

THE WILD
ADVENTURE
OF JASPER
RENN



The Steampunk Chronicles
Kady Cross

In this companion novella to *The Girl with the Iron Touch*, American cowboy Jasper Renn finds himself in a situation his lightning-fast skills cannot rescue him from...

After surviving a triumph-turned-tragedy in New York City, Jasper is determined to secure a happier future with his gifted band of friends. So when the group's mechanical genius Emily is abducted, he plunges into England's darkest places to rescue her....

But his old flame Wildcat is turning London town upside down to find her missing sister, and Jasper finds the attraction between himself and the fierce beauty as tempting and dangerous as ever. Their trail leads deep into the city's most unusual circus. Soon, Jasper will find his loyalties—and future—tested more than he could ever imagine....

And don't miss Jasper's continuing exploits in *The Girl with the Iron Touch* by Kady Cross, available now from Harlequin TEEN.

The Wild Adventure of Jasper Renn

Kady Cross



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Chapter One

Wildcat McGuire thought of herself as something of a city girl, but as the dirigible she was on drifted toward the Hyde Park landing bay, Cat realized that Manhattan, where she'd grown up, was just an island. When New York was founded by the Dutch in 1624, London was already almost sixteen centuries old.

London was the biggest city she'd ever seen—sprawling out for miles. And the buildings! New York had its share of awe-inspiring buildings—towering ones—but London had so many! Some of them looked downright ancient.

The smells and sounds of the city rose to greet her as she stood on the deck, leather coat wrapped around her to keep the chill of the wind from seeping into her bones. Some of the smells and sounds were pleasant, others were not. That was something London and New York had in common—perfumed opulence piled on top of slums and stench.

But the most important thing about London at the moment was that her sister was here. Somewhere. And so was Jasper Renn, the gorgeous cad who had walked out on her twice. She might still have tender feelings for him—which made her hate him all the more—but she would never trust him with her heart ever again. With her life, yes, but not with anything that mattered.

Closer and closer to the ground the airship drifted. Its timbers creaked in the wind, sails flapping. A bell sounded, signaling their approach to port. Cat had her pack at her feet, ready to jump ship as soon as possible. Sparrow had a week's lead on her, and she didn't want to lose even more time. She just wanted to find her sister and take her someplace safe. Five Points was no longer that place, since it had been bought up and was about to be destroyed. She would find a new home for them, of that she had no doubt.

It was going on twilight, with the threat of rain, but that didn't stop spectators from gathering in Hyde Park to watch the dirigibles land. Tarnation, she was going to be forced to depart in that slow-moving line just like everyone else. Jumping over the side would only draw notice. Usually she could be as patient as the moon, but not today. Not since she realized her sister had run away.

As she set foot on British soil, Cat cast a wary glance around. Either London was an exceptional city or this was the “good” part of it. She had read that Hyde Park was in the hoity part of town, and now she could see for herself. This large expanse of greenery was just as fancy, or fancier, than Central Park. The richies must despise having such a bustling center of travel so close to their mansions. Still, air travel was expensive, and those of the lower classes couldn't afford it.

Cat was one of the few exceptions to that rule. She wasn't poor anymore, but she'd been born into that dismal world, she and her sister. After Abe Lincoln abolished slavery, her grandparents had gathered up the children they still had and headed north. Her mother had been fairly young at the time, but she had scars from a whip on her back all the same. Her father had been born on a farm in Ireland only to come to New York and live in the slums, where the air stank of poverty and ignorance.

But Seamus McGuire had been a fighter, and he made good money fighting. Her mother, Bess, knew how to sew, and she'd made beautiful clothes. It was enough to elevate them from Five Points—but not much. When her father was killed during a fight when she was twelve, Cat had known she'd need to take care of her mother and sister. She'd used her unusual talents and physical differences to steal, fight, run...whatever was needed. It wasn't long before she had her own gang.

She'd turned leadership over to Mick before leaving Manhattan. She was done with crime. She'd lost her taste for it around the time Jasper Renn had strolled back into her neighborhood.

Speaking of neighborhoods...good grief. She hadn't been paying attention as she walked, and she now found herself on the street outside the park. The traffic was similar to New York, with many fine gentlemen and ladies passing by in gorgeous carriages—both steam driven and horse drawn. Beautiful buildings lined the streets, some of them hundreds of years old, others more modern in their appearance. It was noisy, and smelled strange, but it was very, very grand.

“Be needin’ a cab, miss?”

Cat turned her head. Beside her stood a young man with carrot-red hair and bright blue eyes. If his coloring didn't give him away as Irish, his speech would have for certain. His expression changed when he saw her face. Saw her skin.

“Aye,” she replied, falling easily into her father's accent. “I would.”

The boy hesitated, then grinned, all teeth and freckles. He'd been all set to distrust her because of how she looked, but her voice won him over. Prejudice was such a strange thing.

The boy let loose a shrill whistle that immediately brought a black cab hauled by an automaton horse to the curb. The “animal” was flat black with gleaming brass. Intricately carved swirls decorated the black parts, making it a true work of art. A real craftsman had made this beast.

Her ginger friend took her pack and set it inside the coach before holding the door for her. She handed him a shilling for his help.

“Where to, miss?” he asked.

“The Continental,” she replied just before he closed the door and relayed the address to the driver. It was a new hotel. Upscale, but she could afford it. It was close to Mayfair, which was what made it all the more desirable. Mayfair wasn't just the neighborhood where Jasper lived, but where she believed her sister now resided, as well.

She saw two women with skin like hers as the carriage pulled up to her hotel. One had to be the other's mother. She had the arm of a handsome blond man, who also had the arm of the younger girl. People looked at them, but not with the same degree of surprise or disgust as she sometimes saw in America. Slavery had been abolished here half a century before the States finally put an end to it. She wasn't naive enough to think that everyone in London would treat her in a manner that had nothing to do with her skin, but she hoped it wouldn't be held against her. That sort of thing made her angry, and when she was angry she had a tendency to hit people. The only person who made her feel as though they were truly equals was Jasper, damn his eyes.

Cat paid her driver, slung her pack over her shoulder and walked into the hotel. No one paid much attention to her. There were many people coming and going, of all shapes, sizes and colors, and all of them seemed far too busy to concern themselves with a tall girl whose clothes were a little wrinkled, but clean, and whose hair was pinned up under a wide-brimmed hat.

She approached the desk and gave her name. An Asian man who was shorter and thinner than her took a punch card from a slot on the wall and asked her to follow him. He led her across the marble-floored foyer with its Grecian statues, automaton shoe-shine station and young girl trying to sell leaflets on things to do while in London. He led her into the lift, closed the iron outer gate and then the inner brass cage. He inserted a punch card in the slot and then dialed the floor number on the wheel beside it. He didn't speak, which was fine by her.

The lift stopped at the sixth floor. Her escort opened the gates and led her to a door that had the number 606 etched on a shiny brass placard. He opened the door and held it for her. As she crossed the threshold he offered her the punch card. “Your key. May I be of any other service to you, miss?”

“No,” she said. “Thank you very much.” She tipped him a shilling. He didn't seem insulted, so she relaxed a bit.

He gave her a stiff bow. "Enjoy your stay." And then he left her alone in the most opulent room she'd ever seen.

A huge bed sat in the middle of the back wall, draped in beautiful gold brocade that matched the drapes. The carpet was a rich cream, plush and soft beneath her feet when she kicked off her boots. All the furniture was oak and polished to a high shine. There was even a tiny water closet that she didn't have to share with anyone else.

"Sweetness," she whispered with a grin. She splashed water on her face, repinned her unruly hair, smoothed some of the wrinkles out of her clothes and then stepped back into her boots, put on her hat and slipped her punch card into the satchel she wore across her body.

She'd gotten the address of the house on Hertford Street from a friend of her sister's, a foolish little thing who didn't know why Cat was so upset. After all, Sparrow had only run away with the man she loved.

A man who was at least twice the girl's age, a gambler and a heavy drinker. A man Sparrow hadn't bothered to introduce to her big sister, which meant the stupid girl knew she shouldn't run off with him. The girl had more impulsiveness than sense. From what Cat had seen, that was often the case with baby sisters, having been doted upon and spoiled by the rest of the family. There'd be no more of that. Once she found her sister and dragged her home, things were going to change.

She marched straight up the drive of the dauntingly grand mansion, up the steps to the front door, grabbed the pull-cord and gave it a sharp yank. She could hear the bell ring inside the house. A few moments later, the door opened, and a sturdy old man with a bald head and a bushy mustache gave her a narrow look.

"Deliveries and servants use the back entrance." He shoved the door toward her.

Cat stuck her foot in—ouch!—to prevent him from shutting the heavy slab in her face. He was lucky she didn't make him eat it. Answerin' some swell's door didn't make him better than her. "I'm not deliverin' and I'm not a servant. I'm here for Sparrow McGuire."

The butler froze, what little color he had draining from his face. "I beg your pardon?"

"Sparrow. McGuire. Beautiful girl. Skin like mine. She came here from New York City with Lord Charles Berkley, Viscount Canton—or whatever you call him."

"My dear girl, I'm afraid you are mistaken. There is no one here named after a bird, and no one here named—"

"Dunich, who was that at the— Oh." Charles Berkley stopped in the middle of the hall and stared at her. He was tall and lean and handsome, for an Englishman. Unfortunately for him, he wouldn't be the latter for long.

Cat pushed the old man out of her way. He was sturdy, but she was strong and had rage on her side. She stepped over the threshold with determination, stalking toward the viscount like a lion about to pounce.

"Where is she?" she demanded, taking off her glasses.

To his credit, Berkley didn't even try to lie to her. He just whirled around and ran.

She often had that effect on people.

Tucking her glasses into her jacket pocket, Cat gave chase. She was a fast runner—even faster when she adjusted herself enough to run on all fours, but this made for a longer chase, which was often very enjoyable to the freak side of her nature.

Cat didn't know why she was the way she was, though Jasper reckoned she'd "evolved," like him and his friends. All she knew for certain was that she was different and she liked it, even though wearing dark spectacles all the time was a bit of a nuisance, but her slitted eyes made folks

uncomfortable.

Berkley was lean, but he wasn't terribly fit. Cat caught him at the top of the stairs—actually two from the top, but who was counting? The viscount tripped over his own feet and went sprawling to the dark blue carpet. Cat immediately pounced, positioning herself so that while not on him, she certainly had him caged.

She smelled him, mouth partially open. It was weird, but she could taste certain things on the air, such as fear. It had both smell and taste, and Berkley was definitely afraid, given the sour essence coming off him.

“Don't hurt me,” he pleaded.

Cat hissed at him. She preferred hissing to growling because it better showcased her fangs. “Where's my sister? And if you lose control of your bladder I'm going to slice off your eyebrows.” She held up one finger, topped by a wickedly curved claw, just to point a finer point—no pun intended—on the threat.

“I don't know.” He actually whimpered. “I swear to heaven I do not know!”

“You brought her back here with you.”

“Yes, but not to my *house*.” She must have had some reaction to his statement because he began stammering to correct it. “I mean, I put Sparrow up in her own house, with her own servants. I gave her everything she could want, but she disappeared. I thought she robbed—er, went back to New York.”

So Sparrow was in the wind. She believed the viscount because his fear of her was genuine. Also, there was only the slightest trace of her sister's scent left in the house.

“She doesn't care about material things,” she informed Berkley. “And I wager she didn't take a thing with her that you hadn't given her outright. She loved you, you know. She thought you loved her.”

“I did. I do!”

Cat stood up. “Not enough to marry her, though.”

“Marry her?” He looked aghast as he pushed himself into a sitting position on the stairs. “I couldn't marry her. I have to marry a woman of my station—it's what's expected of me.”

She stared at him. How could she have thought people were different here?

“My little sister is out there alone in a big city because you're an arse. You'd better hope I find her safe and healthy, because if I don't, I'll be coming back for a little chat.”

Berkley turned even paler. God, he was practically a ghost. Cat sneered at him before hopping on the banister and riding it down to the floor. She jumped off with her usual grace and strode toward the door. The butler actually held it open for her. She mocked him with a flourish of a bow before stepping out into the evening.

Where the devil had her sister gone, and how was she ever going to find her when she was unfamiliar with the land? She was an excellent tracker, but this was going to be like trying to find a particular piece of hay in an entire stack. She knew absolutely nothing about this city or the people who lived in it. But she knew someone who did. Jasper Renn, who she'd sworn never to speak to again.

Damn.

Chapter Two

Jasper Renn was soaked in so much sweat his clothes clung to him like a second skin. He'd used his talent for moving incredibly fast to run around England—literally—and had returned to King House only seconds earlier. His body mercifully tired, he hauled himself upstairs to his room, shut the door and began undressing as he walked into the small, attached private bathing chamber.

He turned the taps in the tub until the water gushing from them was the right temperature, and then threw the lever that forced the stream to come out the shower attachment. Naked, he climbed in, letting the hot water rinse away the sweat and stink and uselessness he felt.

Miss Emily, darling of a girl, was lost. Taken. He'd just searched the entire country for a clue to her whereabouts and found nothing. *Nothing*. She couldn't have dropped off the face of the earth, which just left the uncomfortable realization that he'd missed something.

But then, missing something seemed to be a talent of his, as well. He had missed that Mei, the girl he once loved with all his heart, was not who he thought she was. And he'd missed the fact that she loved someone else. In the end, he'd missed being able to save her, as well.

He didn't blame Griffin for her death, not really. Griffin hadn't known that his abilities would trap Mei in a wall, crushing her. Mostly Jasper blamed himself for not being able to stop her before she died. He blamed himself that she had fallen in with Reno Dalton. He blamed himself for a lot of things. He had more regrets than a man of eighteen should be carrying on his shoulders.

He couldn't save Mei. Couldn't find Emmy. And he couldn't forget Cat. When he'd first gotten involved with Wildcat a couple years ago, he'd still been half in love with Mei. He'd told himself Cat was only having fun—like he was. When it came to lying to himself, he was plumb brilliant. The second time—he'd stopped by New York on his way back from San Fran a little while ago—he'd known it wasn't just meaningless fun for either of them, but he'd still left. In fact, he couldn't have run away fast enough. The joke was on him, though. He'd run away and thoughts of her followed him. Haunted him.

If Jasper regretted Mei, then he...well, he couldn't think of an adequate word to describe the depth of his remorse where Cat was concerned, but it was deep. The bottomless kind. It had to be, because he couldn't stop thinking about her. She was fine, of course. That girl would always come out on top. He could write to her, but what would he say? That he was sorry, but he just couldn't get involved with another girl who lived on the wrong side of the law? It made him sound like a pansy. And New York held too many painful memories for him to ever entertain living there. Besides, if Dalton ever got out of jail, he might come looking for revenge, and London would be a lot more difficult for him to get to, especially since Griffin had connections with the local port authorities.

No, London was where his life was now. Where his friends were. Where he wanted to be, even though it was sometimes painful to look Griffin in the eye, still ashamed of involving his friends in that mess. They had traveled all the way to Manhattan—at great expense—to bring him home, and learned all about his shady past in the process. Finley had even infiltrated Dalton's gang and risked her own life to save him.

How could he ever begin to repay that kind of debt?

Tarnation, but he was tired of thinking about this stuff. Finally feeling clean, he turned the taps and dried off with a soft towel, which he then secured around his waist. He just wanted to go to sleep and wake up someone different.

Or at least have something to wake up for. It was maudlin, but a little happiness didn't seem too

much to ask.

Barefoot, he walked into his room, rubbing his hand in his hair to make the waves dry faster. He had just taken three steps in when he froze. Jasmine. Sunshine. He knew that scent. His heart slammed against the inside wall of his chest. His mouth dried up like the Nevada desert.

“Hey, Jas.”

That voice. He closed his eyes. Was this a joke? Had he finally lost his ever-loving mind? Now he was imagining her there—smelling her, even!

But that tingle between his shoulder blades—that was real. That sensation of knowing that if someone had a knife to bury in your back you’d be dying at that very moment. Very slowly, he turned his hand instinctively going to his hip.

“You gonna shoot me with a towel?” There was mockery in that husky tone. “Or you got something under there I should know about?”

Jasper forced his shoulders to relax. Forced himself to relax. “Cat. What the blue blazes are you doing in London?” How had he managed to sound so calm and collected? She was in his bedroom—and he remembered things they’d done in hers—sitting there with dust on her boots, as if she owned the place. She’d removed her hat, and all her hair, that glorious riot of corkscrew curls, fell over her shoulders.

She had the *best* hair.

Gracefully, she rose out of the chair and walked toward him. Instinctively, he placed his hands in front of his privates, because she had the look of a woman intent on damaging a man. “Why, Jasper. I came to see you, of course.”

Were that but true. His heart reacted as though it was gospel and not a honeyed lie just to torment him. “The only way you’d come to see me is if I was hanging by a noose.” He knew it was true, because he had hurt her, and Cat was one of those women you could fight with, curse and wish to the very devil, and she’d still come back. But hurt her...

She stuck out her lower lip. She also had the best lips. Red and soft, he’d kiss them if he didn’t think he was in enough trouble already. “You make me sound evil.”

“No room for evil in you with all that pride takin’ up space,” he retorted. “Be honest, Cat. You didn’t come here for me. You’d rather poke out your own eye than confess to missing me, so why are you here?”

Something flickered in her eyes. Something strange. Could it be that she had actually missed him? He was such a dolt. Of course she’d missed him. Her feelings had been as sincere as his own.

“Sparrow,” she said softly. “She’s gone.”

Jasper frowned. “Gone? Oh, Cat. Do you mean she’s...dead?”

She shot him a look that said exactly how low she thought his intelligence. “No, I mean she ran off with a rich white man who promised her chocolates and flowers and pretty dresses.”

He swore. She chuckled dryly, as though he’d understated it. “How old is she?”

“Fifteen just this week.”

“How old is the bastard she ran off with?”

“Six and twenty.”

More swearing. Other girls would have squealed in disgust, but Cat looked as though she agreed wholeheartedly. “Do you know who he is?”

“Yeah. Fella not far from here, but that doesn’t matter now.”

“The hell it doesn’t! We’ll go get her and I’ll teach the bounder a thing or two about the dangers of molesting young girls.” Maybe six things—straight out of his Colt.

“She’s not there anymore.”

He hadn’t expected to hear that. “Where is she?”

“Not the foggiest.” She lifted her chin and met his gaze with a direct one of her own. “You and I are no good together, I know that, but I need your help. I know I’m not the easiest woman to get along with, but I wouldn’t come to you if it weren’t important. You and your friends know this city. I can track, but in a place this size it’s next to impossible unless I have a place to start. Will you help me?”

She made it sound as though maybe their breakup had been her fault. Maybe in a way it was, because of her criminal activity, but he’d been the one to run out. “You don’t even have to ask. The others are busy trying to find Emily, but I’ll help you.”

Cat’s brow puckered. “The one you had with you the day you came to collect your belongings?”

“No, that was Finley. Emily’s a sweet little Irish gal who has a way with machines. She disappeared—looks like abduction.”

“It’s contagious.”

If someone else had made that callous a joke, he would have blackened their eye, but somehow Cat managed to say these sorts of things and make the situation a little palatable. “Appears so.”

“Well, you don’t have to help me. I can do this on my own. You should go find your friend. It’s obvious you have a lot of tenderness t’ward her.”

Surprise took hold of his face. He could only imagine the hideous expression that surely had to be convulsing his features. “Miss Emily’s my friend. She has her fella, and I couldn’t be happier for the two of them.” That was a lie. He was happy for them, but sometimes he wondered why it seemed so easy for some people to engage in relationships, while others would never, ever find that sort of happiness. “They don’t need me anyway.” And that was just him being a spoiled brat.

“I don’t *need* you, either, just so you know.”

Jasper looked at her. She was staring at his chest. His naked chest. Could she see his heart pounding beneath his skin? “But you want me.” His voice was low. “My help, I mean.” He’d never thought himself particularly skilled at flirting, but with Cat it seemed to come naturally.

She swallowed. Slowly, her gaze rose up his chest, his neck, his jaw, and then finally met his. “Yes. I want your help. I don’t like it, but I do.”

Why did he get the feeling she was talking about more than his “help”?

God, she was so pretty. Fierce. He had no right to be thinking about her like this, to wonder what she’d do if he put his arms around her. He remembered the feeling of her skin against his. But she’d be going back to New York, and he would stay in London. She’d go back to crime and he’d go on with Griffin’s bunch. The two of them couldn’t be more different.

Tarnation, but he wanted to kiss her.

“Can we go now?” she asked, gesturing to the open window she must have climbed through.

“I need to let someone know I’m going out, and put some clothes on, ’less you’d prefer I go out like this.” He spread his arms.

Her gaze traveled along the length of him once more. “I’m not keen on attracting attention. That pretty face will get us noticed more than enough.”

“You think I’m pretty?”

She arched a brow, a wry expression on her face. “Like you don’t already know it. I’ve seen you use your looks to make so many girls do what you want. Charm and a pretty face, that’s what you are.”

Now, that sounded like an insult, and it stung. “You must really be worried about Sparrow to come to me.”

“I am.”

“You hate me that much, Cat?”

~~Her eyes burned with intensity, her vertical pupils wide in the dim light. “I wish I could hate you. I’d be so much happier if I hated you.”~~

Jasper’s breath hitched a little. If she didn’t hate him... No, there was no future for them. “I wish you hated me, too.”

And then he kissed her.

Chapter Three

Oh, lord.

Cat's hands came up to grab Jasper by the hair and push him away. Instead, her fingers tangled in his damp curls and pulled him closer. His arms went around her, holding her tight as he kissed her. She kissed him back.

He infuriated her. Could hurt her like no other. He also kissed like a dream and felt like heaven. And he smelled so very, very good—like pie. She didn't even want to think about how good he looked half-naked. Was he more muscular than the last time she'd seen him? He looked more rugged and less pretty. He was the most gorgeous thing she'd ever seen, and one of the best people she'd ever known. There weren't many she'd talk about favorably, but she would about Jasper, even though he'd broken her heart.

He had to feel something for her, because fellas kissed girls they liked differently—either as if they were made of china, or as if he was dying of thirst and she was a cool mountain spring.

Obviously, Jas didn't think she was fragile.

What was she doing? Her sister was missing and she was digging the fingers of one hand into Jasper's scalp while her other hand explored his bare shoulder and back. She wanted to rub her face in the crook of his neck and breathe him in.

And Sparrow was out there all alone.

It took all of Cat's strength to push him away. How stupid was she? She was *not* going to risk her heart again, especially not at her sister's expense, but she had no sense when it came to Jasper Renn.

"Get dressed," she told him. "I'll wait for you outside." She slipped out the window and down the side of the house the way she had come up, her claws digging into the stone as she descended. The cool night air was just what she needed to return to sanity. The nerve of him, standing there looking so gorgeous and knowing it! He ought to be ashamed of himself—but really, when a man looked that good, he had to know it, or he was a simpleton.

Above her she heard the window shut. Was he not going to—

"All right, let's go."

Cat jumped. She couldn't help it. One second she'd seen him at the window and before she could finish her thought he was right in front of her. She'd forgotten how fast he was, but it seemed as though maybe he'd gotten even faster.

Jasper grinned. "Nerves frayed, are they, kitten?"

"No." She scowled. "Call me by that awful name again and I'll slice you open from belly to throat."

"You'd have to catch me first." He turned and walked away, leaving her no choice but to hurry after him. He was not in charge of this search—*she* was. He was not allowed to make her feel as though he was the boss. Some of it came from pride, but some from her parents. Regardless of their love for each other, her mother had distrusted white folks in general, which made sense, given her family history, and her father had mistrusted everyone who wasn't Irish. That left Cat with the assurance that she could trust only herself, and possibly Sparrow.

Although it seemed she'd been misguided in that respect. Her sister had just up and left without even a goodbye. Sparrow had been angry at her, and maybe with good reason, but that was no reason to just...abandon her sister.

She was at Jasper's side when they entered the stables. There was a low level of lighting in there—just enough that most regular folk could barely see to get around. Cat could see everything quite

clearly, so when she spotted the velocycles in their bays, she immediately felt a spark of adventure.

“Are we taking two of those?” she whispered.

Jasper shook his head. He wasn’t wearing his hat, which made him look like less of a cowboy.

“We’re taking one.”

“But if we find Sparrow...”

He shot her a glance. “Then you’ll either take a hack back to your hotel and I’ll drive the cycle, or you’ll come back here, in which case I’ll just run.” He shrugged as if it wasn’t any big concern.

When had he become so comfortable with his abilities? When she’d first met him, he had been using his talents for nefarious reasons, and he’d seemed pretty torn up over it. He had not been made for a life of crime. Neither had she, it turned out—though she had been very good at it once.

She’d turned to crime to feed herself and her sister, to help people less fortunate and, yes, for money. She was now at a point where she didn’t need much where money was concerned, and stealing, dealing and wheeling just didn’t hold the same allure they once had.

Jasper, on the other hand, was as fascinating—or more so—as he had been on that first meet. The scoundrel.

He straddled one of the cycles, leaving her room to climb onto the padded seat with him. “You’ll have to put your arms around me. You all right with that?”

Was he teasing her? “I think I can handle it.”

“But can you control yourself? I wouldn’t want to drive you into a state of histrionics.”

She glared at him—because she wanted to laugh. “All this English tea and pudding has gone to your head and turned what brain you had to mush.”

“Used too many big words for you, did I?” he asked with a grin. “I’ve been workin’ on my vocabulary, my elocution, my verbosity, my... Damn me, but I can’t think of another word.”

She would not laugh. She would. Not. Laugh.

She laughed. Jasper’s grin grew.

“Don’t be mad at me, Cat. I lied when I said it would be better if you didn’t like me.”

Was that cracking ache in her chest her heart breaking? “I lied, too.” She wasn’t about to point out how many times. “And I’m not mad at you, Jas. Not really. Not much. But you hurt my feelings, boy, and I can’t forgive you for it.”

His grin slid from his face. “I know, and I’m sorry for it.”

Of course he was. So was she. She climbed onto the cycle behind him and wrapped her arms around his waist. “Don’t worry about it. It doesn’t matter anymore. We’re over. Just help me find Sparrow.”

He started the velocycle, the low rumble of the engine coming to life like a purring lion. “All right,” he said.

Cat didn’t know which of the three he was in agreement with, and she was afraid to ask. It didn’t matter, she told herself, but she was lying again.

It mattered quite a bit.

* * *

Jasper didn’t know Sparrow that well—he’d met the girl only a few times. She’d been in school most of the time he’d been with Cat. He might not know her, but he knew her sister, and he knew enough girls to have an idea of where Sparrow might go.

Straight into the middle of trouble, which made it all the more important that they find the girl. No one at King House would be upset that he’d left to help Cat. She’d helped them in New York, and like

he'd said earlier, they really didn't need his help to find Emmy. He'd left the report of his search on Griffin's desk earlier, and a note on his door that he was with Cat and would be back soon. They could reach him on his portable telegraph if they needed him.

Covent Garden was one of the entertainment centers of London. It had theaters, dance halls, taverns and shops where a young woman might get employment. It also had many boardinghouses nearby where those same girls could live if they hadn't any family. It was one of the first places he'd gone when he arrived in London, so he'd wager that Cat's little sister had gone there, as well.

It was also the sort of place where predators hunted for naive little girls.

Damnation, but Cat had to be out of her head with worry. And he'd taken advantage of that when he kissed her. True, she'd kissed him back and made him happier than he should have been, but it had been wrong of him.

He'd do it again in an instant. Obviously, he had no willpower where she was concerned.

He drove to an area not far from the Theatre Royal and parked the velocycle in the lengthening shadows. Nighttime was when this place truly came alive.

"Did you bring something of hers for scent?" he asked, slipping his leg over the machine as she climbed off. "A photograph?"

"Both."

He nodded. "All right, then, let's go ask some questions. Best let me do most of the talking. Folks won't be inclined to trust you."

"Because of my skin, or because I'm a woman?"

The defensive edge in her voice gave him pause. "Because they don't know you."

"Oh."

He would have laughed at her expression if he didn't think it might get him disemboweled. Those claws of hers could be nasty when she brought them out.

"C'mon," he said, inclining his head. "Let's find that little bird." He offered her his hand, not really expecting her to take it. She stared at it for a fraction of a second, and then slid her fingers around his. Joy exploded in his stomach. He'd told himself this wouldn't work. Told himself she was the wrong girl for him, yet every instinct and emotion he had was against him. He couldn't help himself. He'd help her, spend time with her—kiss her as often as she liked—and then he'd have to let her go. He'd already done that twice. Wasn't it madness to do it again?

Yes, said his mind. No, said his heart. Both of them could just shut the hell up for the time being.

They walked into a tavern called The Hart and Crown. It was popular with the theater and artistic set, especially the younger members. If Sparrow was in the area, then this was their best chance at finding her.

Outside, the building looked to be at least two centuries old. Its dark wood was made even darker by an earlier rain, and the old gas lamp above the sign—which could stand a fresh coat of paint—flickered in the evening breeze. The windows were made of small diamond-shaped panes of that old sort of glass that you couldn't really see through. The door was heavy and the hinges squeaked, but inside it was pleasantly warm, lit with a golden glow and filled with low chatter and laughter. It smelled of meat pie and ale. Behind him, Wildcat's stomach growled. He chuckled as he glanced over his shoulder at her.

"Reckon we might as well grab some food while we're here."

Her cheeks actually turned pink. "Sure. That would be good."

They took a table not far from the fire. Jasper chose that one on purpose because he knew how much she enjoyed the heat. She'd curl up on the tabletop and nap if they'd let her, he thought. She was so

much like a house cat, which made sense, given her appearance and abilities. He didn't know how she'd come to be as she was, and he didn't care, but he assumed it had to do with organites—the little critters that were responsible for all life, and for the current mutations in the human race that made some of them *more* than human.

“Can you smell her at all?” he asked. Cat's intensely keen sense of smell was what made her an excellent tracker, along with her sharp eyesight.

“I'm not sure,” she replied. “There are so many other scents here it's hard to focus on one. With this amount of people all I can smell is them, and food, and beer. I think I can smell her, but it's weak. Maybe just wishful thinking.”

“We'll find her, Cat.” He meant it, and he didn't make promises he didn't intend to keep. “I won't stop until we do.”

Were those tears in her eyes? She'd blinked so quickly they were gone, but he could have sworn he'd seen tears. “Thanks, Jas.”

The barmaid came over, so Jasper ordered ale and two pies for them. “Any chance you've seen this girl?” he asked, taking the photograph from Cat's fingers and handing it to the girl.

The buxom, freckled blonde looked at Sparrow's face. “Oh, aye. Come in just two nights ago with some of the girls from Pick-a-dilly. Sung a right pretty song, too. She's not in any trouble, is she?”

“No,” Cat replied before he could. “I'd just like to find her.”

“You're her sister, ain't you?” The barmaid grinned, revealing slightly crooked but clean teeth. “You look just like 'er.”

Cat smiled—truly one of the loveliest things Jasper had ever seen, even with her lips closed. “Yes, although I'd be most obliged if you didn't mention that I was here looking for her.”

The girl nodded. “Right. You're the elder. Got a baby sister and brother meself, and I understand your meanin'. I won't say a word. She'll probably be back with the girls tomorrow night.”

Jasper offered her one of the calling cards he'd had made a little while ago. It was simply his name, his telegraph number and the address for a postal box he kept. On the back he had scrawled the address of King House. “If you see her, talk to her or hear anything about her, maybe you'd be so kind as to let me know.”

Either the girl had a tic or she was fluttering her eyelashes at him. “Of course, ducks. Anything for you.” As she walked away he heard Cat emit a dramatic sigh.

“What?”

She rolled her eyes at him. In this low light her pupils were dilated, but that made them rounder and more normal-looking. “You can't help yourself, can you? You'd flirt with a tin can if you thought it was female.”

“Flirt?” His voice cracked, the accusation was so incredulous. “How was I flirting?”

Cat made a face. “Maybe you'd be so *kind* as to let me *know*.” She'd made her voice so deep she had to tuck her chin to her chest, and every word and gesture was overly exaggerated. She snorted. “Should've winked at her while you were at it. Maybe give her a little pat on the bottom.”

“I have no desire to go anywhere near her bottom,” he retorted, not caring how it sounded. “And I wasn't flirting. I was asking about your sister.” He tossed the photograph back at her. “Next time you ask.”

“You really don't think she's pretty?”

“She's pretty enough.” He shook his head. Cat wasn't the least bothered by his surliness. She was more surprised—apparently—that he didn't want every girl he met.

In fact, other than Mei, *she* was the only girl he'd really wanted. He had flirted a bit with Emily, but

only because she was such a sweetheart and it irked Sam when he did it.

“So, we’ll come back tomorrow night,” he said, changing the subject. “We can always check with the circus, as well.”

“Yeah, what is the Pick-a-dilly Circus?”

“They do a lot of acrobatics, animal stunts, freak shows. They’re just like any other circus except they seem to be good to their employees and their animals. They seem to have a lot of people like you and Sparrow working for ’em.”

One of her sharp black eyebrows shot up. “Like me and Sparrow? What do you mean, *like me and Sparrow?*”

“Oh, for crying out loud, Cat. I mean girls who are different. People who can do things most people can only dream of. I’m one of them, too. You know I’ve never cared if your skin is dark or light or purple.”

She stared at him. For a moment he thought she might take a swing, and he was ready for it. Then she dropped her gaze. “You’re right. You’ve never acted like you were better than me, or treated me like that. I’m sorry.”

“Accepted.”

Their pies arrived at that moment, so nothing more was said. Jasper smiled at the barmaid and thanked her, and he didn’t care what Cat thought of it. He was not a flirt.

They didn’t eat in silence. Neither one of them was much good at staying put out with the other, just as they couldn’t seem to keep their hands and lips off each other. He asked about people they both knew and they shared amusing stories as they enjoyed the savory beef, vegetables and flaky crust.

Afterward, they took a walk by Pick-a-dilly, but it was closed for the evening, so there was no one about. They were on their way back to the velocyycle when a strange whirring and clattering arose from a nearby underground exit.

“What’s that?” Cat demanded.

Jasper listened, a sense of dread suddenly overtaking him. “Metal,” he whispered. “And it’s in a hurry.”

No sooner had the words left his mouth than half a dozen automatons of various shapes and sizes came streaming up the steps, headed right at them.

“Cat, move,” he said. When she didn’t, he grabbed her by the arm and pulled her against the side of the building, putting his own body between her and the machines. The metal gang moved fast, mowing over anything in their path. Most people got out of their way, but a lamppost was twisted and bent as if it was nothing more than taffy, and the steps they had ascended were chipped and smashed from heavy footfalls.

Jasper braced himself for the sound of the velocyycle being ripped apart like a cheap toy, but as soon as the automatons got within three feet of it, the cycle’s lights began to flash and a high-pitched hum emanated from it. The machines didn’t stop in their tracks, but they altered their course, swerving at just the last moment to avoid collision with the velocyycle. Some of the automatons spoke as they marched. He couldn’t make out anything but one word, *Master*.

Most people might assume these were household machines that had gotten loose and were trying to find their way home, or some sort of prank, but Jasper had spent enough time with the crew at King House to be wary. And suspicious. He’d mention it to Griffin the first chance he got.

“That,” Cat said, “was one of the strangest things that I’ve ever seen, and I’ve seen a lot of strange things.”

“Me, too.” He glanced down the street where the automatons had gone. He could barely see them in

the darkness. “Come on, I’ll take you back to the hotel. Where are you staying?”

“The Continental.”

He whistled softly. In the next alley over, a dog barked. “Fancy.”

She shrugged. “When am I going to get to London again? Figured I might as well live it up a bit.”

“Fair enough.” He didn’t want to think about the cost, or what she’d done to get the money. Cat wasn’t cruel and she wasn’t evil, and he had no right at all to judge.

They climbed on the cycle and made the trip back to the West End. He found a place to park just a short distance from the hotel door. “I’ll walk you up.”

Cat made a face. “You don’t have to do that.”

“Yeah, I do.” His mother would tan his hide if he ever let a girl walk somewhere unaccompanied.

They strode along the walk side by side, watching the brilliantly dressed guests of the hotel leaving for the evening’s entertainment. It was early to the upper classes. They’d likely be out half the night.

At the door of the hotel, he stopped. He wasn’t wearing his hat, so he couldn’t take it off or tip it to her. “I can fetch you tomorrow evening if you like, or is this where my part in the intrigue ends?”

“Yes. I mean, no. I would like you to come with me—if you don’t mind.”

She was so pretty when she was flustered. “You know I don’t.”

“Yeah, I suppose I do.”

Silence.

Jasper cleared his throat. “All right, I’ll see you tomorrow night, then.” He began to walk away.

“Jas?”

He’d only made it one step. Slowly, he turned. “Yeah?”

It took her two tries to meet his gaze. The uncertainty in hers inspired a fluttery feeling in his chest as if a dozen butterflies were in there flapping their wings in excitement.

“Would you…” She folded her arms over her chest. “Want to come up?”

The distance between them was barely two feet, but he closed it regardless, coming to stand so that they were toe to toe. He placed his finger under her chin and lifted so that she was forced to look at him. “You know what’s going to happen if I come up.”

She nodded, and he removed his finger. This was when she said good-night—or goodbye.

Cat took a step back, then two. Jas felt each movement as though his soul was being pulled after her. She held out her hand. “Coming?”

Oh, hell.

He should say no. He should go. He should run away, or cut his heart out and hide it in a lead box, buried somewhere deep. Or maybe he should just ask someone to give him a good hard kick in the arse.

She dropped her hand, looking as though he’d slapped her. “Right. Good night, then.” She pivoted on her heel and practically ran into the hotel, leaving him standing on the sidewalk like the idiot he was.

When am I going to get to London again?

This might be the last time he saw her.

Panic grabbed him by the heart and squeezed hard. He didn’t think, he just let instinct take over. He ran through the hotel doors, looking around for her like a wild man. Then he saw her stepping into a lift all the way across the foyer. He rarely used his abilities where he might be seen, but tonight he didn’t care. In the space of a blink he was right behind her, following her into the small and otherwise empty lift.

She froze when she saw him. The gates were closed, and the lift jerked into motion.

“Jas—”

~~He grabbed her and kissed her. They were still kissing when they exited the lift on her floor. They broke contact long enough to get into the room. Jasper hung the do-not-disturb sign.~~

And then he shut the door.

Chapter Four

Cat woke up late the next morning.

Jasper had left sometime after four, claiming that he didn't want people to see him leaving her room, because it might start rumors about her.

She had frowned at him and said, "I don't give a rat's arse about my reputation." It wasn't a complete lie.

He'd kissed her forehead. "I do."

Something gave within the walls of her chest—like a sharp ping or the snap of a slingshot. While she and Sparrow had been loved by their parents very much, and even by the community, there were those who looked down on a marriage of mixed color. Looked down on the children that were a result of that marriage. From the time she started looking womanly, she'd had to protect herself against men who would use her or take advantage. And she could protect herself. Sparrow, too.

Maybe that was part of the reason she was so angry at her sister—for being duped into thinking that rich man was going to marry her. Sparrow should have known better. Their lives had taught them better. But then, her sister was something of a romantic and kept hoping a man would come along who didn't care what color she was or wasn't. Cat had always thought such a man didn't exist.

Until now.

So, she hadn't protested his sneaking out, especially not after the kiss he gave her before leaving.

"Meet me downstairs at seven," he'd murmured before he left.

Seven o'clock that evening wasn't for many hours yet, so that left her with plenty of time to kill. She decided to spend it exploring the city a bit and doing a little shopping. She wasn't the shopping type—mostly because dresses were useless in Five Points. But Five Points was being demolished, the people moving on, and she wasn't going to be that Wildcat anymore. Well, she'd keep the name. It suited her more than Catherine ever had—Mary Catherine, at that. Sparrow's real name was Mary Elizabeth. Their father had been a "good" Irish lad, and their mother had been happy to become Catholic, having a strong belief in God.

Religion was on a pick-and-choose basis for most of Five Points. Sin all week and repent on Sunday. Cat wasn't much for church, but she knew where she was going when she died.

So, she went to a fancy shop that sold what was called prêt-à-porter clothing. Ready to wear. She didn't have to be measured and wait weeks for the darn thing to be done. She found a pretty dress in her size and bought all the bits and pieces that went with it. It was terribly expensive, but it would be worth the look on Jasper's face when he saw her in it.

She'd made it only two hours without thinking of him. And not even two, because she had started thinking about him—and the night before—shortly after leaving the hotel. But she'd made herself stop. She was not going to moon and pine over him. Not going to pin any hopes on him. She was going to collect Sparrow and go home to New York, where they'd have a nice house and Sparrow could have the life she deserved.

Someday Cat might even forget about Jasper altogether.

She had tea in a little shop not far from where she got the dress, and filled her belly with sandwiches and cakes that were so delicious. Then, she bought some chocolates and continued on to another shop that sold beautiful soaps and creams. She spent money there, as well, and at the cobbler's. Her last stop was a jeweler's. Nothing fancy, just some earrings and pins for her hair. And she had all of it sent to back to her hotel, where it would wait for her, rather than having to lug it about.

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