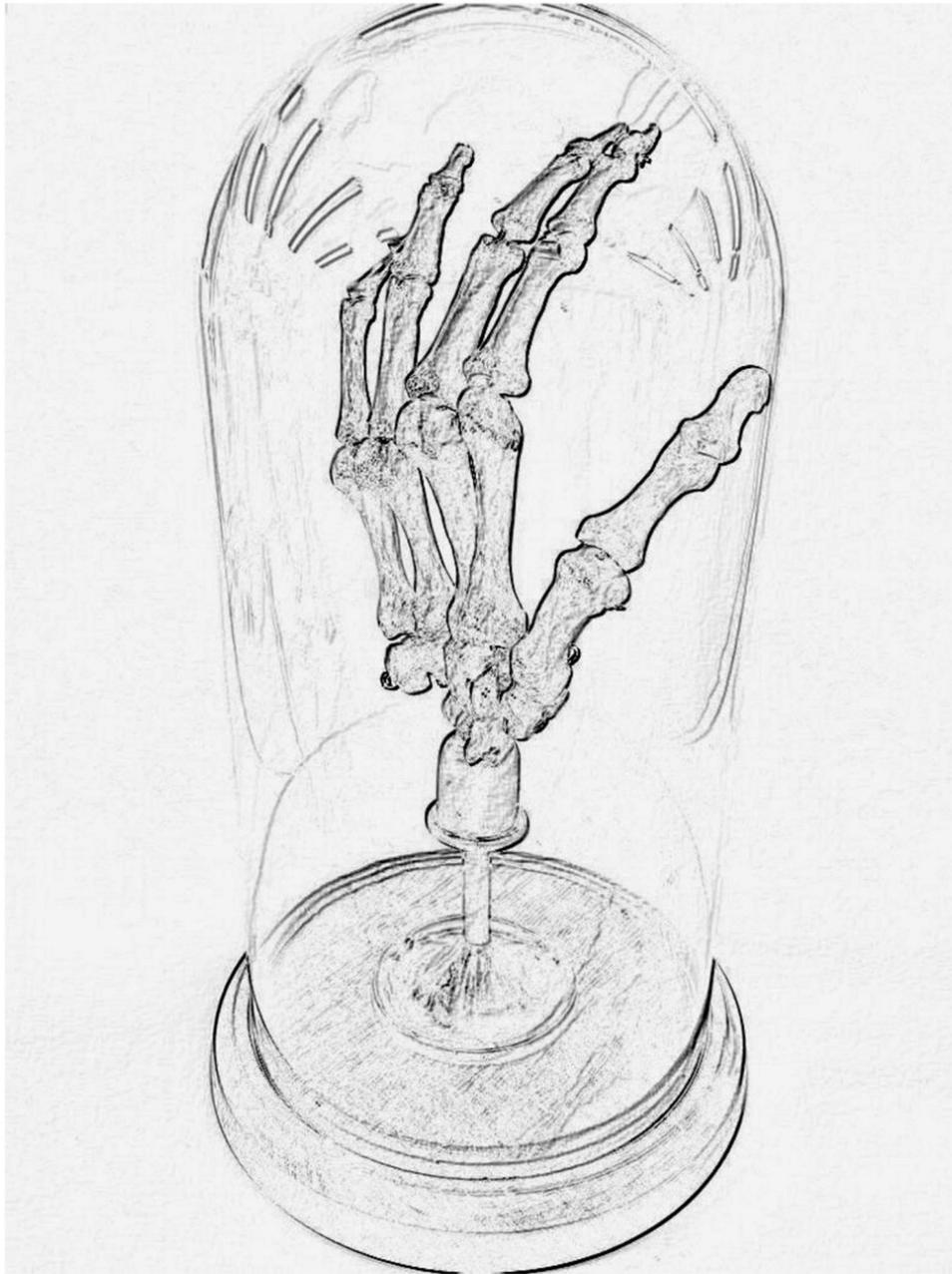


Robert McCammon



The Pale Pipesmoker

A Story from Matthew Corbett's World

The Pale Pipesmoker

Robert McCammon

RobertMcCammon.com (2019)

Tags: Historical Fiction

This short story was published on RobertMcCammon.com on March 5, 2019.

Copyright © 2019 by Robert McCammon. All rights reserved.

Ebook formatting by Hunter Goatley.

Visit RobertMcCammon.com for all the latest news from Robert McCammon!

[Facebook](#) | [Twitter](#)

THE PALE PIPESMOKER

One.

At six by the candle-clock on the white stone mantel above a politely warming fireplace, Katherine Herrald quietly said to Minx Cutter, "There is our gentleman."

The pale pipesmoker had just entered Sally Almond's tavern from Nassau Street. With him, like spectral companions, entered equally pallid tendrils of the mid-November fog that currently embraced the streets, lanes, cubbyholes, cul-de-sacs, and structures of New York town. His arrival caused a momentary hesitation in the tune of "The Wandering Prince Of Troy" that Sally was strumming on her gittern as she strolled amid the tables of diners at their sup, but perhaps only the two women who represented the Herrald Agency noted such for they understood the reason for fingers suddenly gone cold.

But Sally picked up the tune once more, gave a glance and a slight nod toward the table where Katherine and Minx sat entertaining their glasses of claret, and then she moved away into the tavern's second room to leave the ladies to their business and musically pursue the wayward prince.

"Hm," was Minx's comment as she took a sip of her wine. Her voice was light and easy, as if she cared not a whit for the man who'd just come in from the street, but over the rim of her glass, her obsidian gaze directed at the individual was as sharp as the blades that always kept her company.

Katherine noted that a few of the regulars took a quick look at the man and seemed to shudder and shrivel before they returned to their repasts. Minx's next comment—also quietly delivered—summed it up: "Less of a gentleman, more of a walking tomb."

"Indeed," said Katherine.

They watched as he hung up his long black fernaught coat and black tricorne on wallhooks beside the door. They noted the ebony gloves, and his other suitments equally dark, except for a waistcoat the color of gray harbor water. Also noted was the fact that in depositing his coat and hat upon the hooks, his right hand seemed afflicted in some way, in that all the fingers did not open and close as they should. He had close-cropped gray hair that held

hints of the more fulgent brown of his youth, yet it was difficult to judge his age, even though firelight and lamplight glowed the room, for his face was a haggard though craggy cliff of jagged lines across his forehead and along his sallow cheeks, as if the cracks of age and a hard life foretold a coming avalanche of flesh from the skull's bones beneath.

He gave the room a quick going-over with a pair of small and deep-set, dark eyes that caught for a fraction of time red embers of light, and then he walked to a candle-lit table in a corner opposite Katherine and Minx and settled himself. They noted how he angled his chair to face the door. He removed the glove from his left hand, but not from the right. With his hand sinister he drew from a pocket of his jacket first a curved pipe, and then a paper-wrapped square of tobacco. He packed the pipe while staring fixedly at the door. As he was doing this Emmaline Halett came to the table—rather nervously, the problem-solving ladies observed—to ask what he might be having for supper. He said something they couldn't hear, Emmaline scurried away to the kitchen, he flamed his pipe from the table's candle, and then he sat staring at the door with the pipe clenched in the hard line of his mouth, and the blue smoke wafting around the pallid cracked cameo of his face.

"Let us give him a few minutes more," Katherine suggested. She turned the wineglass between her palms. "And I will say that if you stared any more fiercely at him he could light that pipe with the friction of air."

Indeed, beneath the cocked purple riding cap that perched atop the copious blonde curls of her hair, Minx Cutter's expression had become as fearsome a thing as Hudson Greathouse's when he was about to throw himself into a fight. But Katherine mused that Minx and Hudson—who was at the moment gone to England with Berry Grigsby to find their own wandering prince by the name of Matthew Corbett—were cut from the same cloth, that is to say the same battleflags flying from their personal castles, and quick to let it be known that monsters guarded the moats, and the parapets were always secured against enemies. Which in Minx's case, as Katherine had observed, seemed to be everyone else in the world...except, in a modest way, for her own self, which she took to be a compliment.

Minx averted her attention from the pale pipesmoker and seemed to be studying the burning logs in the hearth, yet Katherine knew that Minx was still actively studying their central point of being there this misty evening, and that was exactly why Katherine had decided to give Minx the opportunity

to work with the agency; when the younger woman set her teeth in for a bite, she wouldn't let go until her last tooth had been broken out, and when that might occur—doubtful, if ever—Minx had her set of little sharp metal teeth that she was so expert at using, and with any one of those knives she could carve her initials on an angel's harp or a devil's hind.

It was no wonder to Katherine that Professor Fell had found Minx so useful in his criminal empire. Katherine's only question about Minx was philosophical: would the life of a problem-solver—and obeyer of the law—sooner or later make Minx raise up that battleflag in protest of everything Katherine found holy, and in so doing return to a life of hellfire endeavors?

Well...it was a question.

Katherine took her last swallow of claret. She put the glass aside and said, "Time."

They got up from the table and approached the pale pipesmoker. He didn't notice their approach until they were nearly upon him, so concentrated was his attention upon the door through his drapes of fumous consumption. Then his face turned on them as if the wind had snapped it there, his eyes lit up with red centers, and he lowered the pipe from his mouth with his ungloved hand.

"Pardon us," said Madam Herrald with a charming smile. And her smile could certainly still cast a charm, even at the age of fifty-one and perhaps even more so than at thirty-one. "May we sit with you a moment?"

"No," came the voice, like a barrel of gravel being upended.

"Thanks," Minx said, already down in a chair across from him.

Katherine sat to the man's right. "Just one moment, that's all we require."

"What's this about? Who are you?" There was a stricken note now in the voice.

"We're asking the questions," said Minx.

"Tut," Katherine said, keeping the smile. She resisted the urge to give Minx's hand a pat to quiet her, as that seemed to her the equivalent of putting one's own hand into the iron fangs of a beast trap. "We have a small business to discuss with you, sir."

"I have no business with *you*, madam. Now if you would kindly remove your—"

He stopped speaking, because Minx had drawn a small curved blade from her own dark purple jacket and was admiring it as one might look upon the

greatest lover.

"One moment," Katherine repeated, rather more forcefully, but still with the smile at full charm.

That morning, at the Herral Agency's office at Number Seven Stone Street, the gray-haired but lively and highly industrious Sally Almond had arrived to take a chair before Katherine's desk and say, "My problem is with a man."

"The universal problem of women," replied Katherine, with a wan smile and a quick glance at Minx, who had paused in her scribing of the recent case known to her as the Moon Maiden Murder. At the nearby desk, Minx held her quill steady over the paper to continue the previous line, yet her ears and focus of attention were held steadier still in regard to the problem being set forth by the owner of New York town's best eating establishment, that which bore the name of the famous lady herself.

"Do go on," said Katherine, bringing her cool, gray-eyed gaze back upon this morning's visitor.

"I wish," said Sally, "that I might find a shred of humor in this situation, but as it is beginning to affect my business, I fail to do so. I have a repeat customer who is...shall we say...rather peculiar, and his presence—a thundercloud from whom lightning and storm is sure to strike before long, I'm certain—is making my other customers...well...*nervous*. I have had several tell me so. Some of them—all regulars—have not returned. And my serving-girls...they dread to see him walk through the door. Yet walk through the door he does...exactly at six o'clock, and remains at table until the last call at nine. And he has followed this exact habit for the last ten nights, excepting the Sabbath of course."

"You know this man?" Katherine asked.

"I have never seen him before ten nights ago." Sally looked quickly toward Minx, who had moved her chair closer with a small scraping noise, and then back to the madam. "He orders fish, or chicken, with peas and potatoes. He orders coffee and a platter of biscuits. He smokes his pipe, one bowlful after another, and orders more coffee. He pays at the presentment of the bill and leaves a bit for the girls, that's no problem. But I notice that he always sits facing the door, as if he's expecting someone."

"He's always alone, then?" Minx asked, as her curiosity had been fired up for this present situation, and after all, the Moon Maiden affair was part of

the quickly-receding past.

"Always alone. And if you saw him, you'd know why. He has the demeanor of a gravedigger. That's what Emmaline said about him, the first night. Sophie says he looks more like a hangman. Anyway, to me he looks like death on a high post."

There came a heavy-sounding *thump* from across the room, loud enough to make Sally jump in her chair. "Heavens!" she said, wide-eyed. "What was *that*?"

"One of the ghosts," Katherine answered calmly. "They both dislike the 'd-word'. But never mind those two...go ahead, this interests me."

"Us," Minx corrected, and Katherine nodded and let it go. Minx might be valuable, if push came to kick.

It took a moment for Sally to continue. She cast a frown toward the offending spirit in its little corner of the world, cleared her throat and went on. "Well...the man...the pale pipesmoker, I call him...because he smokes all the time, and he looks as if he's never seen the sun...anyway...I fear for my business, if he continues his pattern. But, as I say, he pays promptly and I have no real reason to ask him not to attend my tavern. Yet his effect on my other customers and my girls is quite *real*, in itself."

"But even so," said Katherine, "this man is a good customer, never fails to pay for his food and drink and I would venture to say he keeps to himself in silent contemplation. He offers no trouble and recognizes the worth of your serving-girls with a ready coin. Therefore his only sin seems to be the fact that he is of a phlegmatic nature. I can think of many of those in this town, yet I assume they are never refused service in your establishment."

"True enough," came the reply. "But this man...he's different. He carries something inside him. Something...I don't know what." Then she decided she did know. "Something terrible," she concluded.

"Which you believe your other customers can feel and thus is harming your business," said Minx.

"Correct. I certainly can. And there's the matter of his right hand."

"Oh?" Katherine's brows went up. "What's the matter with it?"

"He never removes from his right hand the black glove that hides it. I have watched him pack his pipe and eat his supper, and I can tell you that there is some affliction to the hand that demands it remain hidden."

"He's unable to use it?"

"Unable to *fully* use it," Sally corrected. "Three fingers of that hand will not bend."

Katherine spent a moment in contemplation, her own fingertips steeped together. "So," she said at last, "this pale pipesmoker, as you call him, is offensive because of his gravedigger's demeanor and the fact that he has a crippled right hand? I hardly think that calls for denying him the pleasure of meals at your tavern, no matter what your other customers think."

"I understand that position, and I have grappled with it myself. Still...from him I get a terrible sense of...well...terrible things to come. I can't put that aside, and neither can my girls nor my other regulars. I'm sorry, and I know I sound callow, but he casts a pall upon my establishment."

"All right, but what would you have us do?"

"Pay him," Sally replied without hesitation. "I will offer him ten pounds to take his business elsewhere." When neither Katherine nor Minx responded, Sally plowed ahead. "I find it disagreeable that I should myself approach him with this offer, therefore I will hire you to do the job. Ten pounds on the table for him, if he does not return to my tavern."

"And if he takes the money and does return, what then?"

"I will ask that he sign a legal document, as much as can be assembled over this. I've already contacted David Larrimore, my attorney."

"I see," said Katherine. "And you would have us witness him take the money and sign the document? When?"

"Approach him this night, if possible. Squire Larrimore assures me the document can be readied and brought here by late afternoon."

"It's a lot of money and a lot of trouble to boot someone out the door," Minx said.

"I regret having to do it, but when you see him you'll understand."

"Very well, then," Katherine said, with a slight bow of her head. "We'll do as you require. But what interests me more than booting him out the door is...who he is waiting for so patiently—not to say *urgently*—to come *through* the door?"

Thus it was that the two women sat at the gentleman's table without being invited, and as the fire crackled, the chords of Sally Almond's gittern chimed merrily from the other room, the other customers at their meals went on eating and drinking, and fog pressed against the window glass, Katherine said, "I am—"

"I know you," the man interrupted. "From somewhere." His eyes narrowed. "Oh...yes. From London...but...it was ten years ago, at least." He nodded, as if deciding his memory was correct. "Yes. Katherine Herrald, isn't it? Richard's widow?"

Katherine felt a sudden chill skitter up her spine. How on earth did this man know her? And she was equally startled by the mention of her beloved and long-missed Richard—the creator of the problem-solving agency—who had been brutally murdered by Professor Fell in 1694.

"Yes," she replied, but her voice sounded to her slow and sluggish. "I am Richard's widow."

"Ah." Candleflame went to pipe's bowl and smoke ensued. "I do have a good memory. My wife never fretted that I would forget a birthday or anniversary. I recall meeting you and Richard at the celebratory supper Judge —" He stopped speaking and his face sharpened as the door opened. His entire body seemed to shiver with anticipation. Tendrils of fog came in first, followed by young Effrem Owles, the Master Tailor of New York, and his bride Opal, both of them bundled up and cheer-faced against the cold. The pale pipesmoker watched as the happy couple were greeted by Emmaline Halett and escorted to find a table in the other room, and then the keen—one might say *frantic*, Katherine thought—expression fell from the cracked mirror of his face. After a long pull at his pipe he continued what he'd been saying.

"The celebratory supper Judge Archer gave at the White Knight Tavern for the newly-sworn constables," the man said. "Ten years ago, was it? Twelve, possibly. I had the briefest meeting with you and Richard, a handshake with him and a bow for you. But afterward my wife—Laura—remarked favorably upon your appearance, dress, and bearing. Perhaps that's why I recall so clearly the occasion."

"I recall the event," Katherine said. "Richard and I were there not by the invitation of Judge Archer, who had a dim view of our business, but by invitation of the chief constable at that time."

"Jacob Mack. Yes, a very fine man. I worked with him before his retirement."

Katherine had a moment of feeling that the world was spinning away from her. She gave a look to Minx that she realized must resemble the expression of a child seeking help from an elder.

"What's your name?" Minx asked, picking up the chase in her own straight-forward, runaway-coach fashion. "And what are you doing in New York?"

"I am John Kent. I arrived from London ten days ago. Here on...*invitation*, you might say, though—" He paused for a pipe-puff and a curl of smoke from his mouth that looked like a blue lizard slowly emerging from a cavern crack. "Though not the same happy degree as of the White Knight event. But a momentous occasion and a great opportunity, all the same."

Katherine found her voice. "You're a constable in London?"

"Was. I encountered some difficulties that ended what I had hoped was an upward progress."

Referring to his afflicted hand? Katherine wondered. "Pardon these questions, Mr. Kent, but understand I am still in the profession of finding answers. You are in New York by whose invitation?"

Kent didn't respond for a moment. He continued to smoke his pipe, his pale gravedigger's visage aimed past the two women at the door upon Nassau Street.

At last he removed the pipe from his mouth and his small, glittering, and pain-filled dark eyes stared with fearsome intensity into Katherine's face.

"If you must know," he said quietly, "I am here on the invitation of one of the worst and most insidious murderers ever to prowl the streets of London."

Two.

"Your supper, sir." Emmaline had come to the table just as Kent finished this last coldly-delivered statement. From her serving tray she put his platter of broiled chicken, peas, fried potatoes, and pickled beets before him, as well as a cloth napkin and silverware. "Your coffee and biscuits are on the way," she added, and both of the other women noted that Emmaline refrained from laying eyes upon him. Then, to Katherine and Minx she said, "May I get you ladies anything?"

"Bring them claret." Kent put his pipe aside and took hold of both knife and fork with his left hand. "That's what they were drinking at their table. Does that suit the both of you?"

"It suits, thank you," said Katherine, but Minx asked for a short shot of the strong apple ale that had become so popular among the younger and more

adventurous members of the community.

Kent moved the fingers of his left hand so as to hold both knife and fork at angles readied to cut and eat. It was a quick and seemingly-effortless maneuver, but both Katherine and Minx thought it had taken a long time and much dropped food before Kent could so smoothly fix the utensils. They watched as he began to eat, using just the one hand, though it was obvious that the greater part of his attention was still directed at the door.

He was able also to pluck up the napkin and dab at his mouth without losing his grip on knife and fork, and it was after one of these dabs that he said, "The Herral Agency. I had no idea you were here in the colonies. As I recall, you and Richard operated on fees from clients. I have no doubt you are operating now under commission from the owner of this establishment. I am well aware of the figure I present, and of the unease I cause by being in the presence of happy, stupid people. I regret that but I cannot change it." He speared a bit of chicken and paused with it at his mouth. "I say 'stupid', because they do not know who walks among them. I am waiting for him to show himself. I believe he eventually will." Kent gave a warped and otherwise ghastly attempt at a smile. "He is too much of a gamesman to resist." The bit of chicken went into his mouth. His teeth crunched together.

"Miss Cutter and I," said Katherine, "would appreciate hearing the beginning of this tale."

"Really?" The smile twisted further. "You dare wish to go there?" He held up his gloved hand. "I am partly an illusion, madam. I have one remaining finger and a thumb on that hand. The glove is filled out by fingerlings of wood, to give the glove a proper shape. The man I'm waiting for got hold of me with his snippers. I was very fortunate that he was unable to finish the job, as he'd done to thirteen others in the years of 1695 and 1696. You must know who I'm speaking of, it was written up in the *Globe*, and *Lord Puffery's Pin* ran on with it for two years."

Katherine's eyes darkened. She nodded. "I do know."

"Well, light *my* lamp," Minx insisted. "I had more pressing matters to tend to than keeping up with the news of the day seven years ago."

"He was called 'The Snipper' by us constables," said Kent, whose eyes had gone dead. "The *Pin* gave him the title of 'Billy Shears'. That became the popular name. He murdered six women, four men, and three children, the youngest of which was eight years—" The door opened and again Kent

stiffened like a hunting dog about to leap. It was the elder blacksmith Marco Ross, cleaned up in fresh clothes after a day at the forge and arrived for an evening repast; he noticed the two women and the pallid-faced man staring at him, and he nodded a greeting and claimed a table toward the other side of the room. Kent took him in a few seconds longer, but his countenance had relaxed, and it was obvious he'd decided Ross was not his interest. "Eight years of age," Kent continued, as if he'd never been interrupted. "You recall his method, I'm sure," he said to Katherine.

"I do." For Minx's benefit she explained, "He snipped the fingers off the hands of his victims after he'd cut their throats. The victims were mostly people of the street: drunkards, gypsies, beggars, prostitutes, and homeless urchins." She gave Kent's gloved hand a passing glance. "And almost a constable, it seems?"

"Very near. I never saw his face. He was wearing a gray hood with eyeholes cut into it. But I was a special case, you see. He wished to torture me before I was killed." Kent took a few more bites of his food before he spoke again. "I have often wondered if my wife saw his face before he slashed her throat. And what he did with her fingers. I can see him in my mind's eye, scurrying away through the alleys with his little bloody bag." He regarded Katherine and Minx with a calm, wet-lipped expression of composed horror that neither one would ever forget. Truly, in that moment his face did look like the entrance to a cracked granite tomb. "London being a city of alleys," he said. "Of people so accustomed to violence that the sight of an eight-year-old boy with his fingers sheared off and his head nearly severed from the body raises only a sigh of recognition that evil has come a'walking. And the sight of my Laura lying there on the dirty stones...the same." The agony of his false smile was as sharp as Minx's dagger. "Ah," he said, looking to the right as Emmaline approached with her tray, "here are your drinks, ladies."

After Emmaline had gone again, Minx asked, "What did you mean when you said you had an invitation?"

"Just that. The letter I brought with me was dated in August. Mailed to me from this town. Signed simply, 'S'."

"A letter from Shears? *Why?*"

"Telling me," Kent said, "that he attends this particular tavern on occasion, and that if I wish to continue our game I might find him here some

night, and we might conclude our business. Therefore I am here, and therefore I wait for him at this table where I might see everyone who enters."

"But he wore a hood," Katherine said. "How would you know him?"

"As I told you, I have a good memory. My powers of observation are also quite sturdy. I will know him by his bearing...his walk...his voice. He knows I'm here. He's watching me, most likely, from some dark corner of the street. You see, part of the invitation was a directive to put a notice in your town's broadsheet on my arrival. I was to say, *Mister Kent requests the company of the gentleman well-known to him, yet unknown*. I complied with the directive. Now I wait."

Katherine didn't reply. She took a drink of her wine and mused that there was some insanity in the pale pipesmoker. Or desperation. Or a death-wish. Likely all three.

"So you understand," Kent continued, his voice following a gout of smoke, "Billy Shears has been living in this town—I would think—for the last several years. You might have seen him this day, walking about. That is to say...he is someone well-known to the citizens here...but, as I was directed to say in my notice...*unknown*."

"Granted," said Katherine, who thought she felt yet a deeper chill emanating from this human tomb, "but how is it that he's given up his...*hobby*...if he was so proficient at such? It's my experience that a creature of this twisted nature doesn't simply stop...and we've had no incidents of murders involving snipped-off fingers."

"I doubt he's given it up completely. Oh, no. There are many small villages around, are there not? Many farms on the edge of the wilderness? Places where people might vanish and the surmise would be the act of wild beasts or Indians? And there are packet boats sailing from here to Boston and Philadelphia on a daily schedule, carrying a killer as well as the honest tradesman? No, I doubt he's given up his calling. Perhaps it's now only once in a blue moon, and he wouldn't perform the deed here in New York, but he's finding his pleasure...his challenge...elsewhere, I can assure you."

"Hm," Katherine replied. Then: "I assume that as a constable you have theories as to his personality?"

"A gamesman, of course. Probably likes his gambling and his cards. Also I would think the lower vices appeal to him. He likely lives alone and visits the whores quite frequently. I have already stopped by Madam Blossom's for

a talk of whom might be her best customers, but I was turned out quite rapidly by a rather large black woman who seemed to relish the idea of bashing my head in."

"Madam Blossom is a discreet businesswoman," said Katherine. "Her list of customers would be guarded quite adamantly. As for the gambling, half the men in town are wearing borrowed shirts that the other half own."

"I want to know," Minx spoke up, "how all this came about. I mean...how he got you and your wife, and how you escaped. How you got on his track. The whole story."

Kent was silent for a while, as he finished his food. Pushing his plate aside, he repacked his pipe and touched it alight with the candle's flame. Through the drift of blue smoke he looked from Katherine to Minx and back again, and then he said, "As you wish. Imagine—"

* * *

—the streets of the Limehouse district at night, with the lamps burning both low and bright depending on what a coin seeks to buy. My district, and my responsibility. Ah, the Limehouse! The docks, the narrow ways, the nautical businesses there and all the people and situations that follow and build around men and commerce of the sea. Limehouse was at one time a swamp...which I suppose you know, Madam Herrald. It should come as no great surprise that at night some creatures crawl out from the phantom mire and walk as humans in the Limehouse. Certainly it was no surprise to me—seeing what I have seen on my rounds as constable—yet I failed to reckon with the cunning of this particular reptilian.

So...it began with the murder of a common drunkard...a man well-known in the district and looked upon as a local ragamuffin who danced in the street for a few pence. He was found sleeping in an alley...only his was the sleep that accompanies a slashed throat, and the fingers of his hands that had so readily held cups of liquor bought for him by generous idiots had been snipped off. A report was made, his body was carted away—dumped in the river, I would guess—and life went on in the Limehouse.

Pardon me, my pipe has gone out. I do so enjoy my pipe. A moment.

So then...two weeks passed. An elderly street musician was found next, three streets away from the first killing. Again, the cut throat and the snipped

fingers. At that point I began to feel a cold claw touching the back of my neck. The pattern of the killings...I thought that here is someone who is killing with great stealth and with great...*joy*, I would say. And this person had found the world of the Limehouse in which to perform...a world of rapid comings and goings, of faceless encounters, of shadows seeking shadows in the taverns and alleys...a world of constant change, crews coming in and signing out and desperate women following the money trail. All this, and *my* world to patrol. My people—for better or for worse—to protect. Well, I was not the sole constable in the Limehouse, but these murders were happening on my territory. It was in the area of my responsibility, as I say, and as I had plans to continue the course of constable as far as it might take me, I was determined to act accordingly. All I could do at that point, however, was to ask questions of the locals and that got me nowhere.

A month went by, and then another. Then came the discovery of the young street urchin, eight years of age. Murdered, the same. After that, I announced in the taverns a reward of five pounds for any reliable information. I received ramblings but no leads. I was tempted to contact your agency for help, Madam Herrald, but as I was hard-pressed to apply the five pounds, and my Laura held a lowly clerical job at a company that manufactured nautical rope, I was in no position to pay what I understood was your rather high rate.

"Something might have been arranged," Katherine said.

Possibly so, but the time for that went past. My announcement of a reward did not go unanswered. The next victim, a young gypsy girl who prowled around the docks telling fortunes, was found murdered the same but with a difference. There was a playing card in her mouth...the five of clubs. *Five*, you see? With that our little game began, for I realized the killer was watching me...possibly had been in one of the taverns where I made my announcement...knew I was asking questions...knew I had taken my task to heart...and possibly also was someone to whom I had asked questions, for I had made the rounds of all the shops and businesses.

I then employed four young boys to keep watch around the streets, to report back on anything they found suspicious or unseemly in their quarters of the district. It wasn't another week before one of those young gentlemen was murdered. Another playing card had been pushed into his mouth after the throat-cutting and the snipping were done...this one an ace of clubs. After

that, the *Globe* and the *Pin* caught word of the crimes and I was interviewed by their agents. The stories appeared in print, and thus was 'Billy Shears' born.

"A five of clubs and an ace of clubs," said Katherine. "What did you make of the cards being that particular suit?"

The same thing that is likely in your mind now. That it was of significance, and he was baiting me. The significance being, I surmised, that Billy Shears was telling me he was a member of a gambling club, of which you must know number in the many in London. So I began to visit those establishments, but what was I looking for? What outward sign would a creature of this nature show? Was there some significance in his method, as well, that there are 'hands' of cards, and that human hands actually hold the cards in the playing? Well, I didn't know what sort of sign I was looking for, but still I visited all the gambling clubs in Limehouse and in the neighboring districts...and found nothing but the sense that I was being watched...played with...involved in a game that had deadly consequences.

The stories in the *Globe* and the *Pin* resulted in two more constables being assigned to the Limehouse. Their presence caused Billy Shears to disappear for several months. His next victim—another street urchin—appeared only a few days after the extra constables were taken off-duty. It was obvious to me that he was a resident of the Limehouse, and that he had his ear to the ground. As I say, possibly someone I had previously spoken to...possibly a tavern-keeper or a local tradesman who knew all the circumstances and particulars. But who he was I had no clue... until his twelfth victim offered me something.

I was called to the scene in an alleyway. The killer had been interrupted in his work by a beggar who'd stopped to relieve herself in the entrance. He fled, having snipped away only six of the fingers. By lamplight the body of the prostitute was moved...and I caught the shine of a small object that had been underneath her left shoulder. It was a silver cuff button. What I had heard called a 'cufflink'. I surmised that the deceased pulled at her killer's arm in her throes, and so the button came loose. Upon this object—which looked quite new—was the engraving of a three-masted ship. A very beautiful object, no doubt formed by an expert silversmith. Now I can tell you that such an extravagant item was as rare in the Limehouse as the proverbial pig with wings...that is, never seen among the usual mix of dock workers, sailors,

and tradesmen. But I had a clue, and at last a track to follow.

"The silversmiths," said Katherine.

Exactly so. For the next two days I visited the local smiths with the cuff button in hand. I had no luck until the afternoon of the second day, when I visited a silversmith in Westminster, many miles and a world away from the Limehouse. This gentleman recognized the button as his work, and after I identified myself as a constable he told me it had been made on order for a young man named Davy Glennon, son of Midas Glennon, whose business I knew well, his being a firm that supplied tar to the shipbuilders in the Limehouse. Therefore I visited the Glennon estate, and after some difficulty with a butler at the house, I was escorted in to see Davy, who had just returned from an afternoon's ride on what is quite an admirable parkland.

Well, the young Glennon had the kind of attitude one might expect from a layabout whose father has made a fortune and expects his son to step into the role only at the pater's demise. In short, both a snob and an ass. But was he a killer? He's a slight young man in his mid- twenties. Small hands. On first impression I thought him incapable of exerting enough strength to crack fingerbones, even with the adequate snipper. No, I didn't think he was my quarry...and yet there must be some connection. When I explained my reason for being there and showed him the cuff button, he recalled that some months ago, he had been gambling at the Greenhalls club in the Limehouse—one of many clubs he attended weekly in which he lost copious portions of his father's money—and being short of coin, put the silver cuff buttons up as a bid. Which he quickly lost. To whom? I asked.

He stated that he did not know the man's name but he had seen this individual at Greenhalls several times. A tall and elegant man, he said, but he'd seen that the hands appeared strong. Well-dressed. Age about mid-forties or so, was his opinion. The shine of a cunning intelligence in the eyes. A man silent and self-contained, and also a very able gamesman.

I knew in my bones, heart, and soul...this might have been an older and more refined individual than I'd suspected...but it was Billy Shears.

My following question to Davy Glennon was...when was the next meeting of the Greenhalls? The coming Friday night, he said. I asked would he accompany me there, and point out the man who had won the silver buttons if that individual was present?

He wanted to know what might be in it for him, as he cared nothing about

murders in the Limehouse. I told him that if this man did turn out to be Billy Shears, I would make sure Davy was recognized as a hero of London in both the *Globe* and the *Pin*, and from that he might win an award of some kind—either a medal or money. Certainly the *Pin* would make golden hay out of it, and Midas would have nothing to do with it. As I presumed, the thought of rising above his father's name infatuated him, and so it was agreed upon.

You might imagine my disappointment when, after meeting young Glennon in front of the building that housed the Greenhalls, he failed to identify the man at the gaming tables within. We stayed until the closing hour of three in the morning, when the last card was thrown down and the final die was rolled. Billy Shears did not appear.

Any yet...he *was* there, somewhere. I believe he sighted myself and Davy Glennon meeting outside the building. He knew me well by appearance at this point, for I'm sure he'd been shadowing me. He knew I had the silver cuff button. He knew exactly why I was there with young Glennon. He knew I was closing in on him. He knew.

Therefore...he was tempted to strike at my heart. Possibly because I had interrupted his gaming evening. Possibly because he felt his luck threatened. Possibly because...he simply did not want me to win.

"Your wife?" Katherine ventured.

Victim number thirteen. Pardon me...my pipe.

There. Yes. My Laura. How he got her to venture into that alley on her walk home from her job at Brixton's...I don't know. It was not a deserted street, and the light wasn't even fully gone. How? I have tortured my mind over it. Did he call her over by saying he had news from me? Was his face hidden in shadow, or did she see it? Could he have simply said, 'Come here! John has had an accident!' And her not thinking in that moment to be as careful as I'd warned her to be? What was it that drew her over there? And why did I not meet her and walk her home, as we lived only a few blocks from Brixton's rope manufacture? I had done so in the past. Why not this day? Because this day—the following Friday from my previous excursion—I was watching the door of the Greenhalls club with young Glennon again, waiting for the gamblers to arrive. As he must have known I would be.

A game. That's what all this was to him, ladies. Simply a game.

"And then?" Katherine prodded when Kent paused and took an inordinately long time to flame his pipe once more. "What next?"

Ah. Next. Next was...what I'm sure he'd planned as his final move against me, for I was getting close to him. He knew it. Also...I was preventing him from returning to Greenhalls, and I believe that heightened his desire to finish me off. I was wary, though. I understood he was out there watching my movements, and waiting for an opportunity.

A month went by. Then another. I was standing before Greenhalls every Friday night, though young Glennon had boshed the chase. I thought I might recognize the man by his description. I saw four who might fit...but in my heart I knew Billy Shears would not reveal himself to me so readily, and the four men I investigated were no angels but they all lived far outside the Limehouse and one was a very proper member of Parliament. I had decided already that Shears *must* be a Limehouse resident...must be, simply for what he knew about me and my questions to the locals.

I was always on guard when I made my rounds. I was not so much on guard when I returned to my little house on Narrow Street, in the shadow of the tall masts. It was just before cock's crow on the morning of October fourteenth, 1696. I unlocked my door and entered the house with my lamp before me. I was very tired, and possibly that's why I was both sluggish in mind and body. In any case, I smelled him before he struck me from behind. It was almost a medicinal smell...no...different...the smell of a predatory beast. His sweat of anticipation, I suppose.

I awakened to the twilight of my own kitchen, where Laura and I had shared so many happy suppers. My constable's lamp was still lit and sitting on a shelf. I was bound to the kitchen table with ropes around my midsection and thighs. My wrists had been tied and my arms made to be splayed out on either side of me so my hands were fully exposed. A piece of cloth had been stuffed into my mouth. I could not cry out. It's strange, though, what one fixes upon in a moment like that. I remember being fiercely angry because I could feel a cold draft from the broken window at the other side of the room, and thinking how much it would cost to have it repaired before winter set in.

Well, at that point I was surely half-insane myself.

Then...there he was.

Moving in and out of the cone of light. I was able to lift my head a few degrees. I saw something glinting in his right hand. He was wearing a gray suit with a ruffled shirt and a black cravat. I thought...yes...though he was a killer, he was also sort of a dandy, and that was why he could lure his victims

into the alleys, and that is why he was wearing the silver cuff buttons. The way he moved back and forth, light on his feet. Possibly had been an athlete at some point? I was still investigating, you see, even though I knew...the game was coming to an end, and I had lost.

But human nature being as it is, ladies, I clung to the hope that somehow I might get out of this...and even as the sweat steamed from my face and my heart pounded itself nearly to death, some part of me remained calm...watchful...thinking of how I might literally turn the table on this monster, and avenge not only my Laura, but all my dead charges.

He leaned down over me.

As I said, he wore a gray hood with the eyeholes cut out. He brushed my cheeks with his metal shears. I remember thinking how clean they were, to have been so useful.

'John', he said—and I shall never forget the silken sound of his voice, like chill death itself speaking—'it has come to this,' he went on. He snapped his shears in front of my eyes. 'Which hand shall we begin with?'

I tried to fight, tried to overturn the table but he slammed me in the chest and all the air went out of me. When he went after my right hand, I balled it up. Again he hit me with a fist made of iron...and I felt the snippers close on one of my fingers.

How to describe that kind of pain? Of course the other victims had been dead—or dying—when it was done to them. Is that a thing to be thankful for? I heard the blades crunch on the bone, I heard the bone snap...and then my hand went freezing cold and the cold spread along my arm to the shoulder.

He was quick, I'll say that much for Billy Shears. The second finger was gone before I felt the blades...and, anyway, God, in His mercy, had dulled my senses at that point, and I was falling from nightmare into dream.

Billy Shears must've sensed that, because his next move was to use his snippers to ravage most of the flesh off my next finger before he attacked the bone. My entire body convulsed. I wet my breeches. Not a very polite thing to tell, but the truth. Then I heard him gasp with either satisfaction or a darker ecstasy as he took that finger off. As I said...a beast.

The snippers closed on my thumb. I can feel its bite still, very often as I'm coming up from sleep.

There came a knock at the back door, not five feet from where Shears stood doing his work.

'John?' she called. 'John, are you—'

I heard her scream, and I learned that she had looked through the broken window into the room. Of course she saw what was happening, and she screamed again. My thumb, though badly cut, was spared. I think I saw him lift a knife to stab me through the heart, but Doreen screamed once more and he gave up the attempt at murder to flee out the front way. I heard shouting... someone else had seen him on the street. Then I fell unconscious.

Doreen had taken to walking over from her house every few mornings to make me breakfast, knowing what time I got home. She was—is—a kindly widow, a bit older than I, whom I'd met at church. Lonely, perhaps, as I was. Her visits were not regular, thus if Shears had been watching my house he likely had not seen her visitations...and thus the remainder of my hand and my life were spared.

But after that, Judge Archer himself ordered that the Limehouse be torn apart by an army of officers searching for this monster. Not only was Greenhalls staked out and Davy Glennon forced under threat to attend every Friday night with another constable who passed himself off as a regular gambler, but records were assembled of every man who'd ever thrown a pair of dice or turned a card in that establishment. Judge Archer—a good man, that—had an artist attend young Glennon and draw a portrait of Billy Shears from his description...but, you know, by this time the memory was faulty. Was the jaw large or small? Sharp cheekbones or full cheeks? High forehead or low? Color of eyes? Color of hair? Well, dark-haired and dark-eyed was all that came out of it. Not much to go on.

And of course Billy Shears disappeared. There were no more murders involving snipped fingers. I reasoned he'd moved from the Limehouse likely to some other town in England, some place with many small surrounding villages where he might start anew, if he was so inclined. That was the end of it, until I received the letter from New York town.

How could I not respond? Knowing he is here...knowing what he is capable of. Just knowing...I could not turn a blind eye. You understand?

Katherine said after a moment of reflection, "I understand this individual may never reveal himself to you, having caused you to cross the Atlantic. You say he's a gamesman. Granted. I would think he already considers himself the winner, just letting you know he's still 'out there', so to speak. I doubt very much he'll ever walk through that door you so ardently watch."

"I disagree," said the pale pipesmoker, with a small plume of smoke cast in her direction. "He will show himself, and I will wait for him."

Three.

Katherine and Minx remained at the table with Kent, having another glass of wine and another cup of ale, until the last chords chimed from Sally Almond's gittern, the last plate was taken away, the last customer gone and the last log in the fireplace fallen to red embers. When Sally approached the table—likely to ascertain the progress of the night, Katherine surmised—she was greeted with one word from Madam Herral: "Later."

Outside, fog lay heavy on Nassau Street and slowly drifted like searching spirits around the roofs and chimneys. Kent explained that he had secured a room at Mary Belovaire's boarding house just across the way, and had paid for quarters with a window that looked down upon Sally Almond's tavern...thus he could watch it during the day, as well. He told the women that most definitely he would be returning to the tavern the following night for his supper. Then he bid them goodnight and went on his way, a solitary figure soon swallowed by the fog.

Minx walked with Katherine along Nassau Street toward the Dock House Inn where Katherine kept her own quarters. Though the hour was late for many, for some the night held further escapades. It could never be said that New York did not wish to become as jaunty as London, and the jauntiest citizens would be making the rounds of the more low-cast taverns until the final candle hissed out at an indeterminate hour of intoxication. Candles burned behind windowglass, the occasional carriage rolled past, someone shouted here and there, dogs barked, voices went up and up in argument and then fell silent again, laughter and fiddle music played over and against each other: a town at work, meaning to be a city.

Katherine pulled the black velvet collar of her coat up around her neck, for the image of Kent's fingers being snapped off had come to her much too clearly. "It seems to me," she said to Minx as they progressed southward, "that the only way we can solve Sally Almond's problem is to also solve John Kent's. We must discover the identity of Mister Shears. Must we not?"

"There's no proof the man is actually *here*," Minx said. "Yes, the letter

was sent from New York...but that doesn't mean he's living here. He could've taken a packet boat up from Philadelphia or down from Boston. He could be anywhere."

"Certainly. This could all be simply a furthering of the game the man seems to enjoy playing. Still...there most times is a method to madness. This man—this *creature*—may wish to finish his cutting. In fact, he may be *driven* to finish it, even after this number of years. Does that make sense?"

"In a senseless kind of way."

"Yes. Well, we shall see."

"And what's next, then?"

"Tomorrow, I intend to speak with Polly Blossom about her customers. Is there one who has a particular interest in hands and fingers?" Katherine gave Minx a look of rather dubious amusement. "Our creature may not be snipping, but I would imagine there are other entertainments he might desire. As for you, I presume you know the various gambling dens here?"

Minx shrugged. "I've won a bit."

"Good enough. You might do a bit of visiting as well tomorrow night. Looking for—" Katherine paused. "A man who wears cuff buttons. Possibly his habits in clothing have come with him across the ocean. In any event, it's a start."

Minx walked with Katherine to the steps leading up to the Dock House Inn's entrance and said goodnight. She waited for Katherine to go in and the door to close before she turned away. Her own abode, a room above a carriage house connected to Tobias Winekoop's stable, was about a quarter mile north on the Broad Way. She began walking, and contemplated visiting one or another of the more lively taverns and the gambling clubs tonight, as for her the night was full of opportunity, and sleep before two o'clock in the morning was a waste of life.

She had turned to the east, heading in the direction of the rougher—and for her, more exciting—area of taverns that attracted the kind of ne'r-do-wells who had first planted their dirty boots on the island long before a shed had gone up. Her kind of people.

She'd gone a single block when she heard the man's voice, quite close.

"*Come here.*"

Minx stopped in her tracks. She looked to her right and slightly behind.

He was standing shrouded by fog. Wearing a dark fernaught coat and a

dark tricorn, pulled low over the face. But she wouldn't have been able to see the face anyway; the nearest light was the yellow smear of a lantern in a window on the upper floor of a warehouse where someone obviously was either working late or stealing something.

"Come here," he repeated.

"You come here," she said, her hand going to the knife in her jacket.

He backed away, and just that quickly the fog took him.

Minx brought the blade out. She was not afraid. Knives had saved her skin many times, and she knew how to carve other skins with them. Not afraid, but rather unsettled. Unnerved might be the word. Yet still calm and composed, as was her nature. She wished she had a wall at her back; out here in the street, she was open to many avenues of attack. Her heart was beating harder; not from fear, but from the excitement of danger. Such cleared her head of all lingering traces of strong apple ale that might slow her reflexes. She was ready.

Onward she walked, pointed toward her tavern of choice, the Cock'a'Tail, which served her interest of getting a stiff drink, an inhalation of pungent tobacco smoke, hearing the kind of language that dared a spear of lightning from the hand of God, and being in the company of the roughest necks in New York. Her kind of place.

Was there movement off on her right, through the fog? Yes, there was. She realized she was being tracked. She went on, her senses both questing and tingling and her grip firm on the blade's ivory handle.

Quite suddenly, he was there in front of her.

Hidden still by the fog, yet close enough to attempt damage.

She stopped again. And said quietly, "You're in my way."

"Hear me, Miss Cutter," he replied. "I have no argument with you, nor with Madam Herrald. My game is with John Kent. I would advise you—and your employer—not to interfere. Am I understood?"

The voice. Smooth and silken. *Chill death*, Kent had said. Did she know it? No.

She realized he had seen them walk out together from Sally Almond's. Watching the place, just as was John Kent. "I understand what you are," Minx answered. "Who you are...we're going to uncover that before long. Your time is running out."

"Ah." There was a long pause. "Yes. Time *is* running out. Thank you for

making that so clear. Pardon me, won't you?" He began backing away. Minx saw no need to press the issue, as a knife fight in this fog was not to her liking. If she was correct, the man likely had a blade in his hand as well and obviously knew how to use sharp instruments.

"Goodnight, Mr. Shears," she said, but she was already speaking to empty air.

* * *

As Minx was settling into a corner table of the Cock'a'Tail with a mug of hot spiced liquor and her blade stuck into the tabletop to discourage visitors, John Kent was awakened in his bed at Mary Belovaire's boarding house.

He lay still in the dark for a while, wondering what it might be that had awakened him. The dreams he had of Laura—both of happy times and the horrific sense that he was standing with her at the moment of her death and yet was much of a spirit and unable to raise a hand to help her—were well-known to him and constant, thus his awakening had been harkened by something else.

In another moment he heard it: a small stone striking the glass of his window.

Another followed soon after, as Kent lay struggling with the idea that he was neither entirely awake nor asleep, yet on the twilight border.

He got up from bed, went to the window, drew aside the curtain and peered out.

The fog was still thick, yet as Kent peered down into the gloom from his upper-floor window, he thought he was beginning to make out a figure standing in the street. Imagination? He considered it so, until another small stone struck the windowglass with an almost musical *ping* and he saw the figure lift a hand in a motion that could only mean *Come out and play*.

Kent left the window. He spent a moment striking the flint and firing his tinderbox, after which he struck light to the room's lantern, a series of maneuvers with his good hand that had astounded those who'd witnessed such. By the lantern's smoky yellow glow he dressed himself, applying the fingerlings of wood to the right-handed glove and pulling it firmly over the hand with its single finger and scarred thumb.

Then he took the pistol from his travelling bag and, sitting on the bed,

proceeded to prepare it for its single shot with lead ball, flint, and black powder from his leather powderhorn.

He was in no hurry. He knew who was summoning him, and that the time had come. His heart was barely beating hard, yet a sheen of sweat had come up on his hangman's face and his mouth was dust-dry. The moment had arrived, and for it he must make certain Billy Shears did not again escape judgment.

He stood up, shrugged into his long black coat, wrapped a dark green woolen scarf around his throat, put on his tricorne and thrust the pistol down into the waistband of his breeches on the left side. He peered out the window once more. The figure could not be seen...but Billy Shears was there. Oh yes...he was waiting out there, somewhere, and the end of their game could not be denied.

Kent took a long, deep breath. Then he left the room, descended the curving stairway and went out the door into the murky night.

Sometime later—possibly nearing toward forty minutes—a single pistol shot was heard by only a few residents who lived up near the disused Dutch docks on the river, just off the West Ward. At most, it caused three farmers to rise up from their beds and peer out their windows, but what they could see was nothing. Then—as most people in New York town wished only to tend to their own business and not become involved in the entanglements of others—they returned to their states of rest.

And the dark went on until dawn.

Four.

"There," said Katherine Herrald, "is his pipe. Our problem presently is...where is the smoker?"

John Kent's black pipe was indeed sitting atop the dresser next to the packet of tobacco. Minx Cutter crossed the room to examine the implements that lay on the bed: a bag of lead shot, a small box of flints, and a leather powderhorn. "Another question," she said. "Here are the preparations, but where's the gun?"

"Do you think something's happened to Mr. Kent?" Mary Belovaire asked, holding the lamp with its three candles that lit the room. She was a

thin lady with long gray hair, a sharp beak of a nose and the ability to use that proboscis to sniff out the business of just about everyone in town, though she was of generally a peaceful and friendly nature. "When he left late last night, I nearly spoke to him to ask where he was bound...but I held my tongue and now I regret it."

Katherine nodded, but was also examining the implements used for loading a pistol. When Kent had not appeared at six o'clock at Sally Almond's, Katherine and Minx had been curious...when the hour of eight o'clock had arrived, they knew something was definitely amiss and thought they might be an hour late with their suspicions. They had walked across Nassau Street in the drizzling rain, and, entering Madam Belovaire's boarding house, had heard the tale that the landlady had detected someone coming down the stairs—that eighth riser from the top always made a little skreech that caused the skin on the back of her neck to crawl, yet no carpenter in town seemed to be able to quiet the beast—and she'd peered out her door to see Kent leaving, and she'd known it was him because—well, she knew all her boarders, she had a quick memory, and he had that nice fearnaught coat, and also she caught a glimpse of the glove he always strangely wore on his—

"Yes, thank you, Mary," Katherine had interrupted. "May we see his room?"

"Is Mr. Kent in any trouble?" Mary asked as the two problem-solvers surveyed the dwelling. "He was so quiet and solitary, yet he seemed a decent man."

Katherine went to the window, drew aside the curtain and looked down upon the wet street, where a wagon carrying a cargo of barrels was just passing on its southward journey to the docks. "Mary?" she said. "Has anyone else been asking about Mr. Kent? Anyone at all?"

"No."

"Anyone you met on an errand happen to ask how your business is doing?"

"Many people do that. It's just the way of things."

"Certainly. But did any of those people ask if you ever had boarders who were in any way peculiar? Just in the matter of passing?"

"Well, I can't..." Mary paused and tapped her long chin with an index finger. "A moment. It happened some time ago...last week, it was. I happened to be in Mrs. Kenneday's bakery...early in the morning it was, I recall that.

Then...he came in and asked for a dozen biscuits, and he said good morning to me and asked...oh, but that's nothing to remark on!"

Katherine watched drops of rain slowly running their courses down the window's glass. "Yet do remark upon it, Mary. Go on, all you can remember. And who exactly are we talking about, who wanted these dozen biscuits?"

Mary gave the name.

Katherine remained at the window, only half her face catching the light from Mary's lamp. "The rest of it, please."

"It was as you say. We began talking—just a chat, you know—and he asked that question...or sort of that question, in a humorous kind of way. He said in his profession he saw all the foibles of people and he was sure he and I shared observations on human nature. Of course I was flattered by this, him being who he is—"

"Of course," said Katherine, with a faint smile.

"Yes. So then...I recall...he asked if I had anyone recently who I might consider strange, and I told him about Mr. Kent's gloved hand. It was an innocent thing, just to pass the time. What does *he* have to do with this?"

Minx spoke up. "Did you tell this gentleman what room Kent occupied?"

"No, not directly. But I recall he said—and all this was just done in the most jocular fashion, you understand—that if this man had a window that looked out upon Nassau, he would beware walking beneath it in case the peculiarity of dumping a bedpan onto the street was also part of my boarder's strange nature. I said Mr. Kent did, but I reminded him not to fear, that the situation of bedpans was under strict control and that Mr. Kent seemed a very civilized sort." Mary frowned and looked from Katherine to Minx and back again. "What in the *world* would have been wrong with a little joking conversation? Besides, he has been very instrumental in helping relieve the pain in my knees I sometimes suffer."

"I am glad to hear that, Mary," Katherine said as she turned from the window. She offered Madam Belovaire a smile. "Nothing whatsoever was wrong with your conversation. Please forget that I even asked." She made a show of looking around the room once more, but her investigations here were done. "Thank you for allowing Minx and myself in. As for Mr. Kent, he had asked us to do a small service for him while he was here. I'm sure he'll turn up, somewhere. And as for us...since Minx and I were working for Mr. Kent in that capacity, please keep it to yourself that we were inquiring about him."

It's no one's business. Yes?"

"Certainly. But shall I expect Mr. Kent in the next day or two? It appears he's left all his belongings and clothes here. Even left that pipe of his! It's a mystery, isn't it?"

"Indeed," came the quiet response. "But one I believe shall be solved, very soon."

"And by the by," Madam Belovaire added, "would Mr. Greathouse be returning anytime soon?"

"One hopes. I might assure you that if the money for boarding that Hudson left for you is depleted before his arrival, I shall make up the difference."

"Ah, excellent! I was just wondering, mind you."

Outside, as they walked south along Nassau Street, Katherine said to Minx, "Clever, that. He only had to know for sure that Kent secured a room with a window on the street. Then he could keep watch and see which window lit up with lantern light as soon as Kent departed from Sally Almond's. Of course Billy Shears lured Kent out last night, and Kent took a loaded pistol with him. How that lure was done is unknown, but since Kent has not returned I doubt we'll be seeing our pale pipesmoker again, unless he is lying wounded somewhere and both the players in the game are incapacitated, but I think it more likely from the history of this matter that the killer has emerged victorious."

"So," Minx said grimly, "Billy Shears has won the game."

Katherine stopped walking and looked Minx in the face. Katherine's jaw was set and red embers glinted in her eyes. "Has possibly won the game from John Kent," she said. "But *we* are now involved in the game...and he has not won from us. Now let us go get out of this drizzle, have a cup of coffee, and determine what is the next move."

At the new coffee shop that had just opened two weeks before on Wall Street, Katherine and Minx drank from their cups of the dark elixir and enjoyed the warmth of the brown brick fireplace. There were quite a few patrons at the tables, most of whom both the women knew, but the two problem-solvers were only absorbed with the problem at hand.

"The name of the gentleman in question," said Katherine, "was given to me this afternoon at Polly Blossom's. I decided not to mention it before, until I had further information, but now I'll tell you."

She had gone to the rose-colored house on Petticoat Lane that was the abode of Polly Blossom and her garden of flowers. Here the gentlemen ventured both day and night—mostly night, unless one was spectacularly drunk or obviously aroused enough to cause a public panic—and spent their money on the damsels. All the flowers were neither particularly beautiful nor youthful, but experience had its own virtues.

Sitting in the tidy, fragrant parlor with the tall, big-boned, blonde, and exuberant Polly, Katherine had explained what she wanted while several of the girls slinked around listening.

"The names of patrons," she began, over a nice cup of chamomile tea, "who might have—shall we say—a rather *different* interest in fingers and hands."

Polly paused with the cup at her mouth, her clear blue eyes wide. "Pardon me?"

"A sexual interest in fingers and hands," Katherine went on. "Possibly outlandish. Something that would definitely be remembered by one of your girls, I would think."

Polly sipped at her tea and gracefully set the pink cup back into its saucer. "Madam Herrald, don't think me rude, but that's about the strangest fucking request I've heard all month."

"It may be so, but still it's a valid line of inquiry. I can't tell you why I'm after this information. You know my work and my reputation. Also I understand you have had pleasant dealings with Matthew Corbett."

"Oh dear sweet Matthew! I pray Hudson Greathouse has found him by now!"

"As we all do. But I was going to add that if Matthew were here, he would be at my side asking this question instead of me. You must know it concerns a current situation Minx Cutter and I are—"

"That Minx!" said Polly with a laugh and a flash of the eyes. "There's one for you!"

Katherine restrained herself from asking *one what* and continued on: "Minx and I are handling. It is important that I get this information...that is, if there's anything to be gotten."

Polly took her time drinking her tea. She spent a moment telling a young dark-haired girl that if she didn't clean up her room she would soon be lodging on the street, and Katherine heard in the hard voice the stern

taskmaster that such a profession desired. To Katherine, such a position would be akin to herding cats.

When the young prostitute had departed, Polly leaned toward Katherine, and quietly said, "To offer the names of my customers would destroy my business. Trust is everything. If it got out that I was naming names, not only would a quarter of the men in this town be horsewhipped by their wives, but the packet boats would get rich taking those same men down to Philadelphia and up to Boston."

"I wasn't aware those towns had such entertainments."

Polly gave a short, harsh laugh. "Oh my! Such a world you must live in! Quakers and Puritans be damned when it comes to money and needs of the flesh. Where there's opportunity and money to be made...well, there will be establishments just like this one and also the castoffs in the street doing what they must do to survive. But you know all this, you're not a fool."

"I hope I'm not," said Katherine with an affable smile. "Now...to my question. Do you have such a customer? I would think he might be a regular."

"We have several with what might be called outlandish tastes. But I'm not a judge and no one else judges anyone here."

"A wonderful philosophy. Again I point you in the direction of an answer. A particular interest—an obsession perhaps—with the hands and fingers. Who might that be?"

Polly's eyes narrowed. "Well, now. Maybe I have such information and maybe I don't. What's it worth to you?"

Katherine had reasoned it would come to the purse. An agreement of six pounds was made after a few go-rounds, down from the ten Polly first proposed.

Polly gave the name.

"He's unmarried," she said, "so if this gets out, at least he won't be tarred and feathered by an enraged woman. But it won't get out, will it?"

"It will not. The story, please. What is his interest?"

"It seems," Katherine said in a guarded voice to Minx as they sat at the table with their cups of coffee, "that our gentleman liked to employ his fingers and indeed his entire hand—both hands, in fact—in sexual acts that I think might cause the Devil a fright. Perhaps I'm being old-fashioned and perhaps I *am* old, but I was brought up a certain way. Such things...well, they were even so extreme that they frightened the young prostitute he liked to

visit. She left a few months ago, went somewhere to the north." A hard rain had begun to drum on the roof and hiss in the hearth. "The addition to this rather sordid tale," said Katherine with a look as if she had bitten into a bitter lemon, "is that our gentleman employed the girl to do the same service to *him*."

Minx's sudden laugh was so loud Katherine feared the other patrons would think she was having a fit. It nearly knocked a half dozen cups to the floor from startled hands.

"Pardon," Minx said when she was able to speak. She wiped the tears of hilarity from her eyes. "I couldn't help but imagine it."

"My imaginings of such perversities don't end in uproarious mirth." Katherine drank down the rest of her coffee and sat staring into the empty cup. "Damn," she said at last. "Maybe I *am* old." After a silent pause of reflection upon this point, she righted herself and went on. "Your task tomorrow is to make the rounds of the stable owners. Begin with Tobias Winekoop. Ask if our gentleman has a habit of renting a horse and jaunting about for several days. They may wish to know why. Tell them it's official business. I'll give you a few pounds to play with, money being the official tongue-loosener. Also, I'd like to know if our gentleman is a regular at any of the gaming clubs. Can you take care of that?"

"Of course. There are four. I can ask Reggie to find out."

Katherine nodded. Reggie—to Katherine last name unknown and unasked for—was Minx's contact in the lower dives of the town. How she had gained the confidence and aid of an individual who evidently was part thief, part vagabond, and part Sir Ears and Eyes was Minx's business, but then again, there were definite advantages to employing a problem-solver of Miss Cutter's particular talents.

"If your Reggie can learn that our gentleman is a member of all four clubs," said Katherine, "and we find that he has the habit of travelling about for several days, it may be time for a visit to the man himself. Very well, then. We shall see what we shall see."

* * *

It was after four in the morning when Minx resigned herself to bed. Sometime after that, she was roused not by the sound of the rain drumming

on the roof, but by the aroma of burning tobacco.

She sat up, and there saw in the far corner of the room a small glow.

It strengthened fractionally. In its slightly increased light she saw the blurred image of his pallid face as smoke swirled around the visage. He was neither form nor shape, simply the pipe-glow and smoke mask there in the corner. There for a few seconds and then gone.

She stared into the dark.

"We'll get him," she said to the departed phantom, if indeed anything had been there at all. For it had occurred to her that her encounter with Billy Shears in the fog had increased the tempo of the game and caused the killer to lure Kent out into the street, taking him to someplace where the game could be finished in favor of Shears.

Your time is running out, she'd said to the man in the fog.

Yes, he'd replied. *Time is running out. Thank you for making that so clear. Pardon me, won't you?*

And instead of putting paid to the situation right then and there, Minx had retreated to a tavern and had a drink while Billy Shears went on his way to Mary Belovaire's boarding house. If Kent was indeed dead, had his death been fast or slow? In any event, Minx felt herself to blame for spurring Shears on...she should have at least followed him...should have done something...anything...and Kent might be alive this night.

"We'll get him," she said again. She settled back against her pillow, but before she was asleep again the rain had ceased and the first somber light of dawn had begun to creep across the horizon.

Five.

So it came about that on a morning a few days hence from their conversation of strategy, Katherine and Minx approached a small but well-kept white house with green shutters where William Street began to curve upward toward the larger estates of the wealthy merchants on Golden Hill.

The weather of the day was indecisive, rays of sunlight one moment and the next abolished by the movement of thick rain-heavy clouds. Katherine and Minx went up four steps to the front door. It was noted by both women that the door's knocker was a small brass hand. Katherine knocked, and they

waited as a cold wind swirled around their hats and coats.

There was no response. Katherine used the brass handle again, more firmly.

At last a man's voice from beyond the door answered. "I am not seeing visitors today."

"We have pressing business," Katherine said. "It can't wait."

"Who is that?"

She introduced herself and Minx, but she had the idea he already knew.

"I am not feeling well. If you have an ailment, please go to the Publick Hospital."

"Yes, we understand you're not in perfect health," Katherine said. "We have already visited the hospital." Their visit had resulted in the discovery from one of the two new physicians who'd arrived in the past few months that the gentleman in question had sent a messenger several days before stating he was feeling ill and would be taking a short leave. The timing of that, both Katherine and Minx knew, dovetailed exactly with the morning after Kent had been lured from his quarters.

"Please depart," said the man. Minx's mouth had tightened; the voice was weak, yet it held a characteristic she recognized from the speaker in the fog.

"We shall not," Katherine answered. "Open the door, doctor. Or instead of addressing Dr. Quail Polliver, should I be addressing Billy Shears?"

There was a silence. Then: "What nonsense are you talking, woman?" This time the voice carried a harsher note.

"It seems to me that the winner of any game finds satisfaction in seeing the faces of his vanquished opponents. I ask you again to open the door."

They waited. The wind shrilled around them.

In another moment they heard a latch being turned.

The door opened.

"State your business and be gone," the doctor said.

They walked past him into the tastefully-appointed parlor. He closed the door at their backs and latched it again. "Ah!" said Katherine. "Minx, do you smell that lingering odor of medicinals?"

"I treat patients here," Polliver said. "Why would that odor *not* be present?"

"Of course it should be. Any hospital or physician's office would present that odor. It's the kind of thing that gets into one's clothes, I might think."

Minx knew what Katherine was getting at. When John Kent had recalled

the attack on him by Billy Shears, he'd said *It was almost a medicinal smell...no...different...the smell of a predatory beast. His sweat of anticipation, I suppose.*

But Kent had been correct in his first assumption. Indeed, it had been the odor of medicinals from the killer's clothes.

"I would offer to take your hats and coats," said the doctor, "but I hope you're not staying long. I am just out of bed." Indeed, he was wearing a blue-and-yellow paisley dressing gown that hung to his ankles. He was gray-faced with dark hollows beneath his eyes. Still, he was a tall and stately figure, a man probably in his early fifties, with broad shoulders and a noble, handsome visage. His hair was dark brown except for a gray forelock. By the parlor's yellow lamplight, a slight sheen of sweat could be seen glistening on his forehead.

Katherine smiled. "I presume this is a case of physician heal thyself? Minx, the odor is so strong because Dr. Polliver is treating himself for...would it be a pistol wound? Where did John Kent hit you? Somewhere not fatal, it appears. A crease of the leg or the side, perhaps? Painful, for sure. Certainly not something you'd want the other doctors to see."

Polliver gave a gruff laugh, yet his dark brown eyes held no humor. "Have you lost your senses? And who is John Kent?"

"The question I would ask you is, *where* is John Kent? Will his body ever be found?"

"The asylum beckons you, madam."

Now it was Katherine's turn to laugh. She walked past Minx, looking at the various objects in the parlor. There were nice pieces of pottery, a few dignified oil paintings, and...lo and behold, a skeletal hand wired together and displayed on a little pedestal beneath a dome of glass. "Are you really a doctor?" she asked.

"Of course. You weren't here at the time, but you must know I tended to Matthew Corbett when he was unfortunately singed in a house fire. That whole business was a bit strange, but I can assure you, I have been very successful at my profession for many years."

"Which profession, sir? Doctoring or murdering?"

"Is she always so addled in the brain?" Polliver asked Minx.

"We know who you are," Minx answered. She walked closer to the doctor until they were only a few feet apart. Polliver made a motion to step back a

pace, but halted himself as the move made him wince. "We know about the trips you've been taking. Four or five days, every two or three months. You prefer to spread your business from stable to stable. We know."

Polliver stared into Minx's face.

She saw him change.

Something in his own face seemed to sharpen. The eyes seemed to sink in and the bones jutted like small blades of their own, eager for the cutting. He lifted his unshaven chin and a smile rippled across the terrible slash of his mouth.

But there only for a heartbeat, then gone.

"I attend patients," he said quietly, "in more localities than this town. In fact, I assist other physicians elsewhere, and I am much in demand. My speciality is—"

"Finger snipping?" Katherine ventured.

"Surgery," he responded, with the blankest expression. "Now, I am weakened by my poor condition. It is the weather afflicting me...no more and no less. I am going back to bed, and you are both going *out*." He moved past Minx and toward the door, and both women saw him press a hand against his left side.

"Your prostitute at Madam Blossom's," said Katherine, standing in her spot. "Her name was Miranda, I understand? Such games! What pleasure do you get from that activity?"

Polliver stopped with his hand reaching toward the latch. He turned toward Katherine with a faint smile but his eyes were deadly.

"I wish to know," Katherine continued in a calm, even tone, "what causes a man educated in *healing* to become...well, to become Billy Shears." She tapped the glass dome beneath which was held the skeletal hand. "To be so intent—driven, I would think—to murder unfortunates in such a fashion, and take their fingers as some sort of calling card. What was it—what *is* it—that drives you? May I be informal and call you Billy?" She plowed onward without waiting for the answer that she knew would never come. "Something in your past, I presume. Some incident that has caused you to become both healer and destroyer of life. Some...I suppose one might call it a *kink*? The twisted memory of a mother's or a father's hand? The hand perhaps of a minister? The hand of a prostitute when you were a child? A hand raised against you in a rage that you can never forget nor forgive? Or were you

simply born of two natures, and both live in the same mind that is equally proficient at healing and desirous of killing? What is the answer, Billy? Before we leave, I must know."

"*Ha*," spoke the man, in what was nearly a strangled whisper.

He looked from one woman to the next and back again, and if disgust and hatred had been a physical thing both of them would have been torn to shreds by it.

"You know," he whispered, "*nothing*. Vanquished opponents, yes. That is all you are. And *him* as well. The stupidity of him, to come over here on *my* territory. Over there, he almost had me. I knew it was a matter of time. But *here*...a different game altogether. Oh, his stupidity was his undoing! And his arrogance too...thinking he could come over here and finish me. No, no...it was never going to be."

"There he is," said Katherine to Minx. "Look at him. You can vomit when we get outside." She lifted the glass dome and ran her own fingers over the bones. "Kent made the mistake of searching low for you, when he should have been searching high. He never would've considered that a *doctor* was Billy Shears. I presume you *were* a doctor in the Limehouse district?"

"Shadwell."

"Which is adjacent to the Limehouse, is it not? Therefore you had patients who were citizens of the Limehouse, and could tell you all you wished to know in that charming way you possess of gaining information?"

"Our little conversation is over," he said.

"I doubt you're in any condition to throw us out, and I daresay you won't press an offense against us with a constable." Katherine offered him a smile that was in its own way dangerous. She returned the glass dome to its proper place. "Our case against you will not be closed," she said, "until you are brought to justice. In my true estimation, you should be killed like a mad dog in the street, but a public hanging will have to do."

"Such violent dreams!" said Polliver, with a mocking grin. It twisted into a sneer. "You're not a killer, Madam Herrald. Neither are you able to connect me with John Kent in any form or fashion. As you have so intelligently recognized, the game is over. With not a rope's thread of evidence, I believe the hanging noose will in my case forever remain coiled in its box. Am I mistaken? You do have evidence, or is all this the wildest of conjectures that no court in this town—in these *colonies*—would entertain for an instant?"

Neither of the problem-solvers spoke.

"I thought not." Polliver continued to the door, unlatched it and opened it to the wind. "Get out," he commanded.

Katherine stood her ground for a moment more, and then she motioned for Minx to follow her out. On their way past Polliver, the doctor said, "I fear I won't be able to tend to either of you in the future, as you have such a poor opinion of me. But those new young men are very efficient, so your health will not be in jeopardy." He gave a bark of a laugh. "A healer like me accused of being a low-minded murderer! The shame of it!"

And thus the door was closed and locked at their backs.

Six.

November chilled into December, and December shivered into January.

While hopefully waiting for the return of Hudson Greathouse with Matthew and Berry Grigsby, Katherine and Minx had no lack of problems presented to them by anxious and in some cases terrified clients. There was the case of the demonic fiddler, the strange incident of the two-headed dog, and the rescue of the kidnapped Schoonmaacher child from Captain Ballam's river pirates, to signify a few. In particular, the deadly dealings with Captain Ballam convinced Katherine that a woman with a knife was far more valuable than a man with one.

Time went on, as did the month of January.

In the last week of the month, the packet boat *George Hodel* docked at the Philadelphia wharf, having completed its journey southward from New York town. Among the passengers who disembarked in the flurry of falling snow was a tall, elegant-appearing man who wore a long tan-colored overcoat with a darker fur collar, and upon his head a black tricorne with a yellow band. He carried his belongings for this trip in a leather bag that was obviously well-sewn and expensive.

In his sturdy calf's-skin boots, he made his way out of the bustling harbor area and took a room a few blocks away at what was one of the town's prime inns, named the Bancroft Arms. After a short rest in his spacious room, and then a shave and a hot bath downstairs in one of the ceramic tubs afforded for the exclusive residents, he dressed again in fresh clothing, donned the

overcoat, the tricorn, and the boots as well as a dashing white cravat. Then he took a knife with a hooked blade, his pair of newly-sharpened snippers, and a small leather drawstring pouch from his expensive bag, put them into their proper hidden pockets in his coat, and left his room.

Anyone who looked closely into his face would see that he was greatly excited, for it had been too long and the pressure had steadily built. But no one looked closely enough into his face.

As the snow flew, as the citizens of Philadelphia moved about their lives around him, as horse-drawn wagons and carriages passed back and forth on the long straight streets, he stopped at a tavern called the Gray Horse to enjoy an early supper, as twilight was still some time distant. An inquiry at the Gray Horse—one man to another who worked behind the bar, as well as the change of some money—sent him southward still, walking jauntily and crisply through the snow.

He was certainly a man with a purpose.

It was a walk of some distance, as the Quaker town kept the entertainments he sought at what might be considered an area of ill winds. But it was there all the same, and there he must be. The pressure dictated so.

Southward, the town became disjointed. The houses seemed crooked in their structures, and even the pallid sky and the falling snow seemed stained. As he reached a district of close-shouldered hovels, slanted roofs, broken windows, and figures either huddled around open fires or slinking back and forth from alley to alley, the sun had begun to slide toward dusk.

Though the pressure was intense, he decided to have another drink, and in the murky confines of the Mossy Oak, he enjoyed a cup of cider and watched for a while a game of dice. He was tempted to join in, as he liked his games and was usually lucky at them, but twilight was coming on, and he had a long walk back to the Bancroft Arms and a second hot bath to wash all this filth off.

Another inquiry from the barkeep and another exchange of a few coins sent him toward the southwest, where the hovels stood raw and mottled with darkness. He began to see both women and men—those, he presumed, who had checkered histories as indentured servants or otherwise downward turns of fortune—dawdling about. Some whistled at him and motioned for his further attentions. He kept going, as the snow fell on his tricorn and his shoulders and crunched beneath his boots.

The pressure. Terrible now. But soon it would be gone.

A block further to the southwest, nearer the very edge of the town, and there he saw a slender figure in what could only be termed a ragged gray coat and an equally sad woolen cap. He approached, in the deepening twilight, and saw when she looked at him that she was not unattractive, though her face was pocked and one eyebrow was cut through with a scar. She was perhaps fourteen years of age.

Perfect.

"I have money," he told her.

She looked at him blankly, her senses dulled by whatever she used to dull them.

"The alley there," he said, and he gave her his best smile. "Come along, I'll get you warm."

She followed him, into the alley he had motioned toward. He stopped to let her pass. "Go on," he said softly. "To the end of the alley. The wind there will be less." His right hand went to a pocket, but it wasn't time yet. Best while he had her to let her do her business.

She started on, dumbly.

"Run along, dearie," someone said.

Startled by the voice, both the man and the girl looked toward the alley's mouth. The figure that stood there wore a dark green coat and a cocked hat the same color, but the face was hidden by both the fading light and the falling snow.

"Run *along*," the woman repeated. "This one is mine."

The girl did not run; she hobbled past Minx Cutter, and away.

Minx spoke again to Polliver. "Are you wanting a fuck?"

"Who...the *hell* are you?"

Minx came closer. Both hands were encased for warmth in a fur muff. "I'll be pleased to fuck you," she said.

"Do I know—" And then he did know her, and he gave a small short gasp that sounded like a death rattle.

"You were right," Minx said, coming nearer still. She was smiling. Snowflakes were caught in her blonde brows. "Madam Herrald is *not* a killer. But I *am*."

And before hooked blade could be brought from coat pocket, Minx's right hand came out of the muff with its own hooked terror. The knife sliced across

Polliver's throat in one smooth backward arc. Minx deftly retreated as the opened throat spewed crimson. In an instant the doctor's cravat had turned black with it.

The pressure released itself within Billy Shears with a cry of anguish and a spray of piss into the expensive well-tailored breeches.

He staggered back, looking for someplace to run, even as his world began to turn a darker red. His legs carried him into a wall. Twisting about, he ran into another wall. His hands came up and grasped at the dirty bricks, but they failed to hold him.

He fell to his knees. Minx wiped her blade on his left shoulder, her face as cold as the coming night.

Then he toppled forward, twitched a few times, and died in the snow-clad dirt.

Minx waited a moment, until she was sure the candle was snuffed. Then she turned the body over on its back. It paid to have connections in the office where the packet boats signed up their customers. It paid to have someone watching the ledger for the name Quail Polliver, no matter how long it took. It paid also to board the boat the night before its departure, to take one's own supply of food aboard, and stay secure in one's own cabin; no one would ever know you were making the trip.

Katherine Herrald didn't know, and never would. Better that way.

Avoiding the blood, Minx opened the dead man's coat and found the blade, the snippers, and the drawstring pouch in which he'd obviously meant to carry his gory treasures for further amusement. These she left where they were. From her own coat, she withdrew a roll of parchment paper tied with a red ribbon. On the paper she had written in large letters I WAS BILLY SHEARS.

She'd been keeping it since late November.

She tucked the declaration into his coat. Someone might come along and rob the corpse—likely would—but it might be someone who would recognize the name and show it to an authority. After all, she was sure there were plenty of people even here who'd just recently come over from London, and had been regular readers of *Lord Puffery's Pin*.

Someone would know, and if not...then not.

Her task was done.

Case closed, she thought.

As she stood up from her business, did she see the smear of a figure standing back there where the gloom of the alley met the dimming blue of the light? Did she see the faintest glow of flame and see a swirl of smoke spin upward through the snow?

No, of course not.

In any case, he was no longer there.

But all was right. She felt it in her bones. And she knew it in her heart. Then she turned away and left the alley on her long walk back to the center of Philadelphia, but she thought that the Mossy Oak looked like an intriguing kind of place. She'd gotten very thirsty while waiting down the street for him to come out. So, a hot drink on a cold evening...yes, that was the thing.

Just the thing. Right up her alley.