Chapter One

Courage seldom knows the whole road before it sets out.

Ferrat's guard drove his elbow into my cheek. I lost my grip on his coat and stumbled against a cart, catching at the wheel just in time to see him shove a cooper aside and disappear between two warehouses.

Kit had stayed with Ferrat, who'd just lost his magic, so if I wanted the guard I'd have to catch him myself. I took the drainage alley to the canal bridge. My feet went out from under me on the wet stones and I clipped my shoulder on the corner, but when I came out on the bridge his coat was within reach again.

He looked back and seized a passing man by the arm. The man turned to protest when the guard drew a knife.

"Let him go!"

The man cried out, dropping his sack as the guard drove the knife into him. Looking me in the eyes, the guard wrenched it free, shoved the man against the railing and fled.

I reached him just as his knees gave way. He caught at my sleeve, dragging me towards the low parapet, and for an instant I could see the canal water directly beneath us.

His weight came back against me. I let us both down on the stones. "Help me!" A porter left his barrow in the middle of the bridge and ran to us.

"What happened to him?"

"He's been stabbed. We need a physician." I pulled out my handkerchief and pressed it against the wound.

Across the canal, the guard looked back. When he saw me kneeling beside the wounded man, he slowed to a walk and let the crowd close round him.

I knew which way he'd gone. If I left now, I might still catch him. As I shifted to get up, the man caught my wrist. His fingers slipped on the blood and tightened again. "Please," he whispered. "Don't leave me."

I stayed. The handkerchief was soaked through, and I pressed harder while the porter kept asking where the physician was. By the time Kit arrived with two city guards, I could no longer feel the fingers of my trapped hand. One guard went for a physician; the other knelt beside me and took over the pressure.

Kit crouched beside us. "What happened to your face?"

"He minded being followed."

"I can see that." Kit glanced at the victim, then helped me to my feet.

We left once the physician arrived. Kit was unusually quiet, and I endured it for nearly two streets. "Go on."

Kit caught my sleeve when I stepped off the kerb, though there was nothing coming. "He might have killed you," he said, more sharply than usual.

I touched my swollen cheek and wished I had not. "The man on the bridge needed someone to stay with him." When Kit said nothing, I tried, "Do you think Mathien will notice?"

"Not if you wear a very large hat."

"Can I borrow one?"

"Not large enough."

After a stop at the warehouse, we reached the palace late for supper. The council was waiting for the Crown physician, Anselme Drouat, to come back from examining

Ferrat. I hoped to get upstairs unnoticed, but the guard outside the private wing recognised me and took a good look at my swollen lip.

“The kitchens will know by breakfast,” Kit murmured.

“Sooner, if you keep talking.”

Kit went off towards the guest chambers to wash away the grime of the docks, leaving me near my room. I gathered my hair and fastened it with my mother's silver pin. The worn prongs no longer held properly, but I kept them in place with a tiny thread of Current, scarcely aware I was doing it.

Once changed, I continued through the portrait gallery, past generations of monarchs and courtiers whose expressions suggested that no one had ever seen a king in a decent mood.

I could hear voices from the council room before I reached it. A secretary emerged carrying an armful of papers, and through the open door I caught Anselme mentioning Ferrat's name.

“The minister has finally gone,” the secretary told me. “His Majesty asked that you join them as soon as you arrived.”

Anselme stood beside the council table, his examination notes spread before Mathien. Godevin Holt, who oversaw the Crown's intelligence investigations, sat nearby with the northern reports open before him.

Mathien’s mouth tightened at the sight of my swollen lip. “I take it you didn't catch him.”

“No. He got away.”

“And left you that for your trouble?”

“I was rather hoping you wouldn't notice.”

He pulled out the chair beside him. “Sit down. Tell us what happened.”

Kit arrived while I was explaining the chase. The city guard had secured the warehouse and were searching the docks. He set Ferrat's correspondence and freight receipt on the table, then placed the wooden case beside Anselme.

Earlier that evening, Ferrat had thought we wanted a device to run a dye-works boiler. He'd promised us condensed vitality that would hold its charge for twelve days.

Anselme opened the case without touching the little glass cylinder or the silver coil inside it.

Ferrat had held the cylinder out to show me the guild stamp on the silver, then drawn heat into it from the stove. He was holding it barehanded, quite at ease, until the fire sank. The Current kept circling the coil. His nails went white, and by the time I understood what was feeding it now, he could no longer let go.

“His fingers locked round it,” I said. “I had to break the connection. Afterwards, I couldn't find his gift.”

I could still feel his grip on my sleeve. He'd thought I had taken it and asked me to put it back.

He had nearly burnt himself trying to summon the Current with heat from the stove, insisting he'd never had to be careful before. Rather than let the captain take him straight to the holding rooms, I'd sent for Anselme.

“His breathing and heart have recovered,” Anselme confirmed, still looking at the cylinder. “But there's no trace of his gift. I hope it's temporary. I've never encountered anything quite like it.”

“Does it still have Ferrat's Current?” I asked, pointing at the silver coil inside it.

“Possibly.”

Anselme wanted to know where the two threads joined. I had been too busy getting Ferrat free to study the thing and could tell him nothing useful.

Kit opened the correspondence. “A broker signing himself A.R. arranged the sale, hired the guard and told Ferrat how to demonstrate the device. They never met.”

One letter warned Ferrat to keep a sealed northern shipment away from Current-work. Kit traced it to Rochevaux: the same carrier had taken two earlier shipments north.

Godevin drew a folder from beneath the northern reports. “Ferrat may not be the first.”

For two months, he'd been collecting reports of practitioners whose access to the Current had weakened or disappeared. Several had travelled north. One glassworker had returned from Rochevaux and burnt both hands attempting heat-work he used to perform without thinking.

“Most deteriorated over weeks,” Anselme commented, looking over the reports. “Ferrat lost his gift in moments. We don't know that these people are suffering from the same condition.”

Kit laid two customs papers beside the reports. “Same cargo, different weights, changed delivery instructions. No recipient recorded. We can start with the carrier’s office in Rochevaux.”

“Have you spoken to Amaury?” I asked.

“No,” Mathien replied, continuing through the reports.

I might have guessed. The quarrel between king and duke had gone on for years.

“Wouldn't it be worth asking him about the carrier?”

“I want to know who received those shipments before Amaury knows we're looking. If he's protecting someone, he'll have time to warn them. And he has never been particularly willing to share information with the Crown.”

I pressed my tongue against my sore lip. Amaury governed independently, as his family had for generations. Without his permission, the Crown’s officers had no authority on his land.

Godevin held out another report. “Once the trade convocation starts, the house will be full of strangers. Two nights ago, Lady Ysoraine felt something drawing on her Current in her own rooms, and she was alone.”

“Ysoraine?” I pulled the report towards me. The sensation had stopped before her maid arrived. Her physician had found no lasting injury, but he could not explain what had happened. “Tell me she still has her gift.”

“As far as anyone can tell,” Mathien said. He stopped turning the pages while I read.

I had seen Ysoraine at court before the uprising. During a winter reception, she'd advised a viscount to stop explaining wine to his wife before the poor woman took up poisoning as a hobby. She'd delivered the advice while choosing a pastry, without so much as looking up.

Kit slid another folder across the table.

“Miss Cecily Sutton. Quiet disposition,” I read. “You've made me sound terribly dull.”

One corner of his mouth lifted. “Employable.”

Miss Sutton was a respectably educated schoolmaster's daughter, formerly of Duremont, who had lost her position with Mrs Tress in Brassen. Her references were excellent. Apparently she was willing to manage a difficult employer.

"Ysoraine needs a secretary," Kit explained. "Her previous one married, and the replacement lasted four days."

"What happened?"

"The lady corrected her grammar in front of a bishop."

"A welcoming employer." I looked again at the application. "When does Ysoraine want to see her?"

"Thursday afternoon," Kit said. "She wants someone competent with correspondence and accounts. You might even get through the interview."

"Your confidence is touching."

Mathien let the teasing pass. "And if Amaury finds out who sent you? He could have you detained. I'd have no authority to order your release."

I closed the folder. "He hasn't given us any reason to think he's involved."

Godevin was busy making a note. I glanced at him, hoping he'd say something in my favour, but he kept writing.

I put my hand over Ysoraine's report. "And if it happens to her again while we're deciding who ought to go? You have the references. Let me use them."

I folded the application along Kit's crease. Nobody at Aubrecourt had seen me for years, and Kit's references would stand up to questions. What worried me was how a secretary was supposed to help Ysoraine if it happened again.

"If Amaury finds out you work for me, you leave," Mathien said.

My thumb was still on Ysoraine's report. "Even if I'm halfway through helping her?"

"Send for Godevin. I can't order your release, Cecily." He kept his hand on the folder until I looked at him.

"All right." He let me take it.

"Make sure she has a way out," he told Godevin.

Godevin confirmed that Kit would also stay in Rochevaux, and we could exchange messages through the household stationer.

"And if Ysoraine dismisses me before I've unpacked?"

"Then we'll find another way in," Kit said.

"Preferably one that doesn't require another set of references."

"I'll bear that in mind."

Anselme secured the cylinder in its wooden case, while Godevin collected the northern reports. Kit was nearly at the door when Mathien called after him. "Good work tonight, Kit."

"Thank you, Your Majesty." Kit glanced back at me, his eyes dropping briefly to my swollen lip. Whatever he meant to say, he evidently decided he'd done enough for one evening and left.

Once the others had gone, Mathien returned to his reports while I finished my tea.

"Hungry?" he asked.

"Desperately."

He went to the sideboard and brought back cold chicken, bread and cheese. While I helped myself, he resumed reading, taking an occasional mouthful between pages.

After watching him neglect his food for several minutes, I drew the reports out of reach.

“Those can wait.”

“There are several matters I need to—”

“There always are. Please eat something.”

He sighed and reluctantly picked up his fork.

“You ought to have someone take those reports away at supper,” I remarked.

“I have you.”

“Not every evening. You've been pushing that chicken around your plate for ten minutes.”

He ate it, watching me over his fork. “There. Satisfied?”

“Temporarily.”

He passed me the bread, but reaching for it pulled at my bruised shoulder.

“Still hurting?”

“A little.”

“Have you thought any more about retiring from fieldwork?”

I gave a disbelieving laugh. “I'm twenty-six, Mathien.”

“And you've been doing this for ten years.”

I broke off a piece of bread. I'd been sixteen when the uprising began. Both sides had pressed gifted people into service, and by the end of the fighting, so many

practitioners had died that few survivors were willing to risk themselves for Crown Intelligence.

I'd started by carrying messages until Godevin discovered I could sense workings other practitioners missed, even when they were carefully concealed. “You know how difficult it is to find agents who can work with the Current,” I said. “Finding one who can recognise another person's workings is harder still.”

“That doesn't mean you must do everything yourself.”

“I don't. Kit spends a great deal of time telling me what I've done wrong.”

“You could train agents, plan operations. Godevin would welcome the help.”

“And spend my days correcting their reports while they have all the fun?”

“They'd survive.”

“Some of them.”

Mathien smiled briefly, then looked at the way I was holding my shoulder. “Every time you come back, there's something else.”

“Most of it heals.”

“Most of it.” He pushed the bread towards me. “I'd still be happier if you were going almost anywhere else.”

“I'm sure you would.”

I wished he would tell me what had happened between him and Amaury. “After Aubrecourt,” I said, “I'll think about it.” I could offer him that much. Tonight, with the stranger's blood still beneath one fingernail, I could not bear to discuss who would go instead.

He accepted that, and we finished supper discussing two ministers whose quarrel had taken up most of his afternoon. I suggested locking them in a room until they

reached an agreement, but Mathien pointed out that one had already threatened to resign.

“Then you'll have solved half the problem.”

“Unfortunately, he's the more useful of the two.”

By the time our plates were cleared, Mathien was rubbing his forehead.

“Headache?”

“It's been a long day.”

I went to the adjoining passage and found the guard officer at his post. “No more visitors tonight, please. His Majesty is finished for the evening.”

“Am I?” Mathien called from behind me.

“You are.”

The officer glanced towards the king, but I closed the door before Mathien could object. When I turned, he was watching me with a reluctant smile.

“Sit back,” I said. “I'll see what I can do about that headache.” By Thursday, I would have to remember that Miss Sutton did not give orders to kings.

Chapter Two

Borrowed boots can still carry someone towards an honest purpose.

“Did you like Mrs Tress?”

Lady Ysoraine sat opposite me with my references on her lap and her spectacles halfway down her nose. Unanswered letters and invitations crowded her desk. She had accepted my story about bruising my jaw on the luggage, though with a sceptical noise.

“Yes, my lady.”

“Why?”

“She was forever getting herself into difficulties and hated being helped out of them.”

“At least you haven’t called her kind.” Ysoraine set aside my references and handed me a letter from a baroness demanding we move a luncheon because her daughter had another invitation. “What would you do with this?”

“Decline. Her daughter will have to choose.”

“Well... Draft it.”

I wrote a courteous refusal, which Ysoraine promptly revised. “You apologise too much.”

“Only once, my lady.”

“Once too often. I am not sorry.”

I pressed my lips together over a smile and crossed it out.

The next two invitations were for the same evening. I chose Marquis Saint-Lys's, then realised I had begun explaining the toll negotiations before Ysoraine had asked why.

Ysoraine studied me over her spectacles. “You know a good deal about government for a widow’s companion. Was Mrs Tress interested in politics?”

“Her husband supplied cloth to titled families.”

“Very well. Write to Saint-Lys.” She read my draft and put it with the letters awaiting her signature. “You may stay for a week. Correspondence, appointments, invitations and subscriptions. Political matters go to my nephew unless I say otherwise.”

My hand paused above the letters she had given me. “A week, my lady?”

“I'll know whether you're worth keeping by then. Come when I send for you, but otherwise get on with your work. I dislike repeating myself.”

“So do I.”

Ysoraine raised her eyebrows, and I lowered my eyes, my cheeks warming. At this rate, I might be dismissed before Kit reached Rochevaux.

“No need to look so alarmed, Miss Sutton. I didn’t employ you to agree with me, though I reserve the right to complain when you don’t.” She pushed another letter towards me. “Now, see what you can do about this florist. He sent white roses instead of cream and charged me extra for the privilege.”

Later that afternoon, Piers accompanied me to the steward’s office to deliver Ysoraine’s revised appointment schedule. Aubrecourt sprawled along the wooded hillside, its passages crowded with servants, luggage and arriving guests. One child demanded a room overlooking the lake. There was no lake, but his footman wisely left that for someone better paid to explain.

We had reached the north gallery when a crash below made Piers lean over the rail. Two porters were struggling with a crate at the garden gate. Behind them, a cartload of glass jars blocked a maid trying to get an empty infirmary chair through.

“Back entrance.” The guard pointed them to the door. “I've told you twice.”

“And we already measured it! It won’t fit!”

“Is that the warming cabinet?” Piers called down.

“For Lady Ysoraine,” one of the porters replied, evidently hoping her name would help.

I gave Piers the appointment papers to take to the steward, asked him to check the delivery and went downstairs.

The guard had orders to keep the western passage clear. I pointed to the recess beneath the gallery. “There, for now. You can still get past it.”

“I've another delivery to make,” the porter complained, his cart still blocking the passage.

“Then leave the cabinet here, unless you'd rather personally explain to Lady Ysoraine why it hasn't arrived.”

I marked the cabinet's new location on the chit, then went to help with the infirmary chair. Before we had it clear of the cart, a man approached along the covered walk. He stopped at the cabinet, looking from the guard to the porter. “Who told you to leave that there?”

The porter let go of the chair as the man stepped closer, blocking his way back to the cart. Then the newcomer turned towards me. I recognised Amaury just before Piers came hurrying back.

“Your Grace.”

I remembered the duke as tall, dark-haired and rather severe. He was still tall and broad across the shoulders, but ten years had left faint lines around his eyes. They suited him, which was inconvenient.

I'd last seen him at court, always across crowded ballrooms. We'd never been introduced, and I'd changed a good deal since then. Even so, when he looked at me, I resisted the urge to adjust my hair.

“I suggested leaving the cabinet here,” I explained, handing him the delivery chit. “It won't fit through the kitchen arch.”

Amaury glanced at the chit before turning to the guard. “I thought this gate was closed.”

“The porter came through before we secured it, Your Grace.”

“Has anyone checked the cabinet?”

“Not yet. The porters could return after the inspection.”

“They can wait. I'll pay for their time.”

Piers fetched the workshop men, who unpacked the cabinet while the porters waited. When one of them tried to open its door, it stuck.

“Needs a firm pull, Your Grace. New wood.”

Amaury took hold of the carved lion's-head handle and pulled. It came away in his hand, leaving the door firmly shut.

He looked at the handle, then at the porter. “Was that firm enough?”

The porter stared at the carving. “You'll have to put that on the receipt, miss. They'll charge us for it otherwise.”

I retrieved the chit while Amaury examined the dried glue on the back of the lion's head.

“Handle detached during inspection,” I wrote.

The porter cleared his throat. “By His Grace.”

I looked at Amaury.

“Put it down,” he agreed. “I did pull it off.”

I added the detail, and Amaury passed me the carving while he signed the receipt. “Though I suspect a sneeze would have done much the same.”

I tried not to smile as I handed the receipt back to the porter.

“Have the hinges checked before anyone opens it again,” Amaury said. “I'd rather not dismantle the entire thing.”

He paid the men for waiting and left the carpenter to repair the handle.

At the gate a kitchen maid held her tea out to a guard. Lending someone a little warmth was called a courtesy at court, where there were rules even about whose cup came first. The guard ran a thread of Current through her tea and then his own. She tried his, gave him hers and made him taste the difference. I rather preferred the practice at Rochevaux.

“Bastien Lerrin,” Piers said as we passed. “He’ll ask for your pass tomorrow even if you bring him breakfast.”

“I'd begun to suspect as much.”

Piers showed me the infirmary passage and the covered route for glasshouse carts. Sealed deliveries needed a guard’s escort and had to be recorded in the delivery book.

Before dinner, Lisette, Ysoraine's maid, took me upstairs to my room, two doors from her mistress's. She explained the bell connecting the rooms. As she lifted a linen basket, her sleeve caught on the handle, revealing a pale burn across her hand.

“That looks painful.” I reached to help her with the basket.

“Warming pan,” she explained. “The night her ladyship fell ill, you know she kept asking for more heat, and I burnt myself fetching another. Twenty years I've handled those things without trouble.”

“She was cold?”

“Shivering, miss. Couldn't seem to get warm.”

I thought of Ysoraine alone in her room, frightened enough to keep calling for heat. “Were you with her when it started?”

“No. I found her afterwards.” Lisette pulled her sleeve over the burn and gathered the basket against her, leaving me no room to help.

When Lisette left, I made a note of the cold. The physician hadn’t mentioned it in his report, and I would have liked to ask Kit what he made of that. Unfortunately, he’d gone on to Rochevaux to look for Ferrat’s broker. I knew how to get out of the house in an emergency, but where did one go for a conversation?

The following morning, I was helping Ysoraine with her correspondence when she paused over my reply to the florist and rubbed her wrist.

“Shall I leave the others until later?” I asked.

“Certainly not. The man has charged me for flowers he never delivered, and I intend to tell him so.”

She picked up her pen again. “Serac gave me a brace for this wretched wrist. More trouble than it was worth. I was glad when he took it away.”

“Is it still troubling you?”

“Only when I have to write to florists.” She handed me the signed letter. “Now, what has Lady Maret decided to complain about?”

I returned to the letters. If I pressed her about the brace now, I would have to explain why a secretary wanted it back.

Ysoraine refused Martin Vaurel’s request for rooms already promised to other guests and sent me to his office with her revised list. The duke’s oldest friend and adviser would have to find space elsewhere.

On my way back, I stepped aside to let a maid pass with an armful of sheets. Beneath the house’s familiar heat-work, I caught a faint thread of Current drawing towards a closed door.

I moved closer, holding my hand near the tarnished handle without touching it, but footsteps on the stairs interrupted me before I could understand the working.

I walked on, resisting the urge to look back when the footsteps stopped outside that same door.

I'd need a reason to return.

Back in the sitting room, I found Odelle Marot, the Rochevaux jeweller, seated beside Ysoraine with an open walnut case between them. Gold leaves swayed beneath her curls as she arranged four silver-mounted presentation seals.

I knew her name from Godevin’s reports, which had praised her workmanship and mentioned that she’d been Amaury’s mistress for several years.

“New secretary?” Odelle asked, noticing me in the doorway.

“Miss Sutton. She’s on trial, so try not to corrupt her.”

“I’ll do my best.” Odelle smiled at me.

“Amaury has ordered two extra seals,” Ysoraine told me. “Add them to the commission book.”

I joined them at the table while Odelle fitted a seal into one of the small presentation boxes. The lid caught halfway down, and she nudged the hinge with her thumbnail before trying again. “The boxes are giving me more trouble than the seals.”

“Do you make those as well?” I asked, opening the commission book.

“A workshop in Rochevaux supplies them. They’re generally reliable if I give them enough warning.”

While explaining the repair, she noticed Ysoraine searching for her spectacles and pointed them out beneath a letter.

“Thank you,” Ysoraine said, putting them on. “Now, if you could only get my nephew to stop complaining about your work.”

“He only finds fault with what I charge him.”

We were still going through the order when Amaury joined us with an estate report tucked under his arm. He stopped beside Odelle’s open case. “Are those the extras?”

“Finished and added to your bill.”

Amaury set his report aside and picked up a seal while I checked the commission book. Odelle caught his wrist, turning his hand to inspect a scrape across his knuckles.

“Orchards again?”

“Lower road.”

“You've brought half of it back.” She brushed some mud from his cuff.

“There's plenty left,” he said with a small smile before returning to the seal. After examining it for a moment, he glanced towards me. “I met your new secretary at

the garden gate yesterday," Amaury told Ysoraine. "She was taking charge of the deliveries."

"Was she? I only hired her yesterday. What have you been doing all these years?" Ysoraine turned to me. "Miss Sutton, my nephew. Though I gather you've already met."

I rose and curtsied, dipping lower than I'd intended. "Your Grace."

"Miss Sutton."

Ysoraine pushed the guest calendar towards him, and I sat down to note their changes.

I'd been watching Amaury as he spoke to his aunt. I looked down at the calendar when he caught me, then discovered I had no idea which date Ysoraine had asked me to change. Odelle supplied it without comment. I thanked her, feeling foolish. She had been perfectly pleasant, and I already wished she would stop touching his sleeve.

Odelle had finished packing her seals and was waiting by the door. Amaury collected his report and joined her.

"Don't encourage my nephew if he complains," Ysoraine told me once they'd gone. "Or Martin."

"Is there anyone I may encourage?"

"Not until I've warned you."

I laughed and took her letters to the lower office, where Hugh Carrell, the duke's head of security, was having Odelle's visits recorded. When I mentioned the florist's cart using the same gate, he told me to leave the gates to him.

In the dispatch room I noticed an unregistered letter bearing the royal commissioner's seal. The clerk said it was for the private box.

“How did you recognise his seal?” Ysoraine asked when I mentioned it upstairs.

I aligned the letter with the edge of the desk. “I once helped a stationer sort seal impressions, my lady.”

“Did you?” She gave me a curious look before returning to her letters.

That evening, Maret’s price list arrived with Ysoraine’s accounts. The entries for plum-black sealing wax carried Kit’s message: he had reached Rochevaux and set himself up as Christopher Orrell, a scrivener. He was trying to learn who had bought from the workshop linked to Ferrat.

“Has Maret raised his prices again?” Ysoraine asked.

“Not enough to trouble us, my lady.”

“Give him time.”

Relieved to hear from Kit, I drafted a reply after Ysoraine retired, concealing what I'd learned about Odelle's supplier and Serac's brace in a wax order.

The faint pull of Current near the locked room still troubled me. I left the letter unfinished, checked my concealed knives and took Ysoraine's appointment ledger as an excuse to return to the gallery after dark.

I was nearing the passage when I heard footsteps from the gallery. I turned away from the door just as Amaury came round the corner. Stepping aside, I snagged my heel on the carpet. He caught me around the waist before I could fall.

“Careful, Miss Sutton,” he murmured, close enough that his breath brushed my cheek.

For a moment I forgot the door. My hand had caught his coat, and he was warm beneath it, close enough for me to catch the scent of juniper and silver fir. Then I felt the

ledger digging into my ribs and straightened, taking my hand away. “Forgive me, Your Grace. I didn't see you.”

“So I gathered.” His hand lingered a moment before he released me. “Still working?”

“Your aunt’s appointments. She’ll want them at breakfast.”

“And mine before that, no doubt. Is she still blaming the ink?”

“Twice this afternoon.”

“She needs new spectacles, but I value my life too highly to suggest it.”

I smiled and stepped aside, but he lingered. “Why my aunt? There are easier households.”

“She tells you when you've made a mistake. I prefer that.”

“She'll tell you even when you haven't.”

“Has she improved your letters?”

“Not yet.” He smiled faintly. “Mrs Tress gave you an excellent reference. I thought she lived in Brassen, though her letter came from Duremont.”

“She did live in Brassen. We stayed with her sister in Duremont when she was ill.”

I'd invented the sister on the spot. I'd have to remember her. I loosened my grip on the ledger before its cover could creak.

“Ah. That explains it.” He paused. “I hope she's recovered.”

“Quite well, thank you.”

“I'm glad.” He stepped aside. “Good night, Miss Sutton.”

“Good night, Your Grace.”

I walked on, wondering how on earth I was going to explain Mrs Tress’s newly acquired sister to Kit. The trouble was that Amaury had a very nice smile, and I’d been admiring it while he checked my story.

I was nearing the stairs when Martin came out of the library. Amaury stopped him, and I slowed at the sound of my name.

“Have Hugh check Miss Sutton's references. Particularly the dates and Mrs Tress's stay in Duremont.”

My mouth went dry. I continued towards my room, waited until their voices faded, then doubled back.

Leaving my candle on the windowsill, I followed the faint pull of Current to the locked door. A fresh scrape disturbed the dust beneath it, and I was examining the lock when someone spoke behind me.

“You won't get in there, miss.”

I straightened. A maid stood on the stairs with an armful of clean towels, looking at my hand near the lock.

“I thought this led to the western stairs.”

“That's the old service room. The steward keeps it locked.” She nodded towards the corner. “Stairs are that way.”

I thanked her and collected my candle. She waited until I'd started towards the stairs before continuing down the gallery.

I was nearly at the corner when I heard trolley wheels rattling along the covered passage. I stepped out of sight, shielding the flame as a man in a workshop apron approached with two wooden cases beneath a loose canvas cover.

He stopped at the door, glanced back along the gallery and took a key from his waistcoat. I watched him wheel the trolley inside, then headed upstairs once the door had closed.

Back at my desk, I hurried to finish my letter to Kit, describing the delivery and warning him that Amaury had ordered my references checked. Mrs Tress now had a sister in Duremont; somehow, he would have to make her exist.

Chapter Three

A cup need not be full to offer someone a little warmth.

A young woman with her dark-blond hair pinned back set her papers beside Ysoraine's chocolate. "Let me see your hand."

"I can hold a cup perfectly well, thank you."

"I know, but does it hurt?"

Ysoraine sighed and offered her hand. Pale lines appeared beneath the young woman's skin as she drew the ache from Ysoraine's joints into her own.

"Better?" she asked, flexing her fingers as she let go.

"Enough to write another dozen letters, unfortunately." Ysoraine reached for her cup, then directed her to my desk with the hospital figures. "Miss Sutton, this is Lady Aline Sorel."

"We've met in passing," Aline said, handing me the papers. "I'm afraid we've kept you rather busy."

"Your committee has certainly contributed, my lady."

"And will continue to," Ysoraine said. "Aline, take the subscription list with you."

"Are you coming later?"

"Someone must prevent the countess from furnishing the infirmary like a country house."

Aline took the subscription list, leaving me with the hospital figures and two seating plans that scarcely matched the guest list. It was only my fifth morning, but Ysoraine had already entrusted me with next week's dinners.

“My nephew has added the Belcourts,” she said, sliding another note across the desk. “Pure vandalism.”

“Where shall I put them?”

“If I knew that, Miss Sutton, I should hardly need a secretary.”

Amaury arrived a few minutes later with a folio for Ysoraine, who began complaining about his additions to the guest list before he'd even set it down. While he defended his invitations, I tried to find places for everyone. I rather wished he'd offered to arrange the seating as well.

I moved Lord Tavennes opposite Baron Sorel and glanced at the footman. “Would that do?”

He winced. “Best not, miss. They quarrelled at the Agricultural Society. The baron called him a parasite, and Lord Tavennes called the baron a turnip.”

I put Tavennes back. “Is anyone on this guest list still on speaking terms?”

“A few,” Amaury remarked. “But there's still time.”

He came over to look at the plan. “Have you found room for the Belcourts?”

He leaned beside me to point out an empty place, his sleeve brushing my arm. I had to ask him which one he meant. He repeated the name without moving away, and I bent over the cards as though the seating required my closest attention. His voice was rather more troublesome at this distance.

The footman stepped back to make room, catching several cards with his cuff.

“Not yet,” I told Amaury. “Your aunt’s guests seem to have quarrelled with half the county.”

Amaury set his folio aside and held the scattered cards while I moved Lady Belcourt beside Martin Vaurel.

“Your hand, please. You’re covering someone.”

He moved it, revealing an empty place where Monsieur Charpentier should have been. I spotted his card on the floor behind Amaury.

“Oh, there he is. Would you fetch him?”

Amaury bent to retrieve it. “Anyone else fallen from favour?”

“Only the gentleman who invited the Belcourts.”

“That bad?”

“You haven't seen where I've put them yet.”

He laughed, and I was still smiling when I noticed the footman staring at us. I'd quite forgotten myself, and now I couldn't seem to look Amaury in the eye. “Thank you, Your Grace,” I said, rather more formally than necessary.

“My pleasure, Miss Sutton.” He handed me Charpentier, amusement still showing around his eyes.

I found the card a place and sent the footman to copy the plan before anyone changed it again.

Once he'd gone, I turned to Amaury. “Will you tell your aunt you helped with the seating?”

“She knows I invited the Belcourts.”

“I'd rather she complained to you about where I've put them.”

“I'll mention it.”

“Before dinner, please.”

He laughed, but before he could reply, a servant appeared at the door. “Your Grace, Mr Vaurel is waiting.”

Amaury collected his folio. “I'll speak to her.”

“Thank you.”

The duke had made more work for me, and somehow I'd ended up thanking him for it.

I was gathering the unused cards when Ysoraine called me over to meet Marianne Serac, the physician’s daughter, who was helping with the infirmary accounts.

The linen supplier’s delivery charge would have swallowed most of his discount, but Marianne had already made him take it off. I amended the estimate as she checked the rest. It was a pleasure to meet someone who brought her own solutions.

“If only the rest of the committee were as sensible,” Ysoraine said. “We might have some money left for patients.”

Marianne glanced towards the door before leaning over my figures. “Unless the countess gets her curtains,” she said.

“She'll have to do without.”

Marianne smiled and went to fetch the laundry account while I finished the figures.

By the time the committee gathered after luncheon, the countess had moved on from curtains to the infirmary beds. Ysoraine dealt with her objections while Aline brought her green folio to my table. Piers waited by the door for his receipt.

“It came back from the repairer this morning,” Aline said, handing me the receipt. “Would you initial this?”

The folio’s silver clasp had been repaired, though the hinge still caught when Aline tried it.

“I thought they’d fixed that.”

“Perhaps the new pin needs wearing in.”

She opened the folio while I initialled the receipt and handed it back to Piers.

He was leaving when Amaury appeared at the door.

“Is Martin here?”

“He was,” Ysoraine said. “Come and settle this. The countess thinks sixteen beds will turn the infirmary into a barracks.”

“Serac asked for sixteen.”

“And where are the nurses supposed to walk?” the countess demanded.

Amaury joined them over the floor plan while Aline and I sorted through her letters. She lost her place twice before setting the folio aside and rubbing her hands against her skirt.

“Could someone open a window?” the countess complained. “I've had a headache since luncheon.”

Aline rose and went over to her, rubbing her hands together before offering one. “May I?”

The countess took Aline’s hand, but the familiar pale lines failed to appear beneath Aline’s skin. She tightened her grip and tried again.

“My dear, you're hurting me.”

“Sorry. Just a moment.” Aline loosened her grip, her breath catching as she reached for the Current.

I could still sense traces of earlier workings in the room, but nothing from Aline herself. She released the countess’s hand, then caught it again, pressing her fingers desperately against her wrist.

“Dear?” her mother called.

“I can't —” Aline stared at her trembling hands and tried again, her breathing growing uneven. “I can't feel it.”

She stumbled back against our table, sending the green folio and its papers scattering across the carpet.

“Something's wrong.” Aline pressed a hand to her chest. “It's gone.”

Her knees buckled before her mother could reach her. I caught her and helped her to the floor while Amaury moved a chair aside and knelt beside us. “Aline, look at me,” I said.

“It won't answer.” She clung to my sleeve.

Aline’s pulse raced beneath my fingers, but I couldn’t find even the faint trace an overdraw should have left. When she looked down at her hands I remembered Ferrat looking at his, and took them both in mine.

“Aline. Breathe with me.” I had to slow my own breath first.

“Could I lend her some strength?” one of the committee ladies offered.

“No!” The woman drew back, and I lowered my voice. “Please. Don't give her anything yet.”

Amaury wrapped his coat around Aline and sent for Serac and Carrell, asking everyone but her mother to leave. Ysoraine escorted the protesting countess out while a maid gathered the fallen papers and folio.

“When did she last use her gift?” Amaury asked.

“This morning, on Ysoraine. She seemed perfectly well then.”

Aline was still trying to reach for the Current when Serac arrived with Carrell. He moved the repairer's wrapper aside, set down his case and knelt beside her.

“Let me have a look at you, my dear.”

He checked her pulse and asked about the workings she'd performed that day, waiting whenever she struggled to catch her breath.

“Was it like the last time you overstrained yourself?”

“No. That hurt.” Aline stared at her hands. “I can't even feel where to begin.”

He asked her to try once more, gently, without transferring anything. She gripped his hand, her shoulders tightening until he told her to stop.

“It's gone.”

“We don't know that yet. Illness or strain could interfere with the Current. I'd like to examine you properly upstairs.”

While Serac gathered his case, Amaury drew Carrell aside.

“Find out where she's been today, whom she's seen and what she may have handled. Quietly.”

I accompanied Aline and her mother upstairs. We helped her into bed with Amaury's coat still wrapped around her, but she wouldn't release my hand until Serac asked her to.

“Sorry,” she whispered, noticing the marks her fingers had left. “I keep thinking I ought to feel something.”

“Don't apologise.” I laid my hand back on the coverlet, within her reach.

Lady Sorel sat beside her while Serac finished his examination and warned her against attempting another working until morning.

As he spoke with her mother, Aline reached for my hand again. “Will you come tomorrow? The laundry account still needs checking.”

“Of course. We can finish it together.”

“Even if I don't feel up to the papers?”

“Yes,” I said. “The papers can wait.”

She held on a moment longer before letting go and settling back against the pillows.

When I returned downstairs, Carrell had closed the committee room to visitors. Piers stood nearby with his delivery book, along with the maid who'd gathered Aline's papers.

I was surprised to find Godevin there. He was meant to be advising on northern imports before the royal visit, so I could only suppose that Carrell had sent for him with Amaury’s permission.

The servants confirmed that Aline had taken her green folio into the south garden that morning, its silver clasp newly repaired in Rochevaux. Godevin examined the hinge. “There's Current residue here.”

“Could it have affected her?” Amaury asked.

“Possibly, but there's too little to identify the working.”

My initials on the receipt drew Carrell's attention. I explained that I'd signed it while Aline tested the repaired clasp, which still caught.

“You were quick to stop the others lending her Current,” he said.

“She could scarcely breathe. I thought it wiser to wait for Serac.”

“You seemed to know what you were looking for.”

“Mrs Tress was often unwell. I helped care for her.”

“Did she have trouble with her Current?”

I opened my mouth, then stopped.

“Serac can answer the medical questions,” Amaury said. “Hugh, do you know who came in after Aline collapsed?”

“Not yet.” Carrell was still watching me.

I glanced at Amaury, but he'd turned back to Carrell. I was gathering my papers when Carrell added, “Stay at the house, Miss Sutton. I'll have more questions.”

“Of course, Captain.”

When I returned to Ysoraine, enquiries about Aline were arriving faster than we could answer them. By half past three, half the guests believed she was pregnant.

“At least they've chosen something ordinary,” Ysoraine said, signing another reply.

We spent the rest of the afternoon answering letters. Before dinner, I took the last of them to the dispatch room, where I encountered Amaury at the door.

“Miss Sutton. I meant to thank you for helping Aline earlier.”

I'd been expecting another question. “How is she, Your Grace?”

“Resting, though Serac still has little to tell.”

Amaury stepped closer to let a clerk pass. His sleeve brushed mine, and I nearly reached for it. I'd spent all afternoon answering questions about Aline. Now that he was here, I wanted, absurdly, for him to tell me she would recover. I gripped the letters instead.

“I noticed you checking her Current at the wrist,” he said. “My mother's physician used to do that. Hennet, in Brassen.”

“I was hoping to find something. Even after an overdraw, there should have been a trace.”

“Is that why you stopped the others lending her strength?”

“I didn't know what it would do to her. Neither did they.” I hesitated. “She kept looking at me as though I could put it right.”

Amaury was quiet for a moment. His gaze moved from my face to the letters bending in my grip. “She asked for you again. Something about the hospital papers.”

“I promised.” I straightened the letters, though the top one was already creased. “She thinks I might find something Serac missed.”

“She asked for you. Go.” He sounded tired, and no more certain than I was.

“I'd better deliver these.” I lifted the letters in my hand.

“Of course. And if you remember anything else that might help, tell Hugh.”

“I will.”

Afterwards, Ysoraine sent me upstairs for Aline’s appointment book and the remaining hospital papers. Aline was asleep, with Lady Sorel beside her, one hand resting over her daughter’s wrist. Lady Sorel directed me to the desk, where I found the book. Carrell still had the letters from Aline’s green folio.

I found him in his temporary evidence room, with the folio open on a cloth and its repaired silver clasp resting against the folded-back cover. A drawing of the hinge lay among several witness statements, though no one had yet identified the repairer.

“You can take the hospital letter,” he said. “Nothing else, and don't touch the clasp.”

I reached into the folio’s inner pocket for the letter and felt a faint tug at my Current as my fingers passed near the clasp.

At first I mistook it for the residue Godevin had detected, but the pull strengthened, drawing my Current towards the silver as cold spread through my fingers.

I tried to withdraw my hand, but the connection tightened until I could scarcely feel my gift. I jerked free, dropping the letter onto the table and stumbling back against a chair.

“Miss Sutton?”

I caught the back of the chair to steady myself and reached instinctively for my Current, relieved when it answered.

“Don't touch the clasp,” I warned as Carrell moved towards the folio.

He stopped, and I explained that the hinge had drawn on my Current even though I hadn't touched it. He carefully moved the folio aside by its leather cover.

“Could this have caused Aline's illness?”

“I don't know. She handled that clasp several times before she collapsed.”

Carrell took out his notebook. “How did you break the connection?”

“I pulled away.”

“Nothing more?”

“I was frightened, Captain.” My fingers were still trembling.

Carrell wrote that down. I wished I had said less, then resented him for making me regret it. Ferrat and Aline had felt nothing until it was too late; why had I felt the pull before I touched the clasp?

Carrell wrapped the folio for Godevin and had me sign my account. On the way back I kept checking that I could still reach my Current.

Kit’s reply arrived that evening beneath a sealing-wax invoice. He'd received my warning about Mrs Tress’s sister and the service-room deliveries. I burnt it and wrote about the clasp, asking him to trace its repair, its journey back to Aubrecourt and any connection to the northern shipments.

Three days later Aline still couldn’t reach her Current. Serac had found no cause, and the clasp had yielded no answers.

Meanwhile, Ysoraine was arranging a dinner for the merchants already at Aubrecourt, hoping to settle their smaller disputes before the royal party arrived. I was taking notes in her tea room while she discussed the plans with Amaury. Martin Vaurel came in to argue for cancelling it.

“With Aline still upstairs?” he protested when Amaury refused. “We don't know what happened to her, or whether whoever caused it is still in the house.”

“And send them where?” Amaury asked. “If one of them did this, I'd rather Hugh knew where to find him. We keep the dinner.”

He spoke calmly, but when Martin began to object again he pressed his fingertips to his closed eyes, then lowered his hand to answer.

“And no one is to trouble Aline,” Ysoraine added. “Her mother has enough to contend with.”

By dinner, Carrell had posted extra guards at the service entrances and restricted access to the upper floor. Ysoraine kept the conversation on trade and the coming convocation, while Amaury, who had barely touched his food, dealt with the occasional enquiry about Aline.

When a merchant asked after her, he said only that she was under a physician's care.

“Nothing catching, I hope,” the man said.

“Your dinner is quite safe,” Ysoraine replied before asking whether his cargo had cleared the northern crossing.

After the guests had gone, I stayed up late sorting Ysoraine’s hospital papers and found the letter I'd retrieved from Aline’s folio. Aline had wanted to copy the old

glasshouse vents for the infirmary. On the reverse, she'd sketched a route from the linen entrance to the south glasshouse.

The route passed through the locked service room. Beside it, she'd written: *Chair can pass here. Ask about access.*

I laid her drawing beside mine. She had been measuring a way to get an infirmary chair through; now she could scarcely leave her own room. I marked where I could watch the service-room door. If someone came for the things inside it, I meant to be there.

Chapter Four

A climbing rose needs a trellis with room for its own opinions.

Over the following days, rumours about Aline began to affect Ysoraine's guest list.

"Lady Maret has cancelled," she said, handing me a letter. "She thinks it's infectious."

"Her physician advised caution," I replied.

"That man prescribed six weeks at the seaside for a broken finger. I'd sooner trust her maid."

Another letter came from a baron's wife who wanted to know whether the rumours about Aline were true, without saying which ones.

"Tell her no," Ysoraine said.

"I'm not sure what we're denying."

"I doubt she is either. You may add 'My dear Helena' and my signature. I haven't entirely forgotten my manners."

I began the reply, only to write the date twice. I'd spent much of the night watching the passage outside the locked service room. No one had used it, and four hours' sleep had left me struggling to concentrate.

"Miss Sutton. The invitations?"

"Sorry." I crossed out the extra date.

"Saint-Lys needs an answer before luncheon."

I set Saint-Lys's letter aside for the moment and showed Ysoraine Aline's ventilation letter. Beneath the sketched route was another note:

B. said old house vents may be copied? Ask M.

“Did you tell Aline she could copy the old vents?”

“I may have. The south glasshouse still has some. And M would be Marcel, I expect. She'd been asking him about the old buildings since we began planning the infirmary.”

She handed the letter back. “Oh, Hugh needs the name of Mrs Tress’s sister by tomorrow.”

“I'll see that he has it.” I tucked the ventilation letter beneath Saint-Lys's and immediately had to search for it again.

“I employed you on Mrs Valmer’s recommendation, and you’ve given me no reason to regret it. I told Amaury as much.”

I was wondering how soon I could get another message to Kit when Amaury brought in a sealed dispatch for the commissioner's office.

“Make sure Mervel signs for it,” he said, handing it to me.

I entered it in the register, but he remained beside the desk.

“I'll see that it's delivered, Your Grace.”

“I know,” he said more gently. “Have you slept at all?”

“A little.”

“Amaury, if you're going to hover, kindly do it somewhere else. You're blocking my light.”

He moved to the end of the desk, where I was tying the answered letters together, and glanced at the brief reply on top.

“My aunt dictated that one, I take it.”

“I did try to make it longer.”

He laughed, and I found myself smiling too. I was still trying to secure the ribbon when a young footman appeared at the door.

“Your Grace, there's a tenant here from Bellemont. He says the retaining wall's collapsed and his north field is sliding.”

“Anyone hurt?”

“No, sir.”

“Take him to the map room. Perrin too, with the drainage plans.” He was already at the door. “And the survey. Last year's.”

Amaury excused himself and followed the footman out.

“He has people for that,” I remarked.

“He likes to see for himself.” Ysoraine tapped Saint-Lys's letter. “Now, Saint-Lys. Unless my nephew intends to investigate him as well.”

I finished the correspondence and sent the commissioner's dispatch. Half an hour later, as I crossed the gallery, I spotted Amaury accompanying the tenant through the courtyard. A boy walked beside them, twisting his cap between his hands.

Amaury said something to the boy, who looked up and loosened his grip on the cap.

Everything would have been so much easier if the duke were an ass.

* * *

Before luncheon, I took another bundle of hospital papers up to Aline. Ysoraine had kept the subscription list but let me have the estimates and unanswered letters.

Lady Sorel opened the sitting-room door only a little.

“She's not receiving visitors.”

“I promised I'd bring her the hospital papers.”

“Could you leave them with me? She's exhausted. Serac's been examining her, Carrell keeps asking questions, and now her father wants another physician.”

“Of course.” I held out the papers.

“Is that Miss Sutton?” Aline called from inside.

“Darling, you need to rest.”

“Then let her in, please.”

A chair scraped, followed by a sharp gasp. Lady Sorel opened the door wider to find Aline gripping the arm of her chair, struggling to catch her breath.

“Aline! What did I tell you?”

“I'm here,” I said, crossing to her. “You needn't get up.”

Aline caught my wrist. “Will you check again? Serac says I mustn't keep trying, but I thought you might find something he missed.”

I took her hand and searched carefully for the Current. Her pulse raced beneath my fingers, but I found the same emptiness as before.

“I'm sorry.”

She looked away, keeping hold of my hand until her breathing steadied.

Lady Sorel settled the shawl around her shoulders and urged her to rest, but Aline insisted on seeing the hospital papers. Her mother gave me a look that suggested I would be held responsible.

“Have they decided about the visitor chairs?” Aline asked.

“Ysoraine has refused four. She says people may take turns being concerned.”

“Good.” Aline smiled and drew the estimate onto her knees, smoothing it with the heel of her hand. “Then we can afford the bed covers.”

She crossed out the decorative edging for Madame Revet’s donated blankets. Without it, the housekeeper could have spare covers on laundry days.

“The blankets can go in the waiting room,” she said.

“Madame Revet won't like that,” Lady Sorel warned.

“Would you ask her, Mama? She might forget to insist on the edging if you tell her how grateful we'll be.”

Her mother agreed to write, and I noted the change.

“You could leave the rest until tomorrow,” I suggested.

“If I do, Ysoraine may decide we don't need beds either.”

While Aline returned to her estimates, I drew her ventilation letter from among my papers. “The glasshouse,” I said. “You mentioned the old vents—”

“Did Marcel find the drawings?”

“I haven't spoken to him yet.”

“Perhaps later, Cecily.” Aline rubbed the base of her thumb, and her mother looked up from her writing.

“Of course. I'll ask him about the fittings.”

“Thank you.” She hesitated, drawing her hands beneath the edge of her shawl. “And please don't ask me to try reaching for the Current again. Not today.”

“I won't.”

I put the letter away, ashamed that Aline had had to ask. I’d come to see how she was and caught myself hoping she might try her gift again for my benefit.

As Aline returned to the accounts, she spoke of the washerwomen whose aching hands she used to treat, sometimes the same women several evenings running. “They'll

still be coming," she said. She rubbed her thumb again. "I won't know what to tell them."

"Ask the housekeeper what they need," she said after a moment. "Something we can actually buy. But send the covers first, before the price changes."

Aline signed the orders with a trembling hand. I left the remaining estimates within her reach.

At the door she made me promise to check the new covers against the cloth sample. I left her and her mother discussing the blankets.

Outside, I stepped aside for Aline's maid as she brought fresh water. I asked about the morning her mistress fell ill. Aline had already returned from the garden when the maid left her. Twenty minutes later, the maid came back with clean things and found her gone again. When Aline returned, she complained of a chill and sat down, but otherwise seemed well. The maid didn't know where she'd been.

Marcel's reply was waiting downstairs: the old glasshouse drawings were missing, but the fittings remained. Ysoraine let me go to see them, provided I took the gardener's boy.

Marcel was working beside the south wall when I arrived. His boy had been sent for manure, so he offered to show me the fittings himself. As he led me inside, he complained about plaster the masons had left on his seedlings and three instrument men who'd spread their cases across his bench the day before.

He shook his head. "One even moved my cuttings without asking."

The instrument men had come through the covered passage. I glanced towards its narrow door; Aline's sketch showed the route turning through the locked service room.

“Did Lady Aline come to ask about the vents?”

“The morning she fell ill. Wanted the old drawings, same as you. I was busy with the masons, so she went to look for herself.”

He stopped beside the high windows and showed me the opening mechanism. “Most of these still work.”

I made a note of the fittings while he demonstrated the iron handle. At the far end of the glasshouse, wheels scraped over the threshold as two men manoeuvred a long, iron-bound case through the covered passage.

“Mind those seedlings!” Marcel shouted.

The men continued into the service room, locking the door behind them.

“Who has keys to that room?” I asked.

“The instrument men. Say they’re checking the old heating, though there was nothing wrong with it before they came.”

Fresh trolley tracks marked the floor near the western door. Marcel led me to a ventilation lever beneath the bench, where I noticed a bracket beside the warming pipe. Its lower fitting had been replaced with pale metal that stood out against the rusted iron.

“Was that repaired recently?”

“Those fellows did it. Used to be a brass plate there.” Marcel pointed to the fitting. “Put the new one back crooked, too.”

He reached to straighten it, and I felt a faint movement of Current along the old warming pipe. It gathered around the new fitting as his fingers approached.

“Better leave it,” I said quickly. “The committee may want to see how it's fitted.”

Marcel withdrew his hand. “Nothing worth copying there, miss.”

A call from the orchard took Marcel away before I had finished my sketch. The Current at the bracket had grown faint again, almost impossible to distinguish.

Back at the house, I confirmed Aline's order and the price of the covers. The remaining infirmary correspondence kept me occupied well into the afternoon, though I checked the clock often enough for Ysoraine to notice.

That evening, the Marchioness of Serrat kept me writing past nine, dictating what was supposed to be a short note. By the time she released me, the house was settling for the night.

I carried a lantern through the muddy orchard, closing its shutter as I passed the last garden lamp. The glasshouse door was still unlocked. Inside, I let through just enough light to find my way between the empty planting beds to the western workbench. Rusted hooks hung above the warming pipe, and the air still held some of the day's damp heat.

Someone had scrubbed the centre of the stone floor. Powder and metal flecks remained at its edges; I scraped a sample into a paper packet.

Scratches showed where the bench had been pushed towards the wall. Four depressions marked where the heavy apparatus had stood. Beside them, narrower dents suggested a screen with room behind it for a chair.

I bent closer, but the pull I’d felt at Aline’s clasp caught at my Current and stopped me short. I drew back until it faded, then lowered the lantern for a better look.

A faint working led from the apparatus marks towards the warming pipe.

Footsteps sounded in the covered passage. I shuttered the lantern and crouched behind the bench. As they approached the western door, something heavy scraped across the stone. They stopped close enough for me to hear a man breathing.

Another man spoke too quietly for me to catch the words. Then the footsteps continued towards the service room, and a key turned in the lock.

When they had gone, I opened the shutter a little. Looking at the space for the chair, I remembered Aline's chill that morning, and how she had sat down.

A strip of worked silver lay beside the screen marks. Its faint trace crossed the scrubbed stone towards the wall.

Beneath the bench, a grooved silver sliver had caught against the iron. I worked it free, scraping my glove.

The pull returned when I brought it near the strip. I moved it away at once, remembering Aline's desperate grip, and wrapped it separately from the powder.

The trace led to silver trapped beneath Marcel's new bracket, then turned away from the warming pipe. I lifted the lantern to follow it.

A key scraped in the western door.

I shuttered the lantern and slipped behind a planting bed. A man entered with a hooded lamp and a roll of tools, close enough for me to see the roofing tar on one elbow of his coat. He put his lamp beside the bracket Marcel had shown me and shook a rag out across the bench.

I crouched lower. The bed smelled of damp earth, and a broken pot pressed against my knee.

The man took a crumpled order from his pocket, smoothed it beneath the lamp and compared it with the fitting. Then he began to unscrew the plate.

The silver beneath the plate curved away from the warming pipe and disappeared through an opening behind the bracket. I'd been about to put my hand there. I kept both hands on my skirt.

He paused as footsteps passed along the gravel outside. A guard said something about checking the side entrance.

The workman waited until the sound faded, then bent over the plate again.

If I let him finish, the plate would vanish into the service room. I thought of Aline asking me to check her hands again. The patrol was moving away; I had only a moment to draw it back.

I reached behind me for a wooden plant label and pushed it between the loose pane and its frame. The glass rattled. I pressed again, harder than I intended, and the label snapped.

The screwdriver stopped.

“Inside,” a voice said beyond the door.

The workman lifted the plate free with his rag and set it on the bench while he gathered his tools. For a moment I thought he would wait and show the guard his order. Then the latch of the main door rose.

He dropped the half-gathered roll, snatched up his lamp and went through the side door, leaving the screw and paper beneath the wrapped fitting.

“You there. Stop!”

The guard's lantern swept across the bed. I bent my head, holding still while his boots scraped past the end of it.

“Round the potting yard,” he called to someone outside. “He's gone through the passage.”

A second pair of feet hurried away. The guard crossed to the side door and raised his light to see along the wall. I could have stood up and given my name. He

would have asked why I'd hidden from him and what was in the packets beneath my dress.

I reached across the bench instead. The plate was cold through the rag. I folded the collection order around the loose screw, took my lantern and eased backwards into the potting recess.

The guard came back to the bracket, swearing as he stumbled over the tools. While he lowered his light to the floor, I slipped through the side door.

A hinge squeaked behind me. I stopped beneath the dark windows, scarcely breathing, but he was still inside. Farther down the path, his companion called from the potting yard.

I waited until the lantern moved away from the glass, then turned towards the house and nearly walked into Amaury.

“Miss Sutton.”

For one foolish instant I was relieved to see him. Then I noticed Carrell farther along the path, speaking to the guard.

I lowered the lantern so its light would not fall on the packet in my hand. “Your Grace.”

“Quite a long way back from the Serrat pavilion.”

“I took the garden path.”

His gaze dropped to the wrapped object in my hand. “And collected something on the way?”

“A man was removing a fitting from the glasshouse. He left it when your guard came in.”

Amaury looked towards the open door. “Did you call the guard?”

“I rattled a pane.”

“Rather than speak to him?”

“I didn't want him to see me.” It sounded feeble now that the man was gone. I held out the collection order, keeping the plate against my skirt. “Don't touch the silver. It pulled at my Current, like Aline's clasp.”

He read the paper by the light of his lantern, then looked back at me. “Show me where it was.”

I followed him inside. Carrell went down the service path after the other guard. Beneath Amaury's lantern, I showed him where the exposed silver turned away from the warming pipe.

He took a wooden plant label from the bench. “That used to be joined to the pipe.”

“The new silver runs behind it. I could see it when he lifted the plate.”

Amaury brought the lantern closer while I unfolded the tar-marked rag. Two shallow grooves crossed the underside of the plate. Beneath a smear of dirt was the faint stamp G & C.

“Gervais, perhaps,” he said. “He supplies some of the household fittings.” He checked Renne’s signature on the collection order. “This is for the old vents.”

The guard returned to report that the man had escaped through the potting yard before anyone could reach the lower gate. He had left his tools, but the roll bore no name.

Amaury gave him the wrapped plate and collection order. “Take these to Carrell. Holt is to examine the silver before anyone handles it.” He indicated the bracket. “Cover that, and leave everything beneath it undisturbed.”

When the guard had gone, I set my lantern on the bench. My knees ached from crouching, and there was earth on my skirt.

“You came back to examine the fitting,” Amaury said.

“Yes.”

“And Hugh's men searched the room while you were hiding in it.”

“I wasn't expecting them.”

“They weren't expecting you either.” He looked at the empty place where the plate had lain. “They might have wanted to see this before you took it away.”

“I was afraid someone else would collect it.”

“The guard was standing beside it.”

“I know where he was.” I brushed at my skirt, grinding the soil into it. Amaury said nothing, which was worse. “I should have spoken to him.”

Carrell called from the garden wall. Amaury asked him to wait, then picked up his lantern.

“Come along. Hugh will want your account in the morning.”

On the gravel path I told Amaury that Marcel had seen Aline in the glasshouse. “That morning?” he asked. When I said yes, he nodded. Hugh already knew. I had wanted to help him, but had only made his search harder.

The man had left us his order, but I had learnt nothing about where he meant to take the plate. I could still hear his screwdriver turning in the quiet.

We walked on towards the climbing roses, where the house lights began to reach the path.

“The commissioner wants rooms for another six men,” Amaury said. “My aunt will need to know in the morning.”