She practices Taoist magical arts, always hoping to achieve immortality. She consumes the discarded pills and immediately gains five hundred years' worth of magic powers. Indebted to Xu Xian, the white snake's fate becomes forever entwined with Xu's.

“A terrapin spirit also trains in the lake, but becomes jealous of the white snake when he fails to secure some of the pills for himself. He bides his time, waiting for the moment when he can strike against the white snake.

“One day, the white snake sees a beggar on the bridge who is about to gut to a green snake for its gall. To save the green snake from certain death, the white snake transforms into a woman and buys the green snake from the poor fellow. Freed, the green snake obligates herself to the white snake and regards her as a sisterly savior—an older and wiser sister, no less.”

“Terrapins? Green snakes?” I complained.

“Be patient. As I said, Chinese tales are markedly different from ours. Many years later, the white and green snakes transform themselves into young women during the Ancestors Days festival, becoming Bai Suzhen and Xiaoqing. They meet Xu Xian at the Broken Bridge where he lends them his umbrella during a rain shower. In time, Xu Xian and Bai Suzhen fall in love and marry. They move to Zhenjiang and open a medicine shop there.”

“A medicine shop? Is that why—”

“—they chose the white snake tattoo? I believe so.”

“How romantic.”

Charlotte grimaced. While she was most capable of love and lust, romance was another matter altogether.

“Still, you must admit that something as definitive as a tattoo makes for a profound statement,” I ventured.

She stared at me then, a certain glimmer in her eye. “So, if I pressed you to share a tattoo with me, you would find that romantic?” She even managed to say the word without derision.

I thought of all we shared and how society looked the other way. I grinned in return. “We are not exactly unfamiliar with social transgression.”

She *harrumphed* and returned to the tale.

“During their marriage, the terrapin spirit finally attains the power to take human form and becomes the Buddhist monk Fahai. Still angry at Bai Suzhen, he begins to plot against her and finds his chance during the Dragon Boat Festival. There, he manipulates Xu Xian to give his wife wine laced with arsenic. When she drinks it, the unsuspecting Bai Suzhen returns to her true form and, seeing his wife in white snake form, Xu Xian dies of shock.

“Bereft of her husband but undaunted, Bai Suzhen and her companion Xiaoqing travel to Mount Emei. There they brave many dangers and steal a magical herb that restores Xu Xian. Alive, Xu Xian professes his love for Bai Suzhen despite knowing her true identity.”

Magic! Undying love! Thrilled by it all, I must have looked the enraptured romantic. Charlotte scolded me with a tsk and shook her head.

“The jealous Fahai continues his quest to destroy their marriage and soon captures and imprisons Xu Xian in the Golden Hill Temple. Bai Suzhen and Xiaoqing fight Fahai, and Bai employs her powers to flood the temple and rescue her husband. Tragically, many innocent people drown during her valiant effort.

“But Bai Suzhen's powers are limited; she is pregnant with Xu Xian's child and so she fails to save her husband. Xu Xian later escapes from the temple and reunites with his wife and she gives birth to their son, Xu Mengjiao.

“However, Fahai soon finds and fights them. He defeats Bai Suzhen, imprisoning her in a pagoda not far from the temple. There, she remains for twenty years. Her son grows to manhood, earning a top candidacy for a government administration position. He brings great glory to his family. At the same time, Bai's faithful and still-free sister, Xiaoqing, confronts Fahai at the temple and defeats him in battle. Bai Suzhen is finally free and reunites with her husband and son in lasting peace.”

We rested in silence at the end of Charlotte's story, I contemplating its strange message, she relaxing towards a sleep that I could sense would soon claim her. But not yet: I had too many unanswered questions.

“Why, pray tell, is this legend considered a romance?”

Charlotte shifted upright. “Don't you find an enduring love, especially one that defies the laws of nature and conquers every obstacle no matter how long it takes, romantic?”

I shrugged. “When you explain it like that, yes. But Bai Suzhen did not conquer all, nor did Xu Xian. They were more often victims of Fahai and never truly his nemesis.”

“True,” Charlotte conceded. “But defeating Fahai is not what made the legend—or Bai Suzhen—a romantic success.”

“What did then?”

Charlotte stroked my hair, a condescending touch, I know. But because her heart made her love for me as fierce as her brilliant mind sometimes made her condescendingly rude, I accepted it affectionately.

“Why, Bai Suzhen was the epitome of a successful Chinese woman,” she informed me. “She had a marriage of love and devotion, the loyal friendship of her fellow sister, and, most important, a son who brought glory to the family.”

I sighed. I saw her point. Or rather, the Chinese point of the story. I still preferred an Aesop's Fable or even one of those tall tales that found their way east from the territories, but I grasp the magic that was Madame White Snake. And I understood how Keane and Miss Tam could see themselves reflected in its tradition.

The night had turned glorious for the murderer. Where his boys had indulged themselves and consumed his whiskey, he had been cautious. It seemed everyone in the tavern that night was intent on indulging with wild drunkenness as the outcome. Let them, he decided. It'll give me plenty of opportunity to prove myself.

At The Morgue, boozing often led to boasting and boasting to arguments—and such differences of opinions were more often than not settled through gunfire.

Men that drunk rarely killed each other outright. If they had the wherewithal to even lift their gats and pull the trigger, they rarely had the ability to aim. It was not uncommon for the gang to engage in an hour-long gun fight and emerge with hardly a scratch, they'd been so blinded by booze. Regardless, he saw such an evening brewing and excused himself and Meg from the floor. Passing by McGloin with a nod, he headed upstairs to make good use of his woman.

He must have slept through the haphazard battle when it came, waking only when McGloin himself came to his bedside and shook him. He rose, pulled his pants on and shrugged a shirt into place, then followed the man downstairs. There, he found tables upended, chairs strewn about and some broken. Most of the crowd had scattered, leaving about only a few knocked heads, bruised fists and broken knuckles.

McGloin had already triaged the place, ordering it vacated, and he could see why. His right-hand man had been hit. So had another chap—someone who had likely passed out in his seat—but from the brain and bone splatter, he never knew what had hit him. McGloin's man did, though. Blood seeped from his neck but the mess was not as serious as the bleeding suggested. The burly fellow was sound enough to complain about the pain like a little crybaby, meaning the bullet hadn't hit anything substantial like a windpipe or the jaw—or the jugular.

A quick examination showed the bullet had caught and passed through the side of his neck. Nearby, the gang's current doctor, Old Bones McGregor, snored in his own stupor. Had he been sober, he would've assessed the man as much by touch and feel as by cloudy sight. He smiled, glad that the woes of an old man had provided this in with McGloin,

“Clean shot,” he told the man. “Bullet passed right through.”

“But my jugular!” the fellow exclaimed, as piss-drunk as the rest of them.

“A bullet through your jugular and you'd be too busy dying to complain.” He wanted to say, *You oaf!* but he held back. The man was, after all, McGloin's second. But a smart man would go places in this gang, and being a smart man, he was sure it would be him.

A few stitches here and a few stitches there closed the wounds, his patient squealing like a frightened little girl the entire time. He grinned. Yes, the night had turned glorious indeed.

Had I known the turmoil the next day would bring, I would have begged to give myself over to the ecstasy I had given Charlotte. Regardless of its erotic drama, regardless its pitch and course, such intimacy can be both a relief and a balm to the stresses of life. But I am not clairvoyant. I did not know what was to come. At least Charlotte would be at her best this day.

I suspected a busy day and came to the breakfast table dressed for the street. Ever aware, even with her nose buried in those dreadful newspapers of hers, Charlotte smiled at the sight of my readiness. “Ah, but I would have loved to see you in your morning dress,” she teased.

“You saw enough of me last night, Miss Olms,” I countered and set to buttering my toast and adding milk to my morning tea.

“And you had enough of me, Miss Wilson.”

“Enough that I slept the sleep of the exhausted.”

“And now you're ready for a busy day?”

“I anticipate such.”

“Excellent.” Charlotte set aside her newspaper, her eyes agleam. “We've an adventure and a duty to perform this day.”

“Which comes first?” I asked.

“Duty. Now eat. We must be off, soon and quickly.”

Duty came in the form of a cab taking us back to Chinatown and Lynnette Tam. We found the dispensary quite tidy, with Chinese workmen replacing the glass in the building's broken windows. Their neighborhood was an insular place, its people helping its own, as it was in many an enclave throughout the city. But here that help sometimes carried with it darker obligations, obligations that were sometimes synonymous with extortion.

I wondered if that was the case when Miss Tam greeted us. Behind her deferential gaze lay uncertainty, and I suspected our bearing of bad news had nothing to do with it.

“I received your message, Miss Olms,” she acknowledged. She cast a backwards glance, anxious with worry.

“We have news of Mr. Keane,” Charlotte informed her. “We must bid you accompany us uptown, but I would ask: Do you have any family who could accompany you?”

At this, a Chinaman appeared from a back room. In outward appearances, he seemed unremarkable for his kind. A wispy mustache and chin beard typical of his kind adorned his face and his physical stature was equally ordinary even in western dress. But the stature of power and intelligence that emanated from him told us he was a far from an average individual.

“Miss Olms,” Miss Tam began, “may I introduce you to—”

“Mr. Tom Lee,” Charlotte finished, already bowing to the man. “The renowned mayor of Chinatown.”

The man grinned as I followed suit, pleased that Charlotte had not only recognized him as the neighborhood's de facto leader, but had addressed him as such. Impressed by such a rare greeting from a native, Lee offered Charlotte his hand with effusive enthusiasm.

“Miss Tam tells me she hired you to investigate Mr. Keane's disappearance,” Mr. Lee said, ushering us into a small parlor room.

“Indeed,” Charlotte concurred.

I ushered Miss Tam to a settee, knowing what was about to transpire. Acknowledged as Mr. Lee's equal, Charlotte had to join him on a pair of Oriental chairs. Perhaps that was for the best; she did much better in the ways of men's conversation. I was better suited for being at Miss Tam's side.

“I am afraid,” she continued, “that we bear bad news.”

A small, quick gasp came from Miss Tang. I offered her my hand, which she took. Mr. Lee's generous expression remained unchanged, making it easy to see why his fellow people found him so charismatic. But I also knew that Charlotte was watching him closely. No man, she was often quick to tell me, was so poker-faced that he would not betray something of his inner thoughts upon one's delivery of news, good or bad.

“It is of Mr. Keane's whereabouts?”

“It is.”

Oh please, dear Charlotte. Do not forget the woman sitting next to me, I silently begged.

Turning to us, she spoke to Miss Tam. “I am regretful to report, Miss Tam, that Mr. Keane is dead.”

I had a handkerchief at the ready and a willing arm to support our client. She needed both,

suddenly finding herself bereft of her loved one, but to her credit, strength tempered her grief, not histrionics. An admirable woman.

“How did this happen?” Mr. Lee asked. His demeanor had shifted into a barely repressed anger. Apparently, whatever the rules of Lee's Tong, Mr. Keane had earned his respect.

“Murder,” Charlotte revealed.

Miss Tam's sorrow turned to keening and she took to rocking, but even here she was quiet. I have seen many a woman keen but I had never seen anyone so remarkably controlled.

“I do not know where he met his demise but I can tell you this: He was pithed and his body dumped behind a Pell Street opium joint.”

“Pithed?” Mr. Lee cried. “A tuggie's method, but they shall blame us all the same!”

His anger turned to seething, but Charlotte was quick to add, “Not just a thug's method in India, but a butcher's too, Mr. Lee, and butchers are far more common in this city than Hindoos.” She looked him square in the eye. “I can assure you that his death was not at the hands of a Chinaman, and I will swear to it in court.”

Mr. Lee returned her gaze, his eyes narrowed to mere slits. But even there, one could see his power and anger. “You *know* who did this.”

“I *suspect*,” Charlotte corrected. “Give me until tomorrow to confirm my suspicions, Mr. Lee. Please.” She settled her gaze on Miss Tam, her eyes full of a compassion rare and splendid.

The mayor of Chinatown considered Charlotte's request. Would he accept a woman's request or seize control of the matter and shut us out? Such was always the likelihood, no matter who we dealt with, given the male prerogative of our times—and of his culture. But Mr. Lee sensed our continued involvement might be a valuable comfort to another woman.

“I give you until tomorrow evening,” he concluded. “We will convene here at dusk.”

Charlotte rose, as did he, and bowed. “Thank you, Mr. Lee. May I kindly ask what traditions we must now follow?”

“I shall accompany you to Bellevue for the identification,” he said. “I will see to it that Miss Tam will have the company of women to help her in her sorrow.”

“No!”

Miss Tam shot to her feet, all fury and refusal. “You will not cloister me yet, Mr. Lee. I will see my husband's body and I will make the identification!”

The secret set loose, Mr. Lee seethed for a moment, then collected himself and bowed to Miss Tam, acceding to her demand. Charlotte raised a curious and telling eyebrow and glanced at me. So, she was right about their marriage. But Mr. Lee's change in temper said something more: that he held both Miss Tam and Mr. Keane in high accord. Why, we did not know. But we hoped the mayor of Chinatown would divulge the answer on the long ride uptown to Bellevue's morgue.

Our train had barely left Chatham Square when, forgoing any lady-like decorum, Charlotte launched straightaway into questioning Mr. Lee.

“Why is it, Mr. Lee, that you hold the late Mr. Keane in such regard?”

I swear, Charlotte had all the grace of a bull in a china shop when she was in a fact-gathering frame of mind. But from the corner of my eye, I spied Miss Tam smiling from under her demurely bowed head, and a short laugh broke from Mr. Lee, who grinned and wagged a finger at Charlotte. It seemed he enjoyed Charlotte's boldness. Once again, she knew better than I how to curry favor among people little known to us.

But when he answered Charlotte, he did so in complete seriousness. “Mr. Keane, he never turns us away. We have sickness, he heals it. We need the sick bed, he provides it. Other people?

Other hospitals? They turn us away.”

“So he earned your esteem by caring for your people.”

Lee nodded. “He is learned. Patient and wise in ways I never can be.”

At this, Miss Tam again smiled discreetly.

“I suppose,” Charlotte ventured, “he ran afoul of his own kind then.”

Mr. Lee scowled. Had we been in a less conspicuous place, he would have spat at the floor in disgust. “The Irish? They call us *haythens*. They hate us, probably Mr. Keane, too.”

Prejudice towards the Celestials, those who came to our shores from the Far East, had escalated of late. Newspapers celebrated the recent evictions of scores of Chinese from a tenement that faced the Irish-Catholic Church of Transfiguration. And talk had it that President Arthur would approve the exclusion act that Hayes had vetoed.

“Too much of America rises against your people,” Charlotte said.

Lee grunted but said nothing.

“I am glad,” she continued, “that we had the likes of Mr. Keane doing right where no others would.”

Lee stared at her then, hard and implacable. “And will you do right by us, Miss Olms?”

Charlotte nodded. “Indeed I will, Mr. Lee. Indeed I will.”

I had no doubt that Charlotte's convictions would prevail, but I worried about the consequences we might incur in the pursuit.

We concluded our grim duty by mid-day, took leave of Mr. Lee and our client, and made our way to Grand and Vestry streets where we boarded the 23rd Street horse-car. My mind tumbled with all the information we had accumulated this day and however much I strove to sort through it, I knew Charlotte already had everything in its place. Indeed, she confirmed as much when she began to quiz me about what I had observed this day.

“Tell me, Joanna, what you thought of our Mr. Soames?” She waxed expansively as she posed her question, a kind of flourish that meant we would see which of us had best observed the matters at hand.

“He is no more a murderer than I am an East River eel,” I answered.

“And why do you say that?”

“His hands. Not a callous on them. Nails trim, cuticles neat, skin well-tended.”

“He does enjoy a good manicure,” she agreed. “But fine hands alone do not preclude one from committing murder.”

“No indeed. But Soames likes his creature comforts. He is a hedonist—a well-disciplined one, avoiding sloth, gluttony, and other deadly sins—but a hedonist all the same. The consequences of killing a man would deny him the very things he savors; therefore, he would do nothing to endanger himself in that regard.”

“Excellent,” Charlotte said. “And...?”

“And no matter how gruff a man he might be,” I continued. “No matter how necessary the almighty dollar is to his happiness, he genuinely respected Mr. Keane.”

“And how did you arrive at that conclusion?”

“He ignored his steak—a *Delmonico* steak.” I said with emphasis. But I paused, perplexed. “But one thing I could not determine?”

“Yes?” Charlotte leaned forward, her face bright at the prospect of a question.

“What was that pin he wore upon his lapel? I saw it but I could not make out its details.”

“Aha!” she shouted, slapping her knee. She had the answer and was about to take great pleasure and the lead in this little game of ours. “A veteran's pin, from the war,” she answered. “Our Mr. Soames was a Union army surgeon.”

I returned an aha of my own, one with much less enthusiasm for I would only tie the game if I could think quickly. “Hence, his grizzled appearance,” I decided. “The war made him old.” And then, a flash of realization! “And, tired of the blood and gore of death, he returned home, ready to relish an uncomplicated life among the living.”

“Well done!” The game was tied. “But what of the mayor of Chinatown?”

Confident now, I sniffed at her question, easy to answer after evaluating Soames. “Would a man on the rise jeopardize his newly found standing? I think not. Besides—”

“Yes?” Charlotte was all ears.

“He had an even more profound respect for our victim. And he knew of Miss Tam and Mr. Keane's marriage. He did not appreciate her making public voice of it, but he essentially did not object to the marriage itself.”

“Indeed,” Charlotte agreed. “I admit my initial assumption was incorrect. Keane was not killed over the fact of his marriage. But the why of the matter as yet eludes me.”

She reached into her reticule and drew something from it. “Perhaps tonight's effort will point me in the right direction.” She opened her hand, and there in its palm sat that wooden trinket of a misshaped owl.

If I found Charlotte's forward approach with Mr. Lee an affront in the morning, what she did come evening very nearly panicked me. We returned home for a quick washing-up, a meat sandwich, and much-needed tea when Charlotte advised me to dress for the evening.

In a manner “not quite the station you prefer to project, please.”

Mr. East, pouring out for me, glanced across the table, expectantly.

“Yes, you too, Mr. East,” Charlotte said and nodded. “Dress like the swain that you are, slumming for a good time.”

He nodded back, grinning. “A beau-trap it is then.”

I sighed. Another of Charlotte's risky charades awaited us, but I would make myself as attractive as Mr. East would handsome. When we reconvened in the parlor, not only had Mr. East donned his best evening wear but Charlotte had as well. Dressed in a man's sack suit, her hair shaped into a man's fashion, and—ever the chameleon, my Charlotte—a suitably fashionable mustache perfectly positioned over her lip, she was a swain worth a woman's long, delirious glance.

I, however, was not about to look the shabby consort on Charlotte's fine arm. I had selected the latest ladies' fashion, a choice that Charlotte had not yet seen on me—but one I knew would earn me an approving eye. My dress sported a bodice of black lace against an ecru ground, smartly tailored to the waist. Its décolletage scooped low upon the chest, edged in an inch-wide royal blue satin which met in a bow between my breasts, perfect for accentuating a necklace of precious stones. Suspicious of our outing, however, I wore paste jewelry made to mimic pearls and sapphires. Should a thief rip it from my neck, I would not miss it.

Already Charlotte studied me, her smile a thinly suppressed expression of desire. I was not, however, exempt from the power of her scrutiny; I shivered as her eyes scanned me, taking in not only the dress' bodice but its tight sleeves which fell below the elbow, ending in satin bows, exposing both a portion of my forearms and, in their entirety, my wrists—wrists which served to

remind one of their leggy, almost hidden counterpart.

Its narrow skirt hugged my hips and thighs in ruffled layers of stain of the same royal blue, and while its length respectably hid my ankles, it did so in a way the suggested a slip of the ankle was always a possibility.

When Charlotte's eyes rested there, she was positively leering at me. Mr. East politely looked away, but when Charlotte commented, "It's as if the hoop skirt had never existed," Mr. East muttered "indeed," leaving me blushing and pleased.

Dusk was but an hour away when we set foot in the Bowery, Charlotte and Mr. East as young sporting men and I as their evening consort. They boasted between themselves, jocular knaves filled with swagger and braggadocio, and I could barely muster the courage to be seen with them.

Until Charlotte leaned into me and brushed her mustache against my cheek. "Come now," she urged, "We rabbit suckers need a bleak moll at our side."

Good lord, she was using slang. In public.

At least she used it to call me handsome. And I rather liked the feel of that mustache against my skin.

Nearing the intersection of Bowery and Bayard Street, I trembled. First, because we were only a block away from the scene of the recent evictions. And again because, more potently, I realized where Charlotte was taking us.

We were heading to the single most dangerous spot in the city. The Morgue saloon, home to the violent Whyos. I stopped in my tracks like a mule turned stubborn, nearly blind with fear—until I felt Charlotte's sure hand at the small of my back. She employed that touch for but two purposes: to encourage me into her bed, and to assure me that she knew what she was doing.

"Have no worry," she whispered. "We need not cross its accursed threshold."

We went no further than the street corner, where Charlotte approached a man sitting on a flimsy stool, hunched over his whittling. A ratty and nearly shapeless hat barely hid a neglected shock of orange hair. His right leg stretched out awkwardly before him and a cane sat propped against a building wall. If he was a Whyo lookout, then he was doing a poor job of it, giving more of his attention to his knife and wood than to the street traffic.

"Red Boone!" Charlotte called out, her tenor deep and as tough as the neighborhood that surrounded us.

I nearly gasped when the man looked up. Staring back at us, eyes mean and violent, was a face disfigured. A vicious scar ran from his cheek to his bulldog chin, leaving his lips contorted in a permanent sneer. I tried to keep my wits about me for this man—one Hugo "Twisted" Boone, once famous for brawling no matter what injury resulted—would as soon sink a knife into you than say hello. A noted brawler among the underworld, he had slugged his way through countless fights until rivals threw him under a moving hauler where both hooves and wheels left him maimed.

But Charlotte had addressed him in a respectable manner, minimizing our chances of incurring his savage temper, and Mr. East and I stood a pace behind her so as not to crowd Boone. One could take no chances on Whyo territory.

Boone stopped his whittling and held his knife at the ready. "What do you snots want with me?" he challenged.

"I believe I have something of yours," Charlotte answered. "Something your skilled fams produced."

Boone's eyes narrowed, skeptical of her claim. But when she pulled the owl trinket from her pocket and revealed it, they widened. "Where'd you get that?" he demanded.

"In a back alley. Behind Mott Street. Surely you know it. It's one of Lee's buildings. Where the brawl occurred earlier this week."

"I ain't party to no brawling," he scoffed. "You can see so plain as day. So why tumble me?"

"I don't suspect you, Red. But I know your handiwork and its trademarks. So who do you disdain so much that you'd gift him with a big-headed owl? Someone new to the Whyos no doubt—someone too smart for his own good?"

"That careless pickle!" Busting into a sudden fury, Red closed his penny knife, shoved it into his pants, grabbed his cane, and struggled to his feet. "I'll tune that toney! Coming here, claiming he was as good as a crokus!"

Snatching the crude carving from Charlotte and pushing her out of his way, Boone limped off, his gait as contorted as his face, blasting vulgarities at the top of his lungs. My eyes on Charlotte, I knew she had found what she had come here for—and that it was not exactly what she expected. She threw her hands into the air, exasperated with herself and cried, "Damn, but I've been blind as a mole!"

Without a word to us, she took off, heading back towards Chinatown. But the hour was far too late for seemly women to step foot there, and I begged Charlotte to forgo her haste and let us find our way home. "Please," I pleaded. "Let it wait for another day."

We were only able to dissuade Charlotte when a brawl spilled from a tavern and Mr. East had to pull me out of its path. With me in his arms and a chiding "Please, Miss Olms," he broke the spell that held Charlotte. We headed home.

I fell asleep that weary night to the sound of Charlotte pacing the floor of her own room, prisoner to both propriety and propensity, the latter of her own relentless doing. This night, I was too spent to pacify her. She would have to calm herself.

Boone nursed his brew and watched the tavern door, his mood a rage on its way to a slow boil. That new one—the Pither, they were calling him. The pam, he called him. *Fool*. For losing that trinket and attracting a prying peeping tom. *When he arrives, I'll polt him one.*

Nearby, McGloin and his roughs sat, all raucous laughter and heedless of any trouble coming their way. He made sure to claim a table near them, scowling at anyone who attempted to move on his spot or make merry with him. It did not take long for other to learn to leave him well enough alone. Exactly as he wanted it. Boone did not know how his accusation would go down, but he was not going to let some vaunter put his gang at risk.

I'll make sure the chief knows.

He nursed his beers and kept them to a minimum, wanting to keep his wits about him. He needed nothing to nurse his wrath, however. His heart was all ire, primed to ignite and rarely ever in cinders, and when he fixed his sights on a goal, that ire fed his patience. It had worked well in the brawls on the floor and in the streets when he was a younger man and even better in the boxing ring where both a well-placed hard slug and, when that failed, endurance mattered. They hadn't called him twisted then and he did not care that they did now, for twisted he was, in mind and body.

Finally, the fool and his men found their way into The Morgue. Boone's throat suddenly felt the want of a good whiskey's burn, but he had never needed a slug before a fight and he would not rely on one now. McGloin motioned to his new comrade to his table and, as Boone expected,

he came forward, leaving his men to sidled up to the bar for the start of their evening's entertainment. The young man tipped his hat as he approached McGloin, then stumbled suddenly as he passed Boone.

Not so gnostic a cove, are you? Boone thought, amused.

Sputtering surprise, his opponent righted himself and spied Boone's cane in the process. McGloin saw it too.

“What do you mean by this, Boone? Picking on my man that way?” His voice gruff, annoyed, he demanded Boone account for himself.

“Your new man ain't the gnostic you think he is.”

McGloin narrowed his gaze at Boone, his glare intense and unforgiving. His new man not smart? Boone would have to prove it, and good. “Explain yourself.”

Boone awkwardly shifted to one side, stretching his bum leg, reached into his coat pocket and pulled out the owl figurine. McGloin's expression did not change, but his new man stiffened at the sight of it. “So he ditched the insult you handed him,” McGloin. “He's not the first man to do so and he won't be last, Boone. You ain't exactly Mister Bene Cull around here.”

“Maybe so, but I've never lied to you, chief. I've always done well by you.”

McGloin's expression did not waiver but for a sliver of hardness, one that said McGloin trusted him enough to consider what he had to say. “So tell me.”

“Your boy there did not toss the figurine. He lost it. Behind Mott Street.”

McGloin sat back in his chair, laughing. “And what were you doing, tailing his type?”

“I weren't tailing him, boss. Couple of smoky swells come to me while I was at guard, telling me they knew it was my work. That, and where they found it.”

“I say again: so?”

“They said they was looking into the man's dustin'. Like they was investigatin'. They were ready to ask all kinds of questions but I pitched a fit and scrambled out of it.”

McGloin stiffened and shot his again hard glare to his new man. “Keane, you careless idiot.”

The young Keane paled. His solid ground had just turned to muck and mire.

Charlotte did not emerge from her quarters until afternoon tea was nearly upon us, still dressed for subterfuge. She waved off Mr. East, refusing all sustenance, and made straight away to complete the errand we had forced her to stall last night. Once again, I found myself chasing after her and, soon enough, we entered the celestial ground of Chinatown yet again.

Here, both sidewalk and roadway saw the footfall of its people, men who cared not where they walked. They bustled not alongside one another but in single file, their conversations animated and queer to our ears. And if these men, whether eager for an exciting night in a gaming parlor or for a more leisurely time in an opium den, were not sight and sound enough, the pervasively exotic smell of the neighborhood was keen this evening. Yes, it carried with it the scent of the opium pipe at work, but far more: cigars and tobacco, dried fish and vegetables, and countless things unknown to us and unidentifiable. Chinatown was brisk this night.

We found the dispensary well-guarded upon our return. Two young Chinamen squatted on the stoop, rising at our approach. They stepped before us, blocking our way, and resisted Mr. East's bolder attempt to climb the dispensary's steps. Begging the names of Mr. Lee and Miss Tam did us no good and, loathe to draw attention from passersby least it accelerate discord, we stepped back and relented.

Charlotte attempted to introduce herself, but her name only made one of them glare at me

and scrutinize me from head to toe.

“You are Olms?” he said in halting English.

“No,” I answered. “She is.” I pointed to Charlotte before I realized my mistake.

The man's glare took on an infuriated look, certain that trickery was at work, but Charlotte's determination to enter the house saved me. She pulled her hat from her head, revealing hair severely pinned and pomaded into place, and she pulled her mustache from her face.

“I am Charlotte Olms,” she said. “We are obligated to speak with Miss Tam about her late husband's death.”

The men looked at one another, astonished and wondering what to do next.

“If Mr. Lee wants no one to enter the house without him present, then I suggest you fetch him,” she suggested.

Charlotte stood firm and I knew we would not leave the premises without seeing Miss Tam. The English-speaking Chinaman shouted in rapid Cantonese, not to his companion but to men on the street. Several turned to him and two of them ran off toward Mott Street. We had been surrounded, and although I had not noticed, Charlotte nodded to herself in self-approving gratification.

“Wait here,” we were instructed. The guards returned to their squatting and kept half an eye on us.

“Pray tell, how did you know Lee's men would be here?” I whispered to Charlotte.

I cannot say I was always one for the chase—Charlotte did, after all, take us to far too many places where no woman of our station should be and put us in far too many precarious situations. But she always knew her surroundings and its people, and how she deduced such things often escaped me. I can say with some certainty that she knew of Boone from the penny press. Such publications were as florid as they were lurid and often portrayed men like Boone as heroes instead of thugs.

“I did not know,” Charlotte answered with a thin smug smile. “Odds were Mr. Lee would have the dispensary—and Miss Tam—under watch.”

“Odds? My dear Charlotte, whenever did you begin to rely on odds?”

She grinned. “When logic supports them, my dear Joanna.”

One of the messengers returned, speaking to the guard faster than a chattering songbird. Our English-speaking guard told us to follow the man, that he would take us to the mayor of Chinatown, and we shortly found ourselves welcomed into Mr. Lee's domain on the third floor of a Mott Street building.

The mercurial Mr. Lee greeted us, standing before a squat table laden with dishes steaming with foods—Mr. Lee's hospitality, a sign that we had, at least for the moment, maintained his trust and respect. Encouraged to partake, we followed his lead as he taught us his method of eating, with *kuaizi*—chopsticks, he was quick to point out. Ours was not an easy task and, except for Mr. East who was surprisingly adept, we ate about as gracefully as pigs at a trough. However, the food was excellent, the company delighted by our adventurous appetites, and a shared mirth emerged with guests and host and servants alike laughing at our neophyte skill.

“Mr. Lee,” Charlotte said, savoring a sip of tea, “Such cuisine! You should make a restaurant of it.”

Our host waxed thoughtful for a moment and then said, “Ah, Miss Olms, there are too few like you and your friends. Your people are not ready to guest among mine.” Then, a mercurial twinkle alit in his eyes and he wagged a finger. “But someday...”

“A day I will much look forward to, Mr. Lee.” Charlotte set aside her cup, ready to address

the matter that brought us here. Mr. East and I followed suit, knowing that our conformity would reflect our respect for Charlotte's leadership in a way Mr. Lee would recognize.

"Mr. Lee," she continued. "Would you extend me the courtesy of speaking to Miss Tam yet again? I assured you, I cannot solve this matter without her for she holds the last pieces to this dreadful puzzle."

The mayor of Chinatown had, it was obvious, taken the matter of Mr. Keane's death from Miss Tam's hands. How much of it was cultural and how much of it was power brokering remained to be seen. But one thing was clear: Charlotte would not solve this case without Miss Tam, and we would not that input obtain without Mr. Lee's consent.

Mr. Lee nodded. "I have given Miss Tam my word that she may continue to consult with you." He dismissed all but one servant from our presence, a woman who responded to an order barked in Cantonese. Charlotte raised an eyebrow at that for it more than suggested Miss Tam was about to lead at secluded life.

"I take it Miss Tam is to find a new husband?" she ventured tactfully.

Lee nodded. "I assure you she made the choice freely, and, for all she did for us at Mr. Keane's side, we intend to provide her with a husband of kindness and industry and a life of comfort."

"May I, as a woman, offer a piece of advice?"

Now I raised an eyebrow. If Lee deigned to listen to Charlotte advice, it would say much about how valuable he viewed both Charlotte's and Miss Tam's standings. In their native land Chinese women had little to count for in their own culture until the birth of a son; fortunately, their rarity on these shores greatly mitigated that failure of their culture.

"Please, Miss Olms."

"Thank you." Charlotte bowed slightly from her seat. "I have found Miss Tam to be an intelligent, capable individual. No doubt she was a perfect helpmate to Mr. Keane, and I suggest to you that she could be of great help to your people."

Mr. Lee sat poker-faced, listening but revealing nothing.

"While I understand venerable Chinese tradition and I accept Miss Tam's choice, I would encourage you to let her employ her skills and knowledge—at least among the wives of your men. She is a rare gem in more ways than just heritage, Mr. Lee."

Lee sat stone-still, betraying nothing to my eyes, for but a moment when Miss Tam entered the room. Had we not met her previously, we would not have recognized her. She came to us dressed in exquisite silks, her posture strict, her head lowered. She bowed to Mr. Lee, then to us, lingering in her acknowledgement of Charlotte. Most startling was her hair. Shaped and heavily lacquered, it no longer reflected the west but that of the east. If only we could admit to and admire the equal eloquence of both worlds, I thought, looking at her hair, we might lessen the prejudices between us.

"It seems we are both transformed, Miss Tam," Charlotte said, lifting the narrow lapel of her sack coat.

Miss Tam smiled. "It would appear so, Miss Olms."

"I believe," Charlotte continued. "That with a few answers from you and we will have solved the full circumstances of your husband's death."

At the word of the solution, Miss Tam took momentary leave of her eastern composure. "Oh, would that it be so!"

"First, let me ask: Did Mr. Keane train others in the work about the dispensary?"

"He did. He taught all his brothers pharmacy, and two women in basic nursing skills. I

learned both, of course.”

“Of course,” Charlotte agreed. “And you strike me as quite skilled.” This comment, no doubt, she used to reinforce her previous advice to Mr. Lee. “Those brothers: where are they now?”

“The brother nearest to him in age has a druggist's business in Cincinnati. The third brother left the city two years ago for fortunes in the west, both as druggist and doctor in a frontier town.”

“An admirable and adventurous family, it would seem,” Charlotte complimented. “But what of the youngest brother? What of him?”

Miss Tam froze, startled by Charlotte's supposition.

“There *is* a youngest brother,” Charlotte stated flatly and with utmost certainty. “Pray tell why you excluded him from your answer.”

Charlotte's insistence ruffled Miss Tam from her paralysis. “Not a brother, but a cousin. Defiant and utterly disappointing. A wild boy.”

“So the streets had him, regardless of his cousins' oversight?”

“Yes.”

“And it worsened as each of his relatives left for new opportunity, I imagine?”

Miss Tam visibly paled at Charlotte's litany of facts.

“Yes. Every skill Samuel taught him—”

“The boy perverted,” Charlotte concluded. “Medicines?”

“He stole them and sold on the streets,” Miss Tam confirmed.

“Simple surgeries—the cutting out of a bullet, the stitching together of a wound?”

“He witnessed the surgeries, but had no practical experience as yet.”

“And dissection?” Charlotte asked. “Did Mr. Keane teach this guttersnipe dissection techniques?”

Suddenly, Miss Tam paled and slowly nodded. “To understand the internal organs—he watched my husband pith the animals! Oh dear God, Phillip did this!”

We raced to her side, catching her as composure failed her and led her to Charlotte's seat. Resting her there and seeing that she had not fainted, Charlotte stayed standing while I tended to Miss Tam.

“Yes,” Charlotte confirmed. “The young Phillip Keane did this deadly deed. He wanted in.”

“In?” Mr. Lee asked. “Into what?”

“The Whyos,” Charlotte revealed. “No doubt you are aware of the gang's initiation requirement?”

Mr. Lee scowled. “The killing of another. But why are the Whyos involved?”

Charlotte shook her head. “They aren't, except by way of their rules. Young Keane was angling to join them.”

“The owl figurine!” I said.

Charlotte explained the carving to our hosts and its meaning. “Found where Mr. Keane's body was dumped. The Whyos are known for owl and bird calls to alert one another. One of their lookouts carved it but in caricature, its proportion distorted by an oversized head.”

“Phillip to a tee,” Miss Tam spat in disgust.

Good, I thought, anger will serve her better than the melancholy of sorrow.

“According to its carver, he posed as an able doctor to the gang, but he wasn't taken seriously. I suspect they demanded he fulfill their initiation rule but the coward couldn't put himself in the middle of one of their famous skirmishes. He wanted an easy and sure killing.”

“But why his cousin?” Mr. Lee asked. “Why such a good man?”

“That I have yet to discover,” Charlotte admitted.

“No!” Miss Tam interrupted.

Lee glowered at her, but for no other reason than she asserted herself with a word that no subservient Chinese woman would employ. A thin smile crept across Charlotte's face. Miss Tam's future husband had better be a patient and worldly man.

“I know,” she continued. “Samuel was going to set Phillip right. He was going to send him to his brother in Ohio.”

“And Phillip refused and took to the streets,” Charlotte concluded.

“Yes.” Again, the young widow weakened. “Oh but I never thought it could come to this. Not once. Not even after Samuel's death!”

Charlotte went to Miss Tam, knelt before her, and took her hands into her own. “And yet it has.”

“And now it is solved,” I added.

“I assure you, Miss Tam, murders and maiming happen all the time throughout the city and many go unsolved or—worse—ignored,” Charlotte pointed out. “At least you have the full truth of the matter for too many souls in our great metropolis do not.”

A fine answer, made by the extraordinary Charlotte Olms. As we took our leave of Miss Tam, certain we would not likely see her again, we hoped she would find strength in surviving this ordeal and finding reward in a new life after the fine Mr. Keane.

By the time we concluded all business and set foot in our home, the night was late and I was tired. I would have gladly given myself over to sleep but for one thing: Charlotte's hand at the small of my back. Triumphant, she wanted to celebrate. And my body instantly mesmerized by her touch, I could hardly refuse. I let her steer me to her bedroom.

At its door, she reached around me for its knob, her breath full upon my neck. I remembered the feel of her flesh between my teeth and shivering, wondering if I would feel the same tonight. The door open, Charlotte steered me over its threshold and into the room's dark, unlit interior. Its heavy curtains were drawn tight but for one slit of light where a window was left ajar a precious half an inch. Charlotte liked a sliver of circulating air while she slept. Muffled sounds from the street crept through that opening, and I detected lavender in that slight breeze—Charlotte's eau de toilette, a scent neither wholly feminine nor wholly masculine. A scent wholly captivating to me.

She took me by both hands and drew me first to the edge of her bed and then into her arms. Her lips fell upon mine with a ravenous intent, and her tongue forced its way forward, seizing me and demanding my capitulation. I did not resist—could not, for I wanted Charlotte and everything she would impose on me.

Her hands went to my hair, found each pin buried there, and freed each coil my maid had so carefully place there. In no time, Charlotte had demolished that fair coiffure, leaving my tresses cascading down my back.

“I ached to do this ever since she braided your hair two nights ago,” she murmured.

Knowing she had studied my hair all day for just this moment made me moan, and when her fingers ran through its strands and grasped close to my scalp, I trembled. *Yes, take me*, I silently begged. Her other hand came to my jaw, fingers spread along my neck, her thumb firmly against my cheek. I felt suspended, hanging between the pain of yearning and the promise of relief. Charlotte renewed her kiss, this time slowly, nuanced, as if she wanted to pinch every little

reaction she could from me. Yes, that was it—she was a thief, stealing away my passion.

Her hand traveled, first to the hollow my neck, her index finger resting there for but a moment before all her fingers splayed across skin bared by my décolletage.

“I adore how this dress displays you,” she whispered. “All flesh and curves.”

The thief stole away at the buttons on my bodice jacket then, deft and quick. This too she had studied all day. Again I trembled. Charlotte knew exactly how to arouse me. But when she tried to remove the jacket, the rigors of fashion momentarily bested her. Its tight three-quarter length sleeves forced her to pull me free sleeve by sleeve.

“Just remember how much you like to see my wrists in public,” I reminded her.

When she finally tossed aside the jacket, she renewed her expert pace and swept behind me with a dancer's finesse. She ran a finger down my back, tickling me at the neck and along my spine until she met my corset. I expected her hands there—nearly heaved in anticipation of them—but, no! She went for my skirt buttons instead. Deflated, I uttered a small cry of disappointment.

But then I had the small satisfaction of hearing Charlotte curse the hug of my skirt. It would simply fall from my hips and pile at my feet. No, fashion did not work as well in real life as it does in pornography; she had to help me step from its stiff satin layers.

“Thank God you forgo the crinoline,” she muttered.

Thank God, yes, but I was also thankful that my skirt forced her to renew her seduction all over again. One arm wrapped itself around my waist, hugging me to her, while the other swept my hair away from my neck. Her lips fell upon me then, first preying upon my ticklishness, then pressing harder and evoking an intense mix of ticklish pleasure and pain. My cunt clenched at the racking sensation, and I could not help but succumb.

I wilted in Charlotte's arms, my body against hers, helpless against her. And just as she pressed back against me, I started. Something of bulk pressed against me as well.

She pushed me away before I could react, her hands at my corset's laces. Well practiced, she liberated me from my confines but before I could enjoy two unencumbered breaths, she was before me, unhooking its busk.

I loved how she tossed it aside, how such a minor victory was so paramount to her, but I knew why she loved conquering my captivity. Hungry for my breasts, she pulled them free of my camisole and, hands like claws, she kneaded their full, fleshy meat. Her breath hastened then, sounding almost monstrous and predatory, before she latched onto my hard waiting nipples and rolled them between her fingers. Breast slapping flashed in my hopeful mind and spilled to my lips before I could stop myself.

“Slap them,” I begged. “Oh, make them hurt.”

A leering laugh answered me, and a sharp, burning slap followed, hitting the full side of one breast. I gasped and arched my back, jutting my breasts forward for sacrifice. The next slap grazed a nipple; the third, the other breast. Pain seared them as they undulated under repeated impacts. Pain shot through me as Charlotte grasped and twisted my nipples. Pain made my cunt grow wet, awoke its hunger. I surrendered, willing to take as much as Charlotte cared to give.

She stopped, pushed me back two steps, and fetched a more vigorous and vicious tool. This, she snapped in the air and a familiar, clipped swoosh sounded. A cane—it was a thin, cruel cane. My cunt tightened, and then throbbed, and slickness suddenly coated my delta. Yes, I wanted the sting of the cane. My body ached for it. I clasped my hands behind my back and jutted my breasts out yet again.

Charlotte laughed again, pleased that my own lust had overpowered me, and I was certain

she would strike quick and cruelly. But no: she decided on a different kind of cruelty. She *teased* me with it.

She tapped lightly over my breasts, traveling its tip over the swell of each breast, around its fullness, then to each nipple. Each tap was like a single step in a larger dance, and my breasts, the cane's partner. But this was neither waltz nor dance hall craze. No, this was a seduction, one that followed the moves and tempos of my body. Heaving, my breasts reflected how wanting I was. My squeals and cries begged for passion made complete. Sweat beaded and dripped, making my camisole cling to my torso. Through it all, Charlotte merely laughed and kept at me.

Until she came around behind me again and cupped me hard between the legs. Her sudden groping made me lurch and cry out. Small gasps followed for I realized just how sodden my drawers had become.

“You want it.” The statement was obvious, but the tone leering, implicating me as a wanton. I was. “Yes,” I admitted in a gasping pant.

Charlotte dug into me with her fingers, and I rubbed myself against her irresistible clutch. I could stand it not. I wanted to reach for the heavens, then plunge into a climax strong enough to rob me of my senses.

Charlotte would have none of it. She pulled her hand from me—disappointment bellowing from me—and forced me to my knees. My face before her, she pulled me by the back of the head to her hips. And there it was again: that stiffness, mashed against my face.

Charlotte ground it against me, muttering such filth that fresh wetness poured from me. I felt one hand leave my head for the buttons on her pants, there to free the prosthetic inside. Despite my vision blurred from rough handling, I beheld a fine replica of a man's cock, veined and bulging. Its thickness was far more impressive than its length, meant more for accessory purposes than an implement of sexual endeavor. But it belonged to Charlotte, and I lusted after it.

“You know what this means, don't you?”

I nodded, pulling back and staring straight at the thing. We had played this game before and I had loved it.

“And you know what you'll get?”

“Yes.”

She pulled me towards it again and I approached it with a willing mouth. Saliva pooled in my mouth, mimicking the wetness between my legs and a flash of thought overtook me: Charlotte atop me, pummeling me like a man does a woman. I shoved that thought aside, wanting only to concentrate on the cock in my mouth.

Too late! A hard throb clenched within me—my all-knowing cunt, restless and ever hungry.

I slid my lips over Charlotte's cock, took it into my mouth, and began traveling its length. But I was dainty in my effort, too tentative, and not aggressive enough to please Charlotte. Her hands grasping my face, she held me in place and took over. She pumped my mouth hard and fast, so fast that I could not hold onto her cock. It became as slippery as an eel, wanting only to invade my mouth, to drive its short, fat self into me. I was a hole—its hole—and the longer it pounded into me, the less strength I had to withstand it. In no time, Charlotte reduced me to a drooling, slack-jawed dullard, existing only to cater to her driving cock.

“You whore for it,” she insisted. “Gutter slut.”

This, too, was part of the game, and this I loved as well.

Squelching noises issued from my mouth hole, the conquering sounds of a mighty cock taking every inch of me. Yes no matter how reduced I felt, my clitoris blazed with fire. If

Charlotte so much as touched it...

But no. She pulled from me and ordered me to my feet. She ran her eyes over me, leering until she reached the delta between my legs. One sight of it, and she laughed. Senses addled, I blushed under her mockery, a mockery that was all game and no true insult.

“Close your eyes,” she told me.

I did, and awaited her next move like a pawn before a master.

A sash went across my eyes, swift hands tying it from behind. Dark, I saw nothing.

But I felt everything: the knife as it snagged fabric and ripped open my camisole. Cool air, a temptress against my now exposed skin. My flesh goose pimple and my nipples hardened again. Charlotte's laugh mocked me anew.

Then the knife found new purchase and made me gasp. It lighted between my legs.

“Spread.”

I complied, hoping I gave wide enough berth for the implement to do its job. Charlotte grabbed the fabric, drawing it away from my body. It rode up between the cheeks of my rump, a pull harsh and unforgiving.

I prayed for swiftness, and swiftness I received.

She sliced into the fabric, cutting away all discretion, nakedness in its wake. Later, I would discover the hole was mere inches in width but, blindfolded and compromised, it felt like a canyon. Charlotte tossed the knife aside, its clatter sounding against wood, and in one blistering bartitsu move, she had me on my back, sprawled across the bed and knocking the breath from me. I barely caught it before she pounced, driving it from me again.

It was there, her cock, ready to make good her lusty assault. Her weight pressed hard against me, the force of her hips between my legs, she plunged into me. Helpless, I surrendered, fully and with want.

Oh how Charlotte worked her prick! Driving me, a horse before her whip. Ruthlessly, like ours was a race gone mad. Cruelly, like a driver who cared not if her steed dropped dead in the streets so long as that race was won. I bucked beneath her, my lust a wild, heedless gallop. I matched her every plunge and charged through her challenge, a horse against the bit, wild-eyed and frothing.

How long we fucked, I cannot say—long enough to become drenched in sweat, to stain the sheets with my wet puddle, to collapse under the exhausting weight of our mutual frenzy. We did not climax, did not spend, but it hardly mattered. Sometimes, the fuck is all that matters.

When Charlotte finally pulled from me and rolled over, I remained limp, uncaring, so thoroughly sated I could not imagine ever needing another fucking like this one. When she rose and opened a window, a breeze came to caress me back to my senses, and although I remained lazy and languorous, my body prickled with enough life to tell me that it would indeed demand I succumb again to Charlotte someday, sometime in the future.

Charlotte returned to me. Briefly, she caressed my breast, her gaze tender and appreciative. Then, gathering me into her arms and drawing me close, she kissed my forehead, rolled me away from her and onto my side, and curled up against me. Cradled, I gave myself over to sleep as quickly as I had surrendered to Charlotte. My dear, demanding, perspicacious Charlotte.

“What are we to do now?” I asked Charlotte as we lay abed the next morning.

“We should rise and begin our day,” she answered drowsily. Our previous night's tryst had drained the last of her agitation, leaving her calm and sated. I, on the other hand, had a few welts and bruises to delight me—and for several days to come.

But I thought of neither at this particular moment. I rolled my eyes and stated my concern. "I mean what are we to do about the younger Keane? Shouldn't we return to the police and place the matter in their hands?"

Charlotte sighed. "You saw how they treated it when we questioned them. At this point, they prefer street justice to take its course."

"Damnable men!" I swore. "What good are they?"

"In that ward? Little."

Charlotte was correct. The sixth ward was the first ward to embrace the patronage of the powerful and would probably be the last ward to let go of it. From the day Boss Tweed fed the Irish the moment they stepped foot on American soil, graft had woven itself into the fabric of that neighborhood, embracing nativist and immigrant alike. Over time, it had created and perpetuated a kind of social cohesion, but it had done so through corruption, not compassion, and I could not help but think that a good and thoughtful man like Mr. Keane was a sheep to its wolves.

"So the street will take care of its own," I spat.

"I suspect it will," Charlotte rolled onto her back and glanced at me. "The bell pull, Joanna. I must take my breakfast abed this morning."

I yanked the bell pull, taking some of my frustration out on it, then rose and slipped into my morning coat. "How is it that I am up and energetic when I was the one who suffered so thoroughly last night?"

Charlotte smirked. "Ecstasy is hardly suffering, even if the means to secure it is a bit rough going. Besides, you're atwitter because you've faced injustice before your morning repast." She patted her mattress. "Come back to bed. Allow yourself a moment's peace, won't you?"

I huffed at her. "Atwitter? I do not go all atwitter."

Charlotte chuckled at me as a knock at the door answered Charlotte's call. I glared at Charlotte, and then opened the door for Mr. East. He entered with a bountiful meal for two and set it at Charlotte's window table. I went to the table and did not wait for Mr. East to serve me. Charlotte remained in bed and allowed breakfast to come to her.

"My dear Joanna," she said as Mr. East lay breakfast in her lap. "I understand your frustration. That a man as good and respectable as Mr. Keane should fall prey to the sordidness of this city is an insult to the very notion of civilization. That we should be robbed of such valuable and valued work is heinous. But remember what I told you when you sought to join me in my detective's endeavor?"

"We would often be in the underbelly of the beast," I answered. I remembered too well her words, that day we met for luncheon and discussed her work and her need of me at her side. "We would be called upon to muck about in the squalor and squabble of the city."

"And that we must be pragmatic," she added. "We should never expect to be judge and jury or jailor, only the hound dog that finds the offender."

I sighed, resigned to this truth. "I have yet to learn such a skill, I'm afraid."

"Joanna! Stop being disparaging!" Charlotte scolded. "You are coming along nicely. Why a month ago, you would've found Mr. Soames a selfish confusion, and you would've completely missed his lapel pin. And your take on Mr. Lee? A bull's-eye there!"

I smiled weakly. I had made progress under Charlotte tutelage, or at least my mind had. My heart had yet to follow suit.

"We cannot always deliver justice as we want," she reminded me, "but we can often deliver as best we can."

She was right. Social mores, whether among the hoi polloi or the riotous rabble, allowed us only so much. We are not allowed a justice for women on par with that of men, but what we could achieve for women as their detective and associate is already better than what men would deign to provide. If I kept faith in our work, I would eventually become the pragmatist Charlotte wanted. But truth be told? Watching Charlotte come awake and alive this morning, I began to think that between us, perhaps one pragmatist was enough.

Two days passed without incident, enough time for Charlotte to uncoil from the intensity of her investigation but well before inactivity drove her to more impulse habits. Although I did not want another case to fall into her lap just yet, I began to grow wary, wondering how long she would accept such relative peace. She was not one to endure boredom well.

Midday, a well-dressed young man knocked at our door, imploring Mr. East to bring us to its threshold. No amount of western clothing or grooming, nor his polite, understated demeanor, could hide the fact that he came from Mott Street, and he greeted us with salutations from Mr. Tom Lee. Behind him stood a small entourage of well-dressed Chinamen. Among them stood a coolie with a hand cart, and upon that conveyance rested a small, beautifully lacquered Chinese apothecary's chest.

"An expression of gratitude," he said, bowing, "for providing Miss Tam with peace of mind and Mr. Lee with sound advice."

I saw a quick twitch of satisfaction twitch in the corner of Charlotte's mouth. Then she bowed with aplomb. "Please convey how honored we are to receive such a generous gift from Mr. Lee."

The young emissary removed his hat and held it in his hands. "If you will have us, Miss Olms, we would like to set this gift where ever you would care to have it."

"I think..." She pondered for a moment, raising her hand to her chin and tapping her cheek, "it best go into my laboratory. Thus, I will see it and remember the esteemed mayor of Chinatown each time I endeavor to bring science to bear on the betterment of the city."

I suppressed the urge to roll my eyes at her flowery adulation. And because her laboratory was up a flight of stairs and to the back of our house, giving the men a good, sound haul every bit as taxing as the long walk from Chinatown to Madison Square.

They brought the furnishing indoors and upstairs without complaint, setting it in place according to Charlotte's whim. She insisted on giving the emissary funds to feed the workmen upon their return to Chinatown, a gesture that had the group beaming with delight and chattering in their indecipherable Cantonese, forcing the young man to shoo them along their way. Given the profuse bowing Charlotte's offer required, it took our young emissary some moments to return his men to the task of departure.

Afterwards, Charlotte retreated to her laboratory, examined the apothecary, and I soon heard her voice calling me. From its crisp, clipped call, I knew something intriguing had her attention and I found her holding a pale jade pendant. Carved upon its exquisite white stone: a snake wrapped around a terrapin, both in profile. Apparently, Miss Tam felt we had been crucial to her fate.

"Another gift, I see," I commented.

"Indeed," she answered. "From Miss Tam herself."

I sighed. "What an admirable woman. I wonder what will happen to her."

Charlotte sighed, too. "It is a shame that, without her American husband and the different path he offered her, she must step into seclusion."

“Indeed,” I agreed. “All that talent, that skill. Wasted behind the closed doors of a pampered life.”

“Pampered, yes, but likely not wasted,” Charlotte countered. Her voice held a kind of certainty—the kind born of clues pieced into a narrative.

“Pray, tell.”

“Did you not notice? First, the emissary thanked me for the advice I rendered to Mr. Lee. And what advice was that? Not to waste Miss Tam's talents.”

“But that cannot be all,” I followed.

“Indeed not.” Charlotte crooked her finger, telling me to follow her, and we returned to her laboratory where she pointed to the chest. “See here? Inlaid upon the chest? What do you see?”

I looked closely at the chest's flat-surfaced top. There, inlaid in various woods from the Far East was the image of two women, one offering another libation. One who appeared strong and giving while her recipient laid prone and, it could be interpreted, ailing.

So Miss Tam would have certain freedoms.

“How satisfying,” I murmured.

“How indeed,” Charlotte agreed.

But the image chest had caught more than just my eye—a certain smell caught my nose as well. “Whatever is that?” I asked, wrinkling my nose and trying not to breathe deeply.

“Fresh lacquer and glue,” Charlotte answered. “It will dissipate. Mr. Lee must have had the original top of the chest removed and had a new one tooled just for us. See the sides of the chest? Floral images, quite common to such pieces. And the hand-painted seals surround the brass handle of each drawer? A likewise common motif, that of longevity seal.”

Charlotte ran her hand over the top of the chest, her gazing admiring and her expression set in firm satisfaction. While gratitude was easy to come by in the city, *genuine* gratitude—the kind that came without quid pro quo or any sense of future obligation—was far more elusive. We had earned the latter from Mr. Lee and, by way of a jade pendant, that of unfailingly sincere Miss Tam. We had, it seemed, secured justice for her after all, just as Charlotte had expected.

McGloin glowered at the messenger, detesting the orders delivered to him. Not that the youth knew what news he carried, but McGloin had no one else to scowl at. *Damnable politics. Give me brawling and thievery any day.* But he'd have to comply. That, or the Whyos would lose the largesse of Tammany Hall.

He crumpled the paper, tossed it onto his plate, and set a match to it. “Tell ‘im I'll see to it.” The messenger nodded and left without a word. *Boone always said he was too big for his britches,* McGloin thought. The man's face might be mangled and twisted, but he rarely read a man wrong. And when a fixer told you that you had a problem, you damn well act on it.

“Oatsey! Dutch!” he growled. “Fetch Meg the Cat. I don't care if you have to drag her out of bed and naked through the streets—get her here.”

He was not a happy man to learn that Tammany Hall now courted Chinamen, but the Society had enfranchised the Irish and every other immigrant group to set foot in the city, so why not the Chinese? They had as much money as any of their neighbors, what with their kind coming into the city from Long Island and New Jersey almost nightly for FanTan, Mah Jong, and other gambling opportunities. Even if the Chinese started as a scourge, once they were monied, Tammany sought to pocket them. And pocket them, they had, declaring the celestial people as one of their own—and demanding the Whyos make amends for a certain wrong done them.

Not like we have a problem with them, McGloin told himself. Sure, Irish Catholics

complained about the Chinese crowds so close to their Church of Transfiguration, but the press had exaggerated those claims. The residents of both Bowery and Mott streets knew the Moravian Society owned the tenements and had evicted the Chinese. *The Irish, my foot. It had nothing to do with us.* He'd requested a rectifying of that perception, telling the fixer the Whyos would take the blame for Keane's death and clean up its mess, but the Irish would not take the blame for other's doings. A curt nod told him he had Tammany's ear on that one.

Oatsey and Dutch returned, practically dragging a fuming Meg the Cat to McGloin. Apparently, they had interrupted business—good business if her cussing was any indication. She pulled her arm free of Dutch's ham-handed grip, brush her wild hair from her eyes, and glared McGloin. She did not, however, cuss his birthright as she had his lackeys.

“Meg,” he said, leaning back in his chair. “I'm afraid it's time to say your goodbyes to your beau. Give him one last night of your pleasures, then close your eyes, ears, and especially your mouth.”

Meg bristled—it wasn't the first time McGloin had made such a demand of her—but rarely had he ever interrupted business to tell her so. “You had to take me from my doings to tell me that?” she complained.

“Was he that important a bedding?” McGloin asked.

Without blinking, Meg named her client. McGloin raised a brow, impressed. “What'll it cost me?” he asked, already digging into his pocket. Meg named an inflated price but he shot coin her way, knowing full way that part of the fee paid for her silent loyalty. After she left, he turned to his men. “Hit him on the street,” he ordered. “Be quick and be done with it.”

In the wee hours of the morning, long before sun and songbird rose, two shots took Phillip Keane down, one through his right lung, the other to his throat. He suffocated, gurgling in his own blood, his face twisted in tortured suffering. When Miss Tam learned of his hideous death, she wondered if he had longed for the pithing blade in those last moments, but was glad that he had known no mercy.

Where our first gift-giving emissaries had provided a pleasant start to one day, a chilling one greeted us the next. I was reading by the parlor window while Charlotte rested on our settee, one arm draped over her forehead, deep in thought. At the first sound of Mr. East's approach and she bounded from her position—never let it be said that a woman's dress could slow her!—and roundly quizzed Mr. East.

“Is it here?”

Ever calm, Mr. East handed her a roughshod, dirty envelope. “I believe so, Miss Olms.”

“Good man, East,” she complimented, tearing into the paper. Spreading one hand beneath it, she tipped the envelope and let its contents spill there with a cry of “Aha!” A gasp from Mr. East drew me from my novel and to their side.

There, resting in Charlotte's hand, was the coarse little owl carving. Or, rather, what was left of it. It had been splintered apart just as roughly as it had been shaped into existence in the first place.

“The Whyos!” I exclaimed.

Charlotte nodded.

“But what does it mean?”

Charlotte sobered. “It means we need not worry any longer about the young Mr. Keane.”

I bristled. “So the deed is done.”

“Indeed.”

But another thought struck me then, one I thought fearfully perilous. Aghast, I murmured,

“They know where we live.” I lifted my gaze to Charlotte. “The Whyos. They know where we live.”

With an expression both calm and certain, Charlotte took me by the hand. She brushed a stray strand of hair from my cheek, tucked it behind my ear, and then tenderly kept her fingers there for a brief moment. “Not to worry, Miss Wilson,” she assured me. “If the Whyos dare harm us, they’ll upset the very apple cart they just righted. I am certain they have just conveyed to us that the matter of young Keane to be at rest.”

I thought of Hugo Boone—how twisted he was, inside and out, how much his appearance symbolized the rotting heart and soul of that gang and, closing my eyes, willed the memory away. I reminded myself of Charlotte’s brilliant perceptibility, how accurate her observations always proved to be, and how much I had come to trust her abilities. Yes, we probably were safe from The Whyos, but somewhere inside of me, a timid and fearful voice still prayed that Charlotte was right.

The next morning, Charlotte picked up her morning paper and crisply snapped it as I sat down to my breakfast, her eyes riveted on me. I immediately sensed an urgent energy in her and knew at once that, despite her collected exterior, something already animated her thoughts. But I reached for the teapot first, desperate for its fortification after a late evening at Booth’s Theatre. Upon which I discovered a full cup waiting for me. Charlotte was wasting no time this morning.

“Good morning, Miss Wilson,” Charlotte welcomed. “I took the liberty of pouring out for you.”

Mouthwatering for that first sip, I took it, then answered Charlotte. “Good morning to you, Miss Olms, and thank you. May I ask what has you all a-twitter today?” I smiled, shielding my impishness behind my cup.

“I do not go all atwitter!” Charlotte recoiled. To my delight, I had caught the fox for she had not expected sharp wit first thing from the groggy likes of me.

I grinned, our banter bringing me to life. “Nonetheless, something has captivated you this morning.”

She did not labor over my teasing but launched right into it. “A most curious thing, but one quite expected. When I rose, Mr. East informed me that our newsboy had insisted on speaking personally to me and had been waiting out front already for an hour.”

Hank, little more than a guttersnipe when Charlotte had first employed him to collect all manner of newspapers, had faithfully kept to his task long for us to see him mature from the young age of eight into his early adolescence. An industrious and trustworthy youth, he was often our eyes and ears of the street and, apparently, others had noticed.

“He rose from our stoop upon seeing me at the door,” Charlotte explained, “and conveyed a most peculiar message: ‘I’m to tell you page three, column four.’ He pointed to the top paper.”

“And I suppose you’ve already examined the section?”

“Indeed.” She placed the paper on the table and pushed it to me.

There, a headline blared: *Murder in Five Points, Victim Was Late Physician’s Brother.*

So there we had it. One Phillip Edward Keane met a “nefarious end” with a pistol shot to his head outside a brothel. Nothing was said about the particulars of his demise, but the newspaper article noted his relationship to his elder brother and then dedicated three paragraphs to lauding Samuel Owen Keane. There, I learned that the physician not only tended to Chinatown’s sick, but had sided with them in a nativist’s fight against their cigar-making businesses and other economic in-roads. The mayor of Chinatown himself was quoted, expressing his sorrow that “so

fine a man to all peoples” had been taken from them.

The mayor's praise reminded me of an unanswered question. “Charlotte, the day you showed Boone the owl: what exactly did he say that revealed the existence of another Keane?”

Charlotte grinned. “Ah! So you determined that the answer lay in Boone's criminal argot. A fine deduction!”

“Charlotte, the answer!” I demanded.

“Crokus,” she revealed with good natured patience. “Street slang for doctor. From the nature of Boone's reaction, I concluded that our suspect was a young initiate, hoping to join the Whyo gang—someone who only recently became familiar with a physician's trade.

So the solution to a seemingly indecipherable crime came down to a single word. How fascinating!

I returned to the newspaper. “Odd that the Herald celebrated Keane's relationship with the Chinese.”

“Ah! But not really,” Charlotte countered. “Think for a moment with whom does the newspaper align itself.”

Awareness dawned on me. “Tammany Hall.”

“Exactly! And we can deduce who Tammany Hall is beginning to court for votes.”

“The Chinese?” I found the possibility astounding. “But nativists and Irish alike had long excoriated the Chinese.”

“Not Tammany Hall,” Charlotte reminded me. “They have never turned away an immigrant from their doors.”

“But the Exclusion Act—you said it was likely to become law.”

“It will not prevent machines like Tammany from gathering the newly wealthy to its side.”

“And you think the Chinese have that kind of wealth?”

“I do indeed. They simply have not yet put it to use.” Charlotte seemed so certain of her reasoning that I knew we would see it come to fruition in coming months. All we had to do was wait for the facts to unfold. I knew well that waiting games with Charlotte, no matter what their flavor, were always worth enduring.

It saddened me, though, that Mr. Keane's demise had still come down to street justice, Charlotte concurred but had already accepted it as a fait accompli. Avenging Keane's death was a matter of political power and influence between the two underclasses and so those underclasses had mended matters between themselves.

“Behind the most direct matters of cause-and-effect,” Charlotte pointed out, “are other, more nuanced influences. In this case, young Keane had turned from asset to liability—because of Tammany. The Chinese live in the same ward as The Whyos, and while the gang is notoriously violent extortionists and murderers, they still—”

“—they still wish to play the enforcer in the sixth ward for the democrats!”

“Exactly.” Charlotte's expression was most congratulatory. “The Whyos made amends to their Chinese neighbors to keep the patronage of the Tammany Society. That is why I am certain they mean us no harm.”

Ever more confident than I and far more convinced that what was done was indeed done, Charlotte sipped the last of her tea and rose from the table ebullient. She looped my arm through hers, turned us out of the parlor and towards our front door.

“Come, my darling Joanna—we're too celebrate!”

“Celebrate?” I sputtered. “At this time of day?”

“Of course!”

Mr. East pulled open the door and handed Charlotte her walking stick.

“We shall celebrate along the Ladies' Mile,” she informed me. “After all, it seems we have some undergarments to replace.”

We met the pavement at a pace too brisk for propriety, Charlotte relying on her man's walking stick and me completely discomposed and so thoroughly blushing some might think I was a walking case of scarlet fever. New York City can be a hard and at times uncaring metropolis, a place where justice is difficult to come by any means other than the streets. But those same streets allowed us, Miss Charlotte Olms, woman detective, and Miss Joanna Wilson, her companion, to take to the promenade in our own peculiar and particular way. Which, I dare say, makes the city—and us—perfect for one another.

Debra Hyde is the 2011 Lambda Literary Award in Lesbian Erotic for her novel, *Story of L*. To her delight, she won it the same year her late mother's favorite author, Armistead Maupin accepted a lifetime achievement award. Debra is deeply thankful for that bit of synchronicity; her mother is never far from her thoughts.

Before writing novels, she saw dozens of her erotic short stories find print with some of the top publishers of erotic fiction. Then she stepped away from the print world—long considered the industry pinnacle—for ebook publishing. All of her work is available in ebook, and her short story backlist is about to be republished in a mini-anthology format with Sizzler Editions.