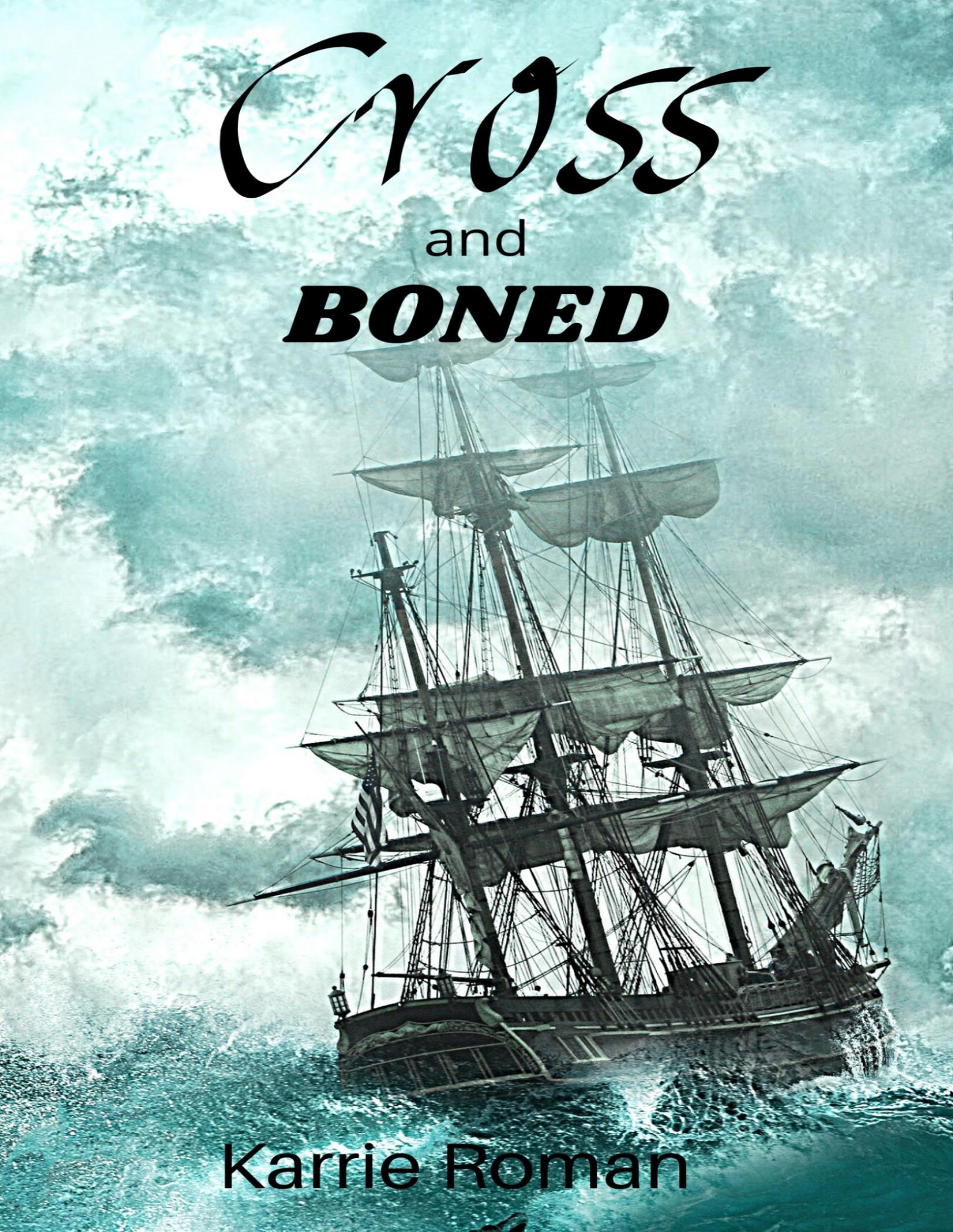


Cross

and

BONED

A three-masted sailing ship, likely a galleon or similar historical vessel, is shown from a low angle, sailing on a turbulent, dark sea. The ship's sails are partially set, and the masts are tall and complex. The sky is filled with heavy, dark clouds, suggesting a storm or a dramatic setting. The overall color palette is dominated by dark blues, greys, and blacks, with some highlights on the water and the ship's structure.

Karrie Roman

CROSS AND BONED

Karrie Roman



This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used factiously. Any resemblance to persons living or dead, or actual events is entirely coincidental.

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Warning: This book contains sexually explicit content, which may only be suitable for mature readers.

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CHAPTER ONE

London, England, November 1834.

PADDY

As he blew into his gloveless hands once, twice, before thrusting them back into his coat pockets, Patrick Maybrick found it difficult to imagine ever being warm again. Despite complaining about their ragged and holey state not two nights ago, he missed the gloves he'd owned for longer than he could remember. He didn't begrudge their loss though, much better they were wrapped around the tiny feet of his newborn nephew.

Twenty-two miserable years he'd been on this earth and much of that time he'd spent cold and hungry, but tonight was unlike any other he'd endured. Paddy felt as though the arctic was moving south, ready to envelop London in its icy, white misery—like a world created in one of those horror books he'd read.

Mr Heller had let him read whenever he had the chance. One of his favourites had been an atlas Mr Heller had in his bookshop a few months back. Paddy had read all about parts further north, all the way to the North Pole. Nobody had reached the Pole yet, but those who'd tried brought back terrible stories of ice and cold—those that did return. At the time he hadn't been able to believe such a terrible cold existed, but tonight he was having no such problem.

Those nights Mr Heller had let him in after closing his store had been the greatest of his life. Warm, fed a handful of stale pastries by Mrs Heller, and left amongst the books, had been Paddy's notion of heaven.

Then one day his sister Molly had turned up with her enlarged belly, the clothes on her back and an empty purse. And his life had changed.

A gust of wind stirred the unkempt ends of his scraggly long hair and reached through his meagre layers to rattle his bones, the chill causing his too thin body to shake until every part of him ached. He was accustomed to London winters, but this was something different. The cold tonight was so absolute it felt like the end of the world.

He blew into his hands again, any warmth lost by the time he shoved them back into his threadbare pockets. He stomped his feet, trying to get his frozen blood flowing. He felt nothing but the sharp sting of icy pinpricks. He hunched, shoving his head down into the collar of his coat, his thin cotton cap offering no protection from the frigid temperatures and biting wind.

He idly wondered if he'd freeze to death, right here in the doorway of Pierson's Bakehouse. If rain suddenly joined its cousins, wind and cold, he most likely would. If not for Molly and baby Ezekiel, Paddy might not care if he did die right here. His had not been much of a life thus far, with the future looking no brighter than the past.

Even with the streetlamps lit he strained to see more than an arm's length in any direction around him. The fog appeared dense enough he knew if there was any light, the air would be that sickly green-yellow colour they'd come to call pea-soup fog.

The bustling noise of other night wanderers had slowed to a trickle. The last of the drunken hotel patrons noisily made their way past him. Whores were out touting their wares hoping for something better than being held up against the wall, skirt over their heads while their clients rutted

against them. The air was thick with more than just the pea-soup fog—it stank of desperation and poverty.

Patrick had a small window of time to work with. He needed the dregs of London's populace to clear the street before he attempted to squeeze through the gate to the seamstresses which shared an alley with the rear of Mr Pierson's bakehouse. Pierson's workers would arrive at any time for their shift, but he was going to take the risk. He had no choice. Molly and Zeke would both freeze to death if he couldn't find warmer clothes for them.

This winter was the most brutal anybody could remember—even old Mr Freeman who remembers when some man named Cook found the hell on the other side of the world. The one where King George now sent criminals—like Paddy if he was caught.

The fog would give him refuge from prying eyes especially now the herd of in-the-wind tavern patrons had thinned out. Most of the drunkards had probably had too many drams to be much of a bother to him but the whores missed nothing, and the *Peelers* were keen to do a good job in their long blue tail-coats and top hats, a wooden truncheon secreted on their person. Mr Peel might have done Paddy a favour and waited a few more years to set up his Metropolitan Police patrols.

Patrick left his doorway, taking the seven steps to the corner cautiously. He didn't need to see the way; he'd walked it several times knowing the likelihood of fog was great. He'd memorised the steps and turns he needed to take. In the distance he heard rough grunts mingling with soft gasps—not of pleasure, at least not for her anyway—and the occasional slap of flesh. He'd seen plenty since he'd been forced into the slums of

London's East End and the sounds were enough for him to conjure a vivid and unwanted image of the couple fornicating in some dank alley nearby.

He took the corner. He was on Dorset Street now; typically, busier than the lane he'd inhabited moments ago. But the fog and the lateness of the hour—or earliness depending how a person viewed it—kept him swathed in practical invisibility. Twelve steps to the alleyway cutting between bakery and seamstress storefront.

He slipped into the alleyway and felt, through the thin sole of his boots, the stone cobbles that lined Dorset Street morph into the crushed stone pebbles and dirt of the alleyway. To his left the rear of Pierson's loomed over him. A small, narrow door and two windows hardly large enough for his baby nephew to fit through, broke up the solid wall. He couldn't see the door, but knew it was there. On his right the metal gates of the seamstresses. The front door was left unlocked after the lock had been shattered months ago and Bessy had been unable or unwilling to replace it. She relied on the gate to keep thieves out. She might be handy with her needle and thread, but not much else was going on in her upstairs. Still, she didn't deserve Paddy stealing from her. Nobody in these parts had much to their name and even less to spare.

He saw Bessy's round face, missing front tooth and trail of freckles across her nose, in his mind's eye. She was one of those round-all-over people. Paddy pictured her jollily laughing, massive bosom heaving as she spoke with her customers loud enough for all the world to hear. He almost turned away, but then he heard his nephews screams of hunger, his tiny body shaking in the cold. He recalled Molly turning to Paddy with such desperation and misery in her eyes as he'd never seen before. She'd said

she'd do this herself but if she got caught then Zeke would lose his mama. Paddy wouldn't allow that.

The gate would keep decent size men out, but Patrick was thin—sickly thin. He'd never been a healthy size but since Molly's arrival he'd given the largest portion of whatever food they'd scrimped together to her. She'd needed it for the baby, so now he looked like one of them skeletons he'd seen in Windsor's Apothecary. He stretched his hands, searching in the mist for the gate. The fingertips on his left hand touched the steel, recoiling at its freezing temperature. He edged sideways until his shoulder caught the steel bars of the gate. He shoved his right leg through, not a part of the limb touched the gate.

His arse went next, and then his torso. He had no stomach to pull in, no extra flab to force between the narrow bars. He eased through effortlessly. He heard nothing, even the rutting in the nearby alley had ended judging from the silence—a welcome reprieve for at least one of the parties involved.

Maybe he'd expected to feel differently on this side of the gate, inches away from the warm woollen coats, and swatches of thick, cosy material he'd spied in the seamstresses days ago. He'd stolen before: loaves of bread, rotten fruit, which he sometimes wondered could even be called stolen goods, a bag of grain here and there. He only ever stole items to keep him and his sister alive. Never for gain beyond survival.

He gripped the doorknob, wincing as the cold burned his tender palm, and turned. The door snicked open—loud in the silence that had fallen in the sliver of time between the raucousness of the nights trade and the hurly burly of the workday. He allowed himself a narrow gap to enter and then ever so carefully closed the door behind him.

Paddy froze. He took a moment to orient himself in the utter blackness of the seamstress's store. About four steps to the back right he should find the coats. And then turning left along the far side wall were the shelves of material. Molly had been taught to sew. She'd be able to make herself and little Zeke something resembling clothes from the material and the coats would warm her as she worked.

Ignoring the thumping of his heart he took the steps, arms stretched in front to feel his way. When he touched the wool it tickled his palms, not exactly soft yet not as abrasive as his own coat. He felt the warmth bleed into his fingers. He grabbed two, size didn't matter when survival was your only concern. Tucking them over his left arm, he turned, heading for the shelves. He stubbed his toe on a table leg, his worn boots barely protecting him. He bit down to cut off his yelp.

The shelves of material were exactly where they should be. He squatted, spreading one of the coats blindly over the floor, feeling his way now he was without the benefit of any light. The other coat he quickly shucked over his own tattered excuse for one. He reached up, pulled a pile of material down, and then another. He couldn't take more than he could easily carry, though the temptation was there, screaming through his desperation. He could sell or trade anything they didn't need, but then people with nothing needed everything they could get. He'd never wanted to sink this low.

He pulled the corners of the coat, tying them together to make a sack—made of and filled with stolen goods. He stood, took a handful of deep breaths to steady himself then turned right searching for the door. He'd completed a circle without knocking anything over or making noise that

could be heard from the outside. He had every chance of getting away with this theft.

The doorknob was difficult to find again, taking far longer than he hoped. He needed to be quick, in and out. He finally felt the cool metal in the cup of his hand and he gently turned, easing the door open. In his terror of being discovered he hadn't even noticed the warmth of the store, but he felt it now as he stepped back out into the hostile cold. The wind knifed through his exposed face and hands, the additional coat easing some of its impact on his body. Tendrils of hair escaped his cap and whipped around his face. He hunched again, trying to hide in his coat and ease the bitter ache of cold already nipping at his bare flesh.

Paddy stepped toward the gate, straining to see further than a yard ahead. He was swallowed once more in the pea-soup fog, unbroken by even a streetlamp. He grunted as his face hit the steel gate, his nose and left cheek taking the brunt of the blow, his left arm stretched uselessly between the bars. He felt around with his foot, finally pushing himself back through the gap, his parcel staying on the other side. He slid his left arm back and manhandled his bundle until he'd squeezed it through to join him in freedom.

The urge to run pulled at his muscles, his mind forcing him to fight his body. Dorset street had finally fallen quiet and a man running would be loud and draw attention. He needed to stay quiet and walk calmly back to the single room he shared with Molly and Zeke. The tiny space with its one broken window he'd stuffed with paper in a vain attempt to keep the cold out was the only refuge left to him. Nestled amongst the other dank, rotting tenements run by unscrupulous landlords who crammed as many of the

desperate into small rooms as they could manage, Paddy's tiny room was nonetheless the only home he had.

His nephew would be up by now, screaming his lungs out for another feed—always more. If Molly's milk ran dry, what would they do? Paddy hadn't allowed himself to think about the time beyond when his baby nephew would need more than merely his mother's milk.

Twelve steps back to the lane, and then fifty-seven steps and a right turn into Clements Lane and his squalid room with waiting sister and her son. The hard part should be over. The trip home, so long as he stayed in the foggy shadows and didn't draw attention, should be easy. All he heard was his heaving breaths and pounding heart. Not another living soul seemed to be out in the freezing wind.

He turned into the lane and began his fifty-seven steps, his breath quieting, heartbeat slowing with each one as the danger passed him by.

Eight steps.

Nineteen.

Thirty.

Forty-two steps. Almost there.

“You there! Stop!”

The shout was loud, though it hadn't really been a shout which meant whoever had spoken was nearby. Paddy sensed movement to his right.

Close.

A brush against his arm, something pointed, though not sharp, and wooden pressed into his throat. A face materialised through the fog.

Paddy smelt the beer sodden and rancid breath of the man who'd accosted him. A drunkard. Easily eluded, he hoped. As the face became clearer it appeared disconnected from a body, like a floating head and then Patrick realised why.

A black top hat cut off the top of the head, a dark blue coat melting into the dense fog giving the illusion of dismemberment. His waylayer was a peeler.

"What's that you've got?" the peeler asked, his lips curled in a sneer as though the mere act of talking to Patrick was a repugnant task.

"Me dirty clothes. Takin' em to my ma." He shrugged, though the peeler was unlikely to notice in the fog. He fell into what he called his slum voice. His first eight years he'd been raised in a well to do home. And then Pa had died, his life falling to pieces in so many ways in the aftermath. His Ma had taken to drinking through her grief, spending what money his Pa had left her until they didn't have a coin to their name. The Maybrick's found themselves just another fatherless family in the masses of the impoverished crammed into London's slums.

The peeler leaned closer, his face only inches away, his fetid stink making Paddy gag. The glow of a nearby streetlamp barely allowing the peeler's features to be more than a blurred mess of shadow and flesh.

"Show me."

The fog and dim light might still work in his favour if the peeler was satisfied with a cursory peek. He had no idea what material he'd grabbed,

only that it felt warm and sturdy. And soft to use against his nephews' tender skin.

Paddy dumped his bundle on the stones at his feet. He bent at the waist, keeping his lower body ready to flee if it came to that. His fingers fumbled the knot he'd tied into the corners of the coat to wrap his stash together.

The wooden truncheon pressed into the back of his neck keeping his head forced down, his body bent awkwardly. Putrid breath ghosted across his cold, bare cheek, and warm lips skimmed his ear as the peeler spoke.

“You're going to Newgate, lad. With this haul,” the peeler said, his foot tapping at the bundle of coats and material. “You'll be transported. One less scum on the street.”

Paddy listened, the words sinking in and rolling around in his head. Transported. No one came back from Terra Australis. Botany Bay was a one-way sentence. What would happen to Molly? Little Zeke.

Fear and panic curdled in his guts and Paddy surged upright, wincing slightly as the back of his head connected with the softer cartilage of his accusers' nose. He heard the satisfying crack loud in his ear. He had only seconds to make his decision.

Leave his haul and run to freedom?

Or...snatch up his package and risk getting caught?

There was no choice. He couldn't go home empty handed. He couldn't sit back and watch his sister—his nephew—wither and die in the bitter cold. That tiny body, already far more perfect than him or anybody he'd ever known, blue and frozen. No. He'd risk anything to prevent that.

Paddy grabbed for the coat, his fingers aching and stiff from the cold, but he managed to get a flimsy grip. And then he ran. He lost some of the bundle before he'd gotten more than a dozen footsteps away. He hefted the coat, cradled what was left of his precious cargo to his chest.

A rattling, clicking sound echoed through the fog. The peeler was summoning help with his rattle. Patrick put his head down and ran faster. He concentrated on the surface beneath his feet to tell him when he needed to turn. Any moment. Any moment.

Seconds before impact he glimpsed a tall figure through the fog. The figure was bigger than him, much bigger and never moved even as Paddy ploughed right into it. Paddy bounced off the firm surface, still unsure what he'd hit. His feet cartwheeled beneath him and he struck the ground hard, his tailbone taking the brunt of the impact, the bundle of coats exploding away from him as he hit the ground.

"Gotcha," the figure said, stepping closer to deter any further escape attempt Paddy might be thinking of making.

"No. No, please," Paddy begged, unashamed because he could not shake the image of the frozen baby from his mind. "My nephew—"

"They all got nephews, lad. Or sons, daughters. Every thief we catch has some story to tell why we should let 'em go." The voice of his peeler permeated through the fog behind him, though as Paddy turned the man himself was still not visible.

The wall of a man he'd run into had spoken just the one word so far, and was now looming over him, arms crossed, and a decided scowl on his face. He'd seen more sympathy on old Watkins' face when he'd taken to him with the strap for smart mouthing.

“Young lad got ya good, Maudlin. P’raps ya shouldna’ had those drams over at Maisy’s,” the wall drawled.

“Shut yer mouth, ya great *gollumpus*,” the peeler replied with plenty of heat in his words, though Paddy heard the thread of fear folding through them.

Maybe these two would start fighting each other and Paddy would have his chance to flee once more. Unfortunately, the *gollumpus* chose that moment to place a big meaty hand on Paddy’s shoulder, and squeeze.

“Get orf,” Paddy gasped as the hand tightened like a vice on his rickety thin shoulder. He wasn’t going anywhere the wall didn’t want him to go.

“Takin’ ‘im to Newgate?”

“Yeah.”

“You’ll need a hackney.”

His gaolers spoke over him as though Paddy was not even there. He was surprised they didn’t comment on his thundering heartbeat. He was heading to Newgate. Only one of God’s miracles he’d heard tell of would stop that now and he didn’t think God was likely to help him out given that stealing was against his commandments. Paddy didn’t much care, so long as God looked after his sister and her baby.

“How fortunate you’ve got one close by,” the peeler sneered. The two men clearly knew each other but there was no love lost between them.

“You can always walk him all the way there, *shabbaroon*.”

“Fine. Get him in then.”

Paddy gasped as he was lifted onto his feet, the big mans' hands tightening painfully on his shoulders. He wobbled but didn't fall, the gollumpus had too tight a grip on him. He was manhandled, dragged and shoved, his legs flailing about to try to keep him on his feet.

Finally, the giant hands released him, giving him his chance to run. But before the idea had even finished forming in his mind he was pushed hard on his upper back. Paddy flew forward, stretching his arms out to arrest the fall he knew would come. Before he lost his footing, he slammed into the side of the hackney. His hands took the brunt of the hit, an intense pain shooting up his arms. Momentum forced his forehead into the wooden coach, his brain rattling in his skull once more. He fell onto the harsh pebbles, sprawled out, his arms and legs akimbo. The way things were going he'd be lucky to make it to Newgate alive and well.

"Missed the door, Princess?" Gollumpus growled, his voice close enough to shoot fear all the way up Paddy's spine.

"Just get him in, Sparrow," the peeler ordered, frustration clear in his tone.

Once again, the giant man hauled Paddy to his feet, uncaring of the aches and pains shooting through his body after his collision with the hackney. One huge hand grabbed Paddy by the scruff of his coat, the other searching for purchase around his lower back. Then Paddy was lifted off his feet and thrown into the carriage exactly as he'd seen men toss bags of grain and the like down near the wharfs.

Paddy curled up on the floor of the hackney, not bothering to try to get onto the seat. He closed his eyes, not wanting to see his last moments of freedom pass him by as he was taken to Newgate. The hackney wobbled as the peeler and the gollumpus climbed in. The peelers feet kicked his ribs as

the man settled into the seat above Paddy. He heard the whistle of the whip as the driver brought it down on the nags back, urging the poor creature onwards, his voice booming from the back of the hackney. He ignored the sound of the peeler's harsh breath, wishing himself out of this life instead. In the distance cocks crowed, doors slammed, and workers talked and argued as they made their way to yet another day of toil.

He kept his eyes firmly shut. All around him people stirred, waking to a freedom Paddy wouldn't know again for many years—if ever. The lives of the folks who lived in the East End slums were hard and brutal, not the sort of life anybody would choose to live, yet they were free. For years Paddy had lamented his lot in life, complaining about all the things he didn't have, never imaging worse than abject poverty. But as the hackney bounced along the cobblestones taking him to a perdition that he'd only heard tales of, he cursed himself for never appreciating the one thing he did have—freedom.

The hackney jounced to a sudden halt, tossing Paddy's body forward so his back hit the footrest. Whether because of the cold or the fear of his situation Paddy was so numb he hardly felt the blow. He stayed curled up where he landed, waiting. He idly wondered if he'd taken a breath since he'd first felt the peelers truncheon digging into his neck. He wasn't ready to think about Molly and Zeke waiting at home for him, full of hope and the promise of warm clothes and maybe a little extra food for their bellies.

A broken promise.

Paddy wasn't strong enough to start imagining what fate awaited his sister and nephew now he'd be gone. He didn't want to think about her having to whore herself out for just a few pennies or where Zeke would be while she worked. He'd ruined everything.

Hands grabbed him again—he didn't care whose—and pulled him violently from the hackney. The back of his head struck something hard, his ears ringing from the jolt. He was dragged by the collar of his coat, his feet scrabbling to keep up as his captor marched briskly toward an enormous stone building dwarfing everything around it.

Newgate gaol. For centuries the large building had been home to London's felons and debtors. Its reputation notorious for overcrowding and as a hive of disease and pestilence. The building had burned and been rebuilt several times but nothing they did had made the gaol any more enticing or decent for habitation.

Paddy squinted through the fog, finally allowing himself to take in his surroundings. Other than the imposing size, the other feature of note was the dearth of windows. Neighbouring buildings featured walls pockmarked with sizeable glass openings allowing light and exposure to the outside to their visitors. Newgate gaol afforded no such luxury to its inhabitants. He easily imagined the darkness and sense of enclosure once a person stepped foot inside.

His chest tightened, his breath quickening as panic rooted itself throughout his body. He was certain if they managed to drag him in there, he'd never step out alive. Sweat slicked his skin beneath his layers despite the frigid temperature. A scream clawed its way up his throat, but he bit down, refusing to let it out and give the peeler the satisfaction.

"Say farewell to yer life, lad," Gollumpus rumbled, the first hint of sympathy in his voice.

"Please," Paddy beseeched, wondering if he'd been loud enough to be heard. Or maybe he was begging in his head. "Please," he tried again.

The man dragging him never slowed down. To Paddy, it felt as though the man was done having his fun and now only wanted to be rid of Paddy.

“Looks like a hanging day,” Gollumpus replied, ignoring Paddy’s pleas entirely.

Paddy whipped his head up. His body shuddered uncontrollably at the sight of the gallows erected in front of the debtor’s door. Paddy had been to one hanging day at Newgate—curiosity getting the better of him. He had no desire to witness another. He recalled the way the poor unfortunate’s body had shaken violently as the noose tightened, sucking the life from him. Almost more appalling than the scene of the dying had been the crowd who’d paid as much as ten pounds for a front row seat at the viewing. He prayed to god he’d see nothing of today’s deaths.

Soldiers with pikes surrounded the gallows, guarding it, but from what, Paddy did not know. He caught the eye of one guard as he was hauled past hoping to find sympathy, maybe even help. Instead, he was met with a steely glare and snarl of disgust.

He was a criminal. There would be no sympathy, no excuse, no reason. He’d be tried, convicted and sentenced. And all without the slightest hint of compassion from those who held his life in their hands. Not one of them would care about his cold and starving five-week-old nephew.

The enormous wooden door was pushed open and Paddy was hauled through, his last glimpse of the outside world was the gallows indifferently awaiting its victims.

“What we got ‘ere?” A booming voice thundered.

“Thief. Stole from ole’ Bessy,” the peeler replied.

“You got yer garnish, boy?”

“Garnish?” Paddy asked.

“Ya see, you’ve got to pay or strip, boy.”

What was the man talking about? Pay or strip. “I dun...I dunno what ___”

“These men run Newgate. You pay them whatever you got on you... or they’ll have yer clothes,” the peeler helpfully explained.

If these men took his clothes, he’d be dead sooner than he thought. There was no question of it given how cold the weather had become over the past few days. He was freezing already in what he had on, the thin, tattered layers doing only enough to keep him alive—but not warm.

“I ca...can’t.” His voice stuttered, trembled with either fear or cold, maybe both.

“Then I’ll have ‘em.” The man leered, stretching his arm out and curling his fingers in a ‘give me’ gesture.

Paddy looked around, wild-eyed and terrified. The men who the peeler claimed ran the gaol stood three abreast. They looked like the three wise men in every nativity scene he’d ever come across. They were all short and rotund. They might have come from the same ma except one had black hair, one had none and the third had a head of bushy red locks—the one who’d done all the talking, the one likely to be the leader.

“No,” Paddy said with as much authority as he could muster. His answer was met with laughter. “I ain’t given’ you me clothes.” He straightened. He was taller than all three but half their width. Together they could easily take from him whatever they wanted.

“We’ll be having them clothes, boy—”

“Leave him, Red.”

Paddy turned to the new voice in the room. Its owner was almost as tall as gollumpus, as broad across the shoulders as the three wise men who ran Newgate, but his bulk was solid muscle, no flab. Though he’d spoken to the leader, his gaze was fixed on Paddy.

“He ain’t paid the garnish, Frost,” Red replied, raising his brow.

“Because he does not have it. Look at the little mouse, Red. He will not last a night without his clothes...such as they are.”

“Everyone pays,” Red answered, though with less bluster and more edginess. Whoever this Frost was, Red was intimidated by him. The man certainly spoke like he’d been properly educated. Perhaps he was a rich man who’d fallen from grace. Maybe Frost was the leader, not Red.

“Here.” Frost flicked a coin toward the three wise men. In the dim light Paddy was unable to see how much the man had paid. He hoped it was enough.

“What’s yer interest, Frost?”

“Decency,” Frost replied, flicking a glance to Red before returning to take one last look at Paddy, and then leaving the room.

Paddy watched him go, wishing he’d stay. He’d felt better when Frost had been in the room.

“Yer all paid up, fer now, boy,” Red spat as he bent and pocketed the coin. “Take him on through, Arty.”

The black-haired wise man stepped forward. He shoved Paddy toward the door through which Frost had come and gone like a kind of phantom. He followed, because what choice did he have anymore. Behind him the remaining men chatted quietly. Paddy tuned them out. He didn't care about them or their conversation at all.

He followed his guide to an open doorway. The man stepped aside and pointed for Paddy to enter. The room—cell—was tiny but packed to the brim with men of all shapes and sizes. Paddy squeezed in, enduring the grunts of the other inmates as he pushed his way through. The stench clawed through his nostrils, so fetid his stomach roiled. He thought he might be sick but that would only add to the repulsive odour. He breathed through his mouth, trying not to inhale more than absolutely necessary. Vomit, piss, shit. The cell reeked of human filth and misery.

The press of bodies closed around him, sealing him in as easily as a barred door might. He was here—his new home.

FROST

Why the hell had he done that? The little mouse was no different to so many who were dragged through the gates of this hell on earth and yet he'd been compelled to help this one. Additionally, he'd put himself in Red's crosshairs. He was not afraid of the man, nor any other in here, but he'd prefer to keep to himself. He had no interest in garnering attention, especially if it led to questions of his past.

Since his arrival at Newgate, Frost had done his best not to think about what had led him here. He'd been somewhat successful; his mind far more preoccupied with his wretched grief than his crime or his situation.

He'd done what was necessary and if he had to pay a price for it, then so be it. He would never regret his actions from that terrible day, even if he swung for it. His only regret was not acting sooner.

Frost leaned against the wall, ankles crossed, as he watched the men around him. A more wretched hive of hopelessness he'd yet to encounter—and he'd been to war. He'd face battle a thousand times over rather than enduring life inside these walls. He comforted himself that he would not be here for long. Before the end of this horrid year he'd likely be swinging by his neck. That fate suited him just fine. What did he have left to live for?

“Can I get yer a dollymop, Frost?” One of Red's accomplices, Mr Barnes he thought, asked through a mouthful cracked and broken yellow rotted teeth.

“No.”

“Come now, yer been 'ere long enough to be hankerin' after some tail with a nice round nancy.”

Frost knew prostitutes were regularly brought in to satisfy the desires of the wealthier prisoners. He'd heard them often enough, though fortunately he'd been spared the sight. He had no interest in publicly engaging in a sexual encounter with any woman, but particularly not the unfortunates so desperate they'd enter this lice-infested hell for a few coins.

Red's men often asked if there was anything that they might get for him. He had some money, though was not sufficiently rich enough anymore to afford one of the private cells. His money would not last forever, though, and if, by some hideous miracle, he was spared the gallows, he'd need every penny.

“I said no.” He pulled himself to his full height and glared at Barnes. Whatever it took to rid himself of the presence of the odious man he’d happily do.

“Some mecks, then?”

“No.” He’d always enjoyed a brandy with Daniel after their labours were over for the day and the moon watched over them on the sapphire seas, but the spirits they served here smelled of gutter water and Frost could not imagine them tasting any better. “Mr Barnes, if there is anything that I require I shall see to it myself. Good day.”

He caught a flash of bitter hatred before the ungainly man skulked away in search of easier fare. Frost didn’t care. He was done caring.

Then why the hell did you help the little mouse?

As if conjured by his thoughts, the young man he’d helped moments ago walked by as he was led to one of the already overcrowded cells. The lad’s eyes were downcast, shoulders hunched. Frost easily imagined just what the little mouse was thinking. Life in London’s slums was grim indeed, but Newgate was a different sort of beast, one that sucked the life out of all who entered. The hollowed-out husks of former inmates of Newgate were easy enough to spot outside its walls—one only had to look for the living dead behind haunted eyes to know they’d spent time in this hell.

He watched as the young man pushed through the crowd already wedged into a cell far too small to accommodate so many bodies comfortably. Frost had no notion what had led the lad here or how long he’d stay. *Nor should you care*, he scolded himself. Caring only begot pain and

Frost already endured more hurt than he thought himself capable of bearing. The little mouse would just have to fend for himself.

The young man was soon lost to Frosts sight as he was swallowed by the crowded room. He recalled the look of terror in the man's eyes when Red had asked for his clothes; Frost knew then he was going to keep an eye out for the lad. He was fooling himself if he thought he was going to do otherwise. How Daniel would laugh at him for such foolishness. *Always pretending your souls as black as your hair, he'd mock, but I know how big your heart truly is.*

CHAPTER TWO

PADDY

Paddy spent much of his first day of incarceration inside his small cell, leaving it only to use the foul water closets located off the courtyard where many of the felons roamed aimlessly. He didn't know if they were attempting to stay warm with exercise or if the courtyard offered them a mockery of freedom.

His mind was as foggy as the London streets, refusing to focus on his terrible situation. He banished all thoughts of Molly and Zeke. He could not think of their dire circumstances and retain any hope of remaining sane.

As he bunked down for his first night, he promised himself he'd walk the yard tomorrow to find out if it offered any sense of liberty. The barracks beds stood mere inches from the filthy, cold stone floor. His covering was threadbare, but bodies were pushed so closely together heat leached from one man to the next.

Many times, during the first day he'd thanked God for Frost and his coin keeping his clothes on his back, even as pathetic as they were. He'd seen a handful of naked men on his short forays into the bowels of Newgate and he'd swear one or two of them had skin tinged blue with cold.

Now, lying crushed between two strangers, he closed his eyes, hoping for sleep and trying to forget where he was.

Only the distant church bells offered him any sense of time as he fought for the oblivion of sleep. Molly must have realised a lifetime ago he'd been nicked. She'd be out of her mind with worry for herself and little Zeke. She cared about Paddy too, but she was a mother now and her first

concern would be for her baby. What were they doing now? Had she eaten at all today? Were they as cold and frightened as he was?

The man on his right shuddered, maybe cold or a nightmare. But then Paddy felt something scuttle across his legs and only force of will kept him from leaping up with a shriek tearing from his throat. This was not the first rat to dart along his body as though it were a trail and would not be the last—especially while he was trapped in here.

Trapped.

The rest of his life laid out before him behind his closed lids. Shackles. Cages. Whips. Filth and rot. There was nothing in his future but the kind of hell that should be reserved only for murderers and rapists. He'd stolen to save the lives of his sister and nephew and for that he had a hellish trip to purgatory to look forward to.

Paddy bit down, willing the tears to dry up. If he had any hope of surviving, he needed to stop thinking about his old life and the future he had before him. He must focus on the present and face whatever demons came his way.

At some point during the frigid night Paddy fell asleep to the sounds of countless other miserable men groaning and shuffling. He was rocked into slumber by the sporadic movements of others shifting and stretching in an ineffective search for comfort, the foul stench of the stale air finally fading as he slipped into unconsciousness.

The morning brought no comfort. He awoke to the same damp, cold, miserable circumstances. His lot had not improved as if by some miracle overnight. His bladder ached, but the thought of using the squalid water closets made him sick. His ward would still be locked so he'd have to use

the piss buckets dotted about for prisoners to use until the turnkeys came to give them access to the courtyard and the water closets. He climbed over the man to his left, trying not to wake him because who knew what kind of reception he'd get for stealing the man from the sweet bliss of slumber.

Through the worn soles of his boots he felt the icy cobblestones. He'd left the shoes on all night, terrified someone might steal them otherwise. As he trudged toward the bucket he wondered if his bare skin would stick to the floor if he did somehow lose his boots, because it was so damn cold. The reminder of the garnish he hadn't been able to pay carved through the tranquillity he'd tried to build around himself. What would happen next time he had to pay? What if there was no Frost around then? He couldn't ask Molly for money—she had none to give.

He heard the church bells toll five. Twenty-four hours he'd been a captive in Newgate. A drop in the ocean of time he'd be expected to serve for the crime of trying to stay alive. He didn't know what time the men would be released from their ward to be free to roam the squalid courtyard, but Paddy had already had enough of small spaces. He decided he'd walk the yard today until he was forced back into his cell.

A handful of men lay outside the cell door, on nothing but the frozen stone floor, such was the extent of the overcrowding. Paddy guessed someone, somewhere, was saving money by shoving too many felons into too small a space. He hoped they choked on their coins. He stepped over the pile of men; his way dimly lit by a single lamp hanging close to the thick steel door of the ward.

“Careful, little mouse,” a deep, husky voice murmured through the dark.

Paddy froze, before quickly looking down. He'd almost stepped in a pile of rats contentedly gnawing on unidentifiable remains, possibly one of their own. Paddy sidestepped the cannibalistic rodents and glanced in the direction the voice had come from.

Frost was leaning against the wall, his long legs crossed, arms folded across his broad chest. In the hazy light Paddy couldn't clearly make out his features but he thought he caught the hint of a smile. A woollen cap was pulled low over his head, a thick scarf covering his throat. Paddy almost salivated at the sight of the warm coat wrapped around the big man's body.

"Thank you," he muttered, and then more clearly because he was a man and not a mouse. "For yesterday, too. I don't know what I woulda' done if you hadn't helped me."

"Died, most likely," Frost drawled.

Paddy was taken aback by the man's bluntness though he needed more honesty. He could no longer kid himself everything was going to be okay.

"Why'd you do it?" Paddy asked, taking a nervous step closer.

Frost shrugged, his gaze resting heavily on Paddy. "Like I said, decency."

"Is he a friend of yours? That Red?"

Paddy endured Frost's glare as he silently watched him for a time. In the dim light he couldn't tell the colour of the man's eyes, but they looked dark. But everything seemed dark in this place.

"I do not have friends," Frost grunted as he pushed off the wall.

The big man brushed his shoulder as he walked by and Paddy shuddered. He fought not to turn and stare after Frost. Their entire interaction, the way Frost looked at him, left him with a feeling as though Frost might devour him if he had the chance. Bafflingly, Paddy couldn't decide if being consumed by Frost would be a good thing or not.

The pull to turn and stare after Frost reminded him of the time when he'd gone fishing and had to drag that big old pollack to shore. He felt a similar struggle now between logic and emotion. He closed his eyes and drew in a breath. When he opened them and turned, Frost had disappeared. Maybe Paddy imagined the encounter. Perhaps Frost *was* a phantom.

By the time he'd found and used the bucket, several more men were out of the cells and idling about the ward. Paddy joined them, finding a spare inch of wall to lean against while they waited for the turnkey to come and let them into the courtyard.

Now that he had some space around him the bitter cold inched back in, folding itself along his bones until he shook so hard, he began aching all over again. He shoved his hands in his pockets, knowing it was futile but what other option did he have. His gaze roamed the inmates and he told himself he was most definitely not searching for one in particular.

He caught sight of a short man, maybe even one of those midgets they put on show, but when he turned Paddy realised, he wasn't a man at all. The child would be lucky if he was twelve and he'd been sent here to hell on earth. For what crime? He couldn't imagine a child causing enough harm out there in the world to land himself in this pit.

Several elderly men congregated together. Judging from their thinning, white hair Paddy reckoned they were at least in their sixties. Most of the felons he saw would be only slightly older than Paddy himself,

though. He tried not to think about the lives of poverty and desperation which led each man here.

Although some doubtlessly deserved their fate, Paddy wondered how many were just like him. How many were here only because they wanted to survive? Or wanted their loved ones to live. His line of thinking brought him back to Molly and Zeke.

Paddy closed his eyes as images of the baby accosted him: tiny hands gripping Paddy's finger, the soft sound of his breath as he slept, his little legs kicking involuntarily as Zeke began to learn his own body. Old Mrs Moran told him Zeke wasn't old enough to smile, let alone laugh. Paddy couldn't wait to hear his nephews voice, the sound of the baby's laughter. He was sure it would be the sweetest noise he ever heard. He swallowed as he realised, he'd never hear it now.

“What'd they nick you for?”

Paddy startled at the voice to his left. He turned and found a youth, probably his own age, staring back at him. His face was pinched, his cheeks hollowed, eyes wild and hungry. He shared the look of poverty with so many unfortunates Paddy saw on the streets every single day.

“Stealing,” he answered.

“Me too. Stole a crate of cabbage. Hate the stuff but ya gotta eat.” The young man shrugged.

Paddy nodded because he knew the sentiment. He'd stolen a few bits and pieces of food himself. Rich folk who made the laws seemed to forget a person needed food to live, otherwise they'd never lock someone up for stealing a loaf of bread.

“I pinched a couple of coats and material. For my sister, ya know, to make some warm clothes for her and her little one.”

“Some bad luck.” The man nodded as though he was an old sage well acquainted with the horrors of the world. “Names Benjamin Goodall.” He held out a stick thin hand wrapped in holey woollen mittens for Paddy to shake.

“Patrick Maybrick. Paddy.”

“Good ta meet ya, Paddy.”

“What happens now?” Paddy asked. This man—boy really—seemed to know more about their situation than Paddy, though perhaps the air of experience he wore like a shield around him only made it seem that way.

“This is me third time. I’ll be on the hulks for sure. Likely end up transported,” Benjamin stated in a matter of fact manner. The expression on his face seemed trapped in a perpetual smile, his eyes wide as though everything was new and wondrous to him. Benjamin Goodall looked like the most non-threatening person on earth. Paddy liked the look of him.

“Sorry,” Paddy muttered as though he had any blame in the man’s misfortune.

Benjamin shrugged. “Is what it is.”

They stood in silence for a time. Paddy watched the growing crowd as more and more men drifted out of the cells. The hierarchy was easy to spot. Those in warm clothes were clearly the wealthier or more powerful, the naked were the dirt poor and powerless. If not for Frost, Paddy would have been among the latter. He shuddered at the idea of being entirely

without clothes to protect him from the damp, brutal cold so alive and thriving inside the walls of Newgate.

“It’ll be in two days,” Benjamin said after a while.

“What?”

“Your trial. In two days, it’ll be trial day at the Old Bailey. That’s why there’s so many of us in here. It’s always crowded in here, mind, but coming up to trial days and hanging days the peelers shove as many as they can in ‘ere.”

Two days. Not long to wait to discover his fate and yet Paddy wanted more time. He didn’t look forward to the finality his sentencing would give him. He held no false hope that he’d be found innocent.

“How long you been ‘ere?”

Benjamin sighed, the first sign he’d given that his situation bothered him at all. “Almost a month this time. Long enough to know—”

“Know what?”

“Who’s who. See that gent o’er there?” Benjamin pointed to an average size man leaning against an adjacent wall. He was neither big nor small, handsome nor ugly. His appearance was entirely plain and unremarkable.

“Yeah,” Paddy grunted.

“Killed his family. Cut up his missus like she were a slab of meat. Drowned his little uns.” Benjamin tsked and shook his head while Paddy stared wide-eyed at the benign looking man who’d slaughtered his family.

“Dear God,” was the only reply Paddy managed.

“Keepers charge ‘im double for whatever he wants. He’s some rich bastard though so he can afford to pay.”

Paddy wasn’t yet acquainted with the gaol system. He’d met the three wise men and been ordered to pay to keep his clothes. Beyond that he had no idea how society in Newgate gaol worked.

“You paid the keepers, then?” Benjamin continued, perhaps sensing Paddy’s confusion.

“Keepers?”

“They run things in ‘ere. You pay ‘em to come in, you pay ‘em to go out. You pay ‘em for bedding, clothes and everything else. You got enough money you can buy some *belch* from ‘em. Plenty here who stay boozy the whole time. Makes ‘em forget, I guess.”

Paddy had never been much of a drinker but the idea of forgetting this nightmare by staying drunk was appealing. He didn’t have money for clothes and bedding so he sure as hell didn’t have any spare for drinking.

“I ain’t got no brass,” Paddy muttered.

Benjamin eyed him. “Ya got your clothes.”

“Someone...a man paid for me when they brought me in.” Paddy didn’t use Frosts name, unsure whether the man would want what he’d done known to others.

“Ain’t gonna help next time you need to pay the keepers.”

Paddy didn’t need anybody pointing out to him the dangerous situation he was in. He knew very well that he was alone and out of luck.

“I dunno anything bout being in ‘ere.”

“You ain’t never been in ‘ere before?” Benjamin asked, a hint of disbelief in his tone as he watched Paddy shake his head. He leaned closer to Paddy as though he was about to tell him all the secrets of the universe. “Listen. We don’t get nothin’ we don’t pay for. The keepers run everythin’. You can’t pay ya don’t eat. Simple.”

The weight of Paddy’s fate bowed his knees and he sunk to the ground, resting his elbows on his knees. “What’s gonna happen to Molly? Little Zeke?” he asked aloud, though he wasn’t really directing his questions to Benjamin.

“That ya sister?”

“Yeah and her baby. He’s only five weeks old.”

“Listen,” Benjamin said as he slid down the wall to join Paddy on the ground. “You best forget ‘em. You get transported you never gonna see ‘em again anyways.”

How could he bear that? How could Paddy live never knowing what became of his sister and nephew?

“It’s us against them,” Benjamin continued, ignoring—or perhaps not understanding—Paddy’s distress. “‘Em outside don’t care none what goes on in ‘ere. So, we run it all. You get visitors, you make sure they give you everythin’ they can. Cause like I say, you can’t pay, you don’t eat.”

“Who’re the keepers?”

“You’d have met some of ‘em when they brought you in.”

“The three wisemen,” Paddy whispered.

“They wise enough to be keepers,” Benjamin scoffed, hearing Paddy’s muttered words.

“Is there one man in charge of all the others?” Paddy asked, thinking about his mysterious saviour. Though they hadn’t exactly kowtowed to Frost, the three wisemen had seemed unwilling to argue with him.

“Nah. We ain’t got no king in ‘ere.”

“What about Frost?” Paddy asked, his curiosity finally winning the battle against remaining silent.

Benjamin turned to him, giving him a curious look before shrugging and answering, “No one knows much about ‘im. But most stay clear. The keepers leave ‘im alone—everybody does. Never gets visitors, never talks much. He’s one of them enigmas.”

Suddenly, there was movement amongst his fellow prisoners as they headed toward the gate leading to the courtyard which now stood open. Paddy and Benjamin stood to follow the human cattle as they spilled out of the ward into the courtyard. What was he supposed to do all day?

Paddy had always been a busy person. He’d undertaken all kinds of work to keep himself clothed and fed. He’d run messages, lugged goods down at the docks, even been a lamplighter once. He liked to move and keep occupied—less time to contemplate his poverty.

Whatever work he’d found had always been enough to keep him going until Molly found him. He thought she’d been safe and taken care of when their aunt took her in several years ago, not long after their mothers’ life imploded leaving them to the mercy of London’s slums. Where his ma was now was anybody’s guess. He’d last seen her draped around a man who seemed to have fared no better in this world than Caroline Maybrick. They’d been half naked and cavorting right there in the street--his mother

laughing at him when he'd tried to intervene to *save* her. Paddy had turned away in disgust and never looked back.

Paddy's wonderings about his family and Frost faded as he contemplated days—weeks or maybe years—of wandering the courtyard with nothing to do but think about the lice scrabbling over his body, the rats underfoot, the man who'd killed his children standing a handful of paces away.

"C'mon, Paddy," Benjamin called loudly as the terror of his thoughts froze Paddy's feet to the spot. How was he to endure his life now?

"If you gonna join them there at cards, the tall one with the funny-looking moustache is a card sharp so don't think about *broading*, cause he'll know. He's been known to beat the stuffing out of anyone he thinks is cheating," Benjamin continued as though the world hadn't suddenly flipped upside down. As though Paddy's life wasn't over.

Paddy nodded, pretending he cared about Benjamin's advice. Even if he wanted to play cards, he had nothing to bet except the clothes on his back and he couldn't afford to risk them, even as ratty as they were.

"Over there." Benjamin pointed to a group of men so thoroughly drunk they could barely stand. "They're full up to the knocker every day. You want get no sense outta 'em."

Apparently, Benjamin had taken on the role of guide as he showed Paddy around, pointing out people or things of interest. Bit-fakers, bludgers, cash carriers, screwsmen. Murderers. Every criminal element of London flourished in Newgate.

Paddy swallowed down the bile flooding his mouth as Benjamin's tour continued. He'd be lucky to make it in front of the magistrate in two

days. He wondered if he even wanted to.

For hours he walked the courtyard. Sometimes Benjamin was with him, other times his *friend* disappeared, and Paddy walked alone. He cringed when he passed naked men who looked more dead than alive. He closed his eyes as he walked by a ruckus between several men, one of whom had already taken a brutal beating but kept getting back to his feet for more.

He'd lost count of the number of laps of the courtyard he'd completed but if nothing else the constant movement helped keep the chill from his bones. The toll of the church bells boded ill for the slow drag of time. Each minute felt an hour, each hour a day. A year sentence would be a lifetime.

Paddy ate nothing all day—again. He'd seen nothing he could eat. Benjamin had told him he needed to pay keepers to get food, but he hadn't been approached. Nobody had asked him to pay for anything. In fact, other than Benjamin, no one had come near him.

Darkness had fallen long ago, lit lanterns provided notches of lights on the skirting of the courtyard. Before long the courtyard would be locked, and they'd all be sent back to the wards and their cells. Paddy began a last circuit, determined to make use of every second he wasn't locked away in the dank, foul cells. The herd had thinned out a while back, so he no longer had to wade through the tide of human refuse he'd strode amongst all day.

As the crowd diminished so did the stench, though the air was still rank with human waste and sweat. He'd tried not to brush against too many felons in a useless attempt to avoid lice. They'd come to him tonight while he slept constricted between bodies, scuttling over every inch and between every crevice of his body. Benjamin had left him long ago, maybe bored by

his sullen company or to tutor some other inmate ill experienced in the life of a Newgate felon.

“Here,” a husky voice Paddy was beginning to recognise spoke from his right.

Paddy turned. Frost leaned against the wall, similar stance to this morning when he’d warned Paddy of the cannibal rats. In his hand he held a small parcel of bread, thrust out towards Paddy.

Paddy looked at the bread and then up to Frost. Black eyes stared back at him. Paddy yearned for better lighting, perhaps even sunlight, so he’d be able to judge exactly what colour Frost’s eyes were. He stretched out a tentative hand, fingers grazing the bread before Frost shoved it more forcefully toward him.

Hunger fought manners, and won, with Paddy snatching the bread from Frost’s hand. He pulled it close into his body in case Frost changed his mind and he’d have to fight him for the tiny morsel. He watched Frost for a moment before his gaze was drawn to his prize and Paddy took a bite. He chewed quickly, wanting to scarf the food down before it was taken from him. He endured Frost’s soft chuckle as he ate like the pigs he used to feed for Mr Joyce on Tuesdays and Thursdays.

“Slow down, little mouse. It’s not going anywhere.”

“Paddy,” he choked out around a mouthful. “My name’s Paddy.”

Frost said nothing in reply, only stared at him as was becoming usual behaviour from the strange man. Why was he so intent on helping Paddy? And why did Paddy care? *Just take the aid and shut up*, the devil on his shoulder whispered.

When he finished the bread, he looked back up to Frost, intent on drawing him into answering some questions. Instead he stood silently, mesmerised by the bow of Frosts top lip, the sharpness of his cheekbones, the way his throat moved as he swallowed. Paddy had never seen a man who looked so—he couldn't find the right word. Beautiful seemed wrong but he didn't know a better one to describe Frost.

“Goodnight, little mouse,” Frost said, laughing softly as he walked away.

For an insane moment Paddy thought of yelling after him, demanding he call him by his name, but why anger his benefactor? And that was what Frost had become. Paddy needed to admit he would either be dead, or in a much worse condition if not for Frost.

CHAPTER THREE

PADDY

“Maybrick! Patrick Maybrick!” a voice boomed through the courtyard. Paddy turned to the sound, seeing a man he didn’t recognise but he replied, nonetheless.

“Yeah?”

“Visitor.”

He had a visitor. On day four of his incarceration and the day he’d go to trial, somebody had finally come to see him. The courtyard was even more crowded than usual as many of the inmates waited their turn to be taken to the neighbouring Old Bailey for trial. Entwined with the usual odours of fear and disease was nervousness as many awaited their sentencing. A term in Newgate. Deportation. Execution. They all seemed the same to Paddy.

“This way,” the turnkey said when Paddy finally reached him. He was led down a corridor every bit as cold and dismal as the rest of the gaol. He glimpsed women huddled together through a small gap window. Benjamin had told him during one of their chats that women were held here in a separate part of the building. He shuddered at the idea of Molly in a hell such as this. Would she end up here now that he wasn’t around to provide for her? Where would her desperation lead her?

Paddy followed the turnkey through a large, solid wooden door which led into a small chapel. Sitting on the front pew was a small, fragile figure Paddy recognised as his sister. The initial flutter of joy at seeing her

and Zeke—because he knew Molly would've brought the baby—turned to horror that his tiny nephew was being exposed to the filth of Newgate.

“Molly?” he murmured. His sister startled and then stood but didn't turn. “Molly?” he repeated when she kept her back to him.

Slowly, she turned, and Paddy gasped at the deterioration in his sister after only four days. She was noticeably thinner and paler. Her red-rimmed eyes glittered with a desolation and misery Paddy had never witnessed before. Her entire body shook violently, her back hunched as though her spine had been torn out and she'd never stand straight again.

After taking all of this in, Paddy finally grasped the worst change of all. Zeke was not in her arms.

“Where's Zeke?” he asked, praying she'd been sensible and left the baby with old Mrs Moran—or even that dollymop Mary, who shared a room with several others next door—rather than drag him to this place.

Molly didn't answer. Instead she shook her head slowly, side to side. Paddy stepped forward, roughly gripping her arms and shaking her too harshly.

“Where is Zeke, Molly?”

“He's gone, Paddy,” she whispered, her voice hardly strong enough to give sound. “Gone.”

“What...what do you mean?”

“He didn't wake up this morning. I couldn't get him to open his eyes. He wouldn't open his eyes,” she cried, her volume increasing with her sorrow. “He was so cold and so blue,” she moaned.

“No,” Paddy breathed. “No, Molly, no.” Tears tracked down his cheeks unchecked as his mind parsed her words.

Her head was bowed as though she didn’t have the strength to raise it up. “He’s dead. He’s dead,” she chanted over and over until Paddy thought he might go mad.

Maybe she was wrong. Maybe Zeke was still sleeping, and just too tired to wake. Even as the thought appeared in his mind another slithered alongside it crushing any hope. His baby nephew was dead. That sweet little boy was gone. His cold, stiff body a mockery of the joy he’d brought into Paddy’s life, even if for such a short time.

Despite the argument raging in his head—because maybe Molly was mistaken—his heart knew it was true. He’d failed Molly and he’d failed Zeke and now that precious baby was dead.

He dropped into a pew, his sister falling to the floor beside him as she covered her face and sobbed into her hands. Never had Paddy heard a more wretched sound than his sisters’ wailing.

He slid down to join Molly on the floor. He pulled her fragile body to him, wrapping his arms around her, holding her while grief bled from her. She was so slight and felt so cold, he wondered how long she’d last until she followed her little son to heaven.

“I’m so sorry, Molly. So sorry.”

“What am I gonna do, Paddy? What am I gonna do without my Zeke?” She pulled away, her large green eyes imploring him for answers. He had none to give. “And you’re gonna be gone too. Oh Paddy.”

“You’re gonna be fine, Molly. You’re gonna be fine,” he lied. He knew he was lying but what else could he say? A pain so sharp and dreadful was blossoming in his chest, spreading throughout his entire body to take root like some insidious weeds come to destroy him from the inside. The intensity of his feelings terrified Paddy. His Ma once told him she thought she was gonna die of her broken heart when Pa had died. At the time he thought she had the vapours and was talking nonsense. He understood what she meant now and thought perhaps death was preferable to this terrible, impossible to bear suffering.

In his arms Molly stiffened. She pushed away from him and wiped at her nose with a handkerchief she’d pulled from somewhere in her gown. Grief cut deeply into her features making her seem like an old lady, but she dried her eyes and looked directly at him.

“I’m gonna go back to Aunt Janes,” she stated simply.

“You think she’ll take you back?” Aunt Jane had been a favourite of Paddy’s growing up, but then she’d turned her back on his Ma—her own sister—when she’d taken to drink and debauchery after the death of his Pa. Worse, she’d tossed Molly onto the streets when she found out she was having a baby with no husband anywhere to be found.

She’d always preached about Christian charity, but Paddy couldn’t find anything too charitable about her actions toward her own family when they’d been in need.

“There ain’t no baby now.” Molly inhaled sharply, the shock of hearing the words aloud paling her skin. “I ain’t no shame to her now.” Molly’s tone bled anguish and Paddy thought he might have struck Aunt Jane if she’d have been close by. How different it all might have been had she helped Molly and not abandoned her.

“Molly—”

“I know, Paddy. You done your best.” She stood and looked down at him, her courage shaming him into finding his own.

He stood beside her, taking her small hands into his. “I wish it could’ve been enough.”

“Stop that, Paddy. I ain’t ever gonna blame you. You did all you could. Not like that cad who had his fun and left. Never even tried to do right by...by the baby.”

Molly never told him who’d fathered little Zeke, but he was the second person whose neck he’d like wrap his hands around right about now.

“Aunt Jane’ll look after you, Mol,” he said, whether he believed his words or not because Molly needed to hear something good. She’d always been a fragile sort of girl, prone to fits of crying when the slightest upset had struck her. Zeke coming along had changed her. She’d had to think of her little one first and she’d been fierce in his protection. What would become of her now he was gone?

“Yeah,” she sighed and nodded. “What ‘bout you, Paddy? What’s gonna happen to you?”

“Trial’s today. Everyone tells me it’ll be transportation.”

Molly gasped again; her eyes wide as she watched him. “Oh, Paddy.”

“Don’t you worry ‘bout me, Mol. At least I’ll be away from this damn cold,” he tried humour out on his tongue, but it tasted of bitter ash.

“When will you go?”

“Dunno, Mol. Maybe judge’ll feel sorry for me and give me a drag in ‘ere instead of the boat.”

“When do *beaks* ever feel sorry for the likes of us, Pad?”

Her candour stopped Paddy’s thoughts of leniency in their tracks, because she was right. None of them who had power or money ever cared much for those without. He had nothing but the boat awaiting him on the other side of his visit to the Old Bailey. But in the wake of losing Zeke, Paddy couldn’t seem to muster a whole lot of concerns about whatever fate had in store for him.

“I’m gonna miss you, Paddy,” Molly continued, beginning to weep again. They’d been close in their youth. After their father died and their mother was lost to her grief, it had been the two of them against the world. Losing Molly to Aunt Jane had stung, but knowing she was safe with their aunt had been a salve on the pain of separation.

“You take care, Mol. When I get back, I’ll come to Aunt Janes, and you an’ me will make somethin’ of our lives. You hear me?” He drew her to him again, wincing as he remembered how foul he must smell not to mention the layers of filth coating him, but he needed a proper goodbye with his sister. In his heart he knew he’d never see her again. He hoped she made some good of herself, because she deserved happiness.

“All right, Paddy. I’ll see you when you get back,” she answered, joining him in his delusion. Her voice was muffled against his chest, but Paddy held tight. He was terrified to let her go because he knew this was it. This would be the last time he saw his younger sister. He’d never hear her voice or hold her again. Once she walked out of the chapel she’d be as lost to him as little Zeke was now.

“Move it, Maybrick. Judge ain’t gonna wait on you,” one of the turnkeys shouted from the doorway.

“You best get on,” Molly said as she pulled away. She straightened the folds of her ratty frock and tucked a few stray hairs into her bun. Her face still held the haunted look of someone who’d lost everything dear to them and Paddy’s heart broke anew at the sight. “Good luck, Paddy.”

“And you, Mol,” he murmured as she brushed by him. He didn’t turn to follow as she left the chapel. He never wanted to move again. Easier to lay down and die than face life now. His nephews’ death weighed heavy like a lead coat, but it also gave him a small measure of freedom because now fate could have its wicked way—he no longer cared what happened to him.

His *trial* passed by in a haze. Paddy had little understanding of anything that happened as he stood in a large room of the Old Bailey facing rows of propertied men who declared him to be a true bill. The peeler who’d caught him spoke and some other man Paddy didn’t recognise spoke in words as foreign to him as if the man had been speaking German, but he hadn’t been allowed to say a word in his own defence.

Nobody mentioned his sister. Nobody spoke of little Zeke and Paddy’s desperate, yet futile attempt to save him. Not a soul cared why he’d done what he’d done.

He’d only half listened to proceedings, his mind with his sister and his own bitter grief. Occasionally he glanced up at the fancily dressed gentlemen who were deciding his fate and wondered why not him. Why

were some chosen to be rich and powerful and have more than they'd ever need, while others had to steal what they needed just to stay alive?

“What happened?” he asked the stranger beside him as he and other prisoners were shuffled out of the Old Bailey. He'd seen no sign of Benjamin during the proceedings. He'd looked for him, needing a friendly face, but he wasn't there. He'd have been happy to catch a glimpse of Frost too, even if the man knotted him up inside.

“We got a true bill, lad. We'll be in front of the judge likely tomorrow and he'll pass judgement.”

Paddy said nothing in reply. He had no words. He was nothing but a passenger being swept along in the raging torrent of his own life with little or no control anymore. He walked silently back toward Newgate, his gaze occasionally peering up at the sky. He couldn't remember the last time he'd seen it blue, though everything seemed dull and grey now. Would the sky ever appear blue again or the grass green? Or was he destined to nothing but bland and drab greys? An old uncle of his fathers had once told Paddy he didn't see colours, maybe he'd never see them again too.

“Chin up, lad. Least we'll be out of 'ere soon,” the man beside him muttered in his ear as they stepped back through the doors of Newgate, the cruel, cold walls of the gaol closing around him once more. The notion of being out of here was cold comfort given what awaited Paddy. “At least we ain't dead,” the man continued.

Irrational anger roared through Paddy. He had no right to feel such rage toward this man who was only trying to comfort him, but his words stoked the inferno of bitterness and fury building inside him since he'd learned of Zeke's death.

Paddy turned to the man, his fist already flying toward his victims' surprised face. His knuckles connected with bone as he smashed into cheek and jaw. Paddy had never hit anyone before and the throbbing in his hand from the blow shocked him. The man he'd hit stumbled back but didn't fall. His hand was raised to his cheek, his eyes wide, mouth a little circle of shock.

Several other men turned to Paddy, anger and vengeance transforming out of their initially surprised expressions. A monster of a man advanced on him, fists clenched, and eyes narrowed. Paddy closed his eyes and waited for the strike. Maybe he'd get lucky for once and they'd kill him here and now.

Though the ward was dimly lit Paddy sensed a shadow falling over him as if something moved between him and the man who'd likely give him a good thrashing.

"Outta the way, Frost," somebody said.

Paddy peeled an eye open, his field of vision taken up by Frost's broad back as he stood between Paddy and trouble.

"Lad gave Mander here a blinker," the voice continued when Frost said nothing.

The silence stretched for what seemed like hours as Paddy remained frozen behind the hulking figure of Frost who hadn't bothered to utter a word. Paddy had no idea what was happening, but he knew he deserved a beating for hitting Mander and he was man enough to take it.

He moved to step around Frost, but the big man shadowed him, moving to keep Paddy behind his body, right between him and the giant whose fist was still cocked to strike. He couldn't see Frost's face, but he

saw the expressions on the men who faced him. Not one of them would hold eye contact with Frost, their gazes darting around, occasionally landing on Paddy, everywhere but Frost. Most had taken a step back with only the giant man holding ground.

“I hit him,” Paddy squeaked. Frost didn’t move, didn’t give any indication he’d heard Paddy or even cared what he’d said. “I’m sorry,” he muttered miserably.

The crowd gave one last glare to Paddy and then moved on, the giant the last to leave the impasse. They couldn’t go far, caged as they were, but life seemed to resume once more as they melted into the rest of the crowd in the courtyard.

Frost stood as still as he had the entire time, not even turning to face Paddy. As the silence between them continued, Paddy grew uncomfortable.

“Why’re you helping me?” he blurted, unable to keep silent another moment.

“You need helping,” Frost replied, finally turning. Paddy caught the last of a look he hadn’t seen before on Frost’s face and it sent a chill up his spine. He’d looked mean, threatening, maybe even cruel. He wondered if that’s why nobody really argued with Frost. And then he wondered if he should be afraid because what if Frost was mean? What if he’d done something awful to get himself put away in here? What if he’d done worse than killing his own family? Though he couldn’t imagine what that could possibly be.

Frost made no further movement after he’d turned to face Paddy, but his expression softened, the cruelty gone as if it had never been.

“Why did you hit him?”

Paddy jumped at Frost's question. The man had never really asked him anything before, content with stilted encounters over before they'd begun.

"Dunno. He didn't do nothin'. I was upset, that's all."

"Why?"

Paddy shook his head. Was he really going to tell Frost about Zeke?

Apparently, he was. "I saw my sister and she told me...me little nephew died. He was only five weeks. Dear little thing never hurt no one. He shouldna died. Twas my fault. Mine. I got nicked and I couldna help 'em."

Frost's fingers were surprisingly warm when they grazed his cheek as he wound some loose hair back behind Paddy's ear. Nobody had ever touched him as gently before and Paddy didn't know what to make of it.

"I'm sorry, little mouse."

"Paddy. My name's Paddy."

Frost's lips curled into a small smile; his eyes gentling. "Don't go around hitting others," Frost commanded and then added, "Paddy."

He was gone before Paddy finished appreciating how his name had sounded coming from Frost's mouth.

FROST

In the overcrowded halls of Northgate, a man could get little distance from another. Frost did not go far from Paddy, only enough to allow space between them. He had no comfort to offer the young man stricken by the death of his nephew. His arms would not—could not—stretch around him to hold his weeping body. He could not staunch the pain in Paddy when his own agony ran so wild and free within himself.

Twice now Frost had intervened on Paddy's behalf. He was drawing unwanted attention, but even worse he was beginning to feel a softening towards the young man. He'd thought after Daniel and his mother that he'd hardened himself about caring for anyone or anything. He'd felt nothing for months as though molten metal had been poured over his heart and solidified around the organ so nothing—no one—could get in again.

He cursed his stupidity for jumping in front of Mander's giant friend, and yet knew he'd had to. He at least knew himself well enough to know he could not have stood back and simply allow Paddy to be beaten.

His second mistake was staying around once the excitement was over. Hearing Paddy talk of the loss of his little nephew and the guilt he felt, cracked another fissure in the armour around his heart. He knew he must stop watching over Paddy, and yet could not seem to help himself.

At least now the lad had a friend in Benjamin. Frost had seen Benjamin around the gaol before Paddy's arrival, and though he'd had nothing to do with him, thought him to be a decent sort. Frost had been surprisingly comforted by the notion of Paddy having a friend in this pit of disease and nightmares.

“Your little mouse is due for his garnish, Frost,” Red hissed as he approached.

“How much?” Frosts coffers had been refilled by his visitor from yesterday even though he’d argued against it.

“Double.” Red’s already ugly face twisted into a foul snarl. Frost fought the urge to put his fist right through it.

“You’ll have it,” Frost replied and kept walking.

“What’s yer interest?” Red asked him once again.

Frost stopped and considered. Then he spun and stepped up to Red, a snarl of his own on his face. “Let’s just say I am not interested in watching repugnant, cowardly little bullies such as yourself humiliate a young man down on his luck.”

“Down on ‘is luck? He’s a thief. He’s as much a criminal as any in here.”

“That may well be, but he is still an infinitely better human being than the likes of you. Now get out of my face before I replace your smirk with my fist.”

Red leapt away as though scalded. He wasn’t certain how he’d attained his reputation but thus far nobody had dared to challenge him, least of all cowards such as Red.

“One day soon, Frost, you ain’t gonna be so high and mighty. One day you’ll be swingin’ and I’m gonna be there front row to watch.”

“I do hope you enjoy the show then,” he replied and smiled as Red darted away.

Only when the keeper was gone did he notice Benjamin watching him from the shadows. The young man’s lips moved as though he desperately wanted to speak but could not find the words. No doubt he had

his own questions for Frost, as many did, but he'd receive no answers. Frost had watched Benjamin scurry around talking to whomever would listen as he amassed a detailed list of prisoners and their crimes. He suspected he might be the last name to add to his list.

“Benjamin,” Frost stated and waited to see if the man would approach him. He saw the inner turmoil: a part of him wanting to come forward and speak to Frost, the other part wanting to run.

“Good day, Sir,” Benjamin stammered and walked a few backwards steps before turning toward where Paddy still stood. Frost watched him for a moment and saw him glance back. He did not know why the lad was so dubious of him, but he hadn't meant to frighten anybody—aside from those who needed a good scare.

He listened as Benjamin greeted Paddy, heard them talk quietly about the death of Paddy's nephew. Benjamin did a finer job of consolation than he had. He leant closer, straining to hear as they discussed him, wondering at his interest in Paddy. He'd have trouble answering that question himself. He told himself over and over 'twas nothing more than decency.

Liar, Daniel's voice hissed in his ear.

Eventually, he turned and walked away toward where his trunk was stored. He drew the key from his pocket and carefully opened the lid, keeping an eye about for any who might attempt to steal from him. He was quite alone, and grateful to Paul Burrows who allowed him to store the trunk in his private room.

He took the small lace purse his visitor had brought him yesterday and counted out the coins he required for Paddy's garnish.

Every time he opened the trunk, he swore to himself he would not look too hard at its contents. Yet each time his fingers found their way to gently stroke the small brass buttons of Daniels jacket before gliding across the navy material to lightly touch his mother's cameo. Somehow this small act always brought these two people he'd so tragically lost closer to him, as though he was able to reach out and touch them in the afterlife.

Daniel had been gone more than two years, his mother not yet half a year. The wounds were raw—jagged—upon his soul. He doubted the gaping maw of agony their loss had rent in him would ever heal.

“I miss you both,” he whispered before closing and locking the trunk once more and turning to face his reality.

PADDY

“How'd ya go?” Benjamin asked as he approached Paddy, his wary gaze following Frosts retreating back.

“True bill,” Paddy muttered.

“Judge'll decide. You tell 'im you ain't guilty when he asks. Waint change nothin' but they say that's what's best to do for sentencing.”

“I don't care,” he replied.

“Come on now, Paddy. You shoulda known you'd get a true bill—”

“Not that. I don't care what happens.”

Benjamin came to lean beside him on the wall Paddy was using to keep himself upright. Paddy's body felt heavier than ever as though his

bones were made of lead and the will to keep going had abandoned him.

“What happened?”

For the second time in minutes Paddy said aloud that his nephew was dead. He wondered if speaking those words would ever get easier.

“I ain’t never gonna see Molly again and little Zeke’s gone. I got nothin’ left. Nobody.”

“We’re friends, ain’t we? I’m ‘ere, Paddy,” Benjamin answered and though he’d only known the man a handful of days, hearing him call them friends helped.

“Yeah, but for how long?”

“Can’t think that way, Paddy. Us poor devils in ‘ere just keep going, no matter what.” He’d never met someone like Benjamin—a man who was on good terms with his miserable fate. He longed to be more like him.

“Keep going,” Paddy repeated.

“It’s all we got.”

They stood together silently, watching as the refuse of London society waded past them in their own filth and misery. Paddy had seen poor, wretched souls in the slums but the men surrounding him in here were a level beneath any desolation he’d seen before.

At last Benjamin spoke again, “What’s Frost so interested in you for?”

Paddy had no answer to give. He shrugged and offered a mumbled, “Dunno. You don’t know anything ‘bout him?” he asked despite Benjamin having already told him no one knew much about Frost.

“Na. Reckon we should find out though. Might help pass the time too.”

“How soon after...everything, will I be transported?” Paddy thought of his transportation as a when not an if anymore. Deep inside, the guilt in his soul screamed at him that he deserved no less for failing Zeke.

“Percy reckons there’s boats due out within the week. Likely the poor sods being transported will be on ‘em.”

A week. He potentially had a week left in England before he was sent to the other side of the world. If he survived the journey, he shuddered to think of the horrors he’d face when they arrived in Australia. He’d heard that nothing but appalling conditions, brutal treatment and a desire for death met the men and women sent there.

As much as he’d been ready to meet the reaper head on only moments ago, the idea of such a drawn out, excruciating death plagued him now. How much would he suffer before the peace of death came to him?

Twenty-four hours later Paddy’s fate was determined by a singularly ugly man. The judge was tall and thin but with a disproportionately large nose that hooked over his pinched mouth. Even from the distance Paddy stood from the man, he was able to see a bush of hair extending unattractively out of each nostril, his skin pockmarked and spotted. His appearance made worse by the constant sneer he wore as he judged and sentenced each man brought before him.

Paddy stood before him a shell of who he’d been. Grief and despair pulling him inside out, his mind a fog of anguish. He hadn’t seen Frost again, or if he had he didn’t remember. Nor did he recall if Mander or one

of his friends had accosted him searching for the vengeance Frost's intervention had denied them. As he stood half listening to the judge, he couldn't recall with any true clarity a single thought he'd had since Molly's visit.

Paddy spoke exactly two words. Not guilty. The words had produced a mocking laugh from the judge who immediately found him guilty and passed sentence.

Transportation to Van Diemen's Land for a term of seven years. It might as well have been for life.

CHAPTER FOUR

Woolwich, England, December 1834

PADDY

Two hundred and twenty male convicts would share berth with Paddy on the *George III*, bound for Van Diemen's Land under the command of William Moxey and the surgeon David Wyse.

Amongst his fellow travellers, Benjamin and the man he'd struck, Mander, lurked as depressed and scared as any being loaded on board. They'd been chained together for the short march down the wharf and on to the ship after spending much of the day crammed into a cart for the journey from Newgate to Woolwich docks. His ankles ached where the fetters rubbed against his skin, his threadbare clothes offering little protection from the iron rings or bitter cold.

He was chained in a group of forty. Most of his fellow prisoners were already on board and the last batch would arrive tomorrow. They were due to sail the day after. He only knew this much from Benjamin who had a knack for finding out any information he wanted.

Paddy glanced wildly about as he boarded, certain he'd seen nothing to give him any confidence this ship was capable of making such a long-distance voyage, she looked nothing like some of the proud sailing ships he'd seen nestled in the bay. The vessel was much smaller than he'd imagined, and he couldn't make the numbers of men coming aboard fit. Were they to stand for the entire crossing? Surely there was not enough room for them to lie down or enjoy any sense of space.

Coiled ropes and large crates took up space they didn't have to spare, and he hoped they'd end up in storage somewhere beneath him before they set off. The deck was small, two hundred and twenty men would be hard pressed to find an inch of room about them if they were all on deck at a single time with the crew and soldiers. He wondered how many decks were beneath his feet.

Roughly four months they'd be at sea. Disease, thirst and fear, their constant companions. *George III* wasn't a huge vessel, 114 feet in length to accommodate the convicts, crew and guards that would be accompanying them to maintain law and order and take up their new posts in the colony. Paddy's breath quickened as he pictured the coming months. Nothing but a bleak future stared back at him.

"Name, age and sentence," a guard asked as Paddy approached the makeshift desk.

"Patrick Maybrick, twenty-two. Seven years."

His name was ticked off in a ledger, the guard not even sparing him a glance before telling him to move on.

Paddy followed the line of men, almost coming to a standstill as they lined up to descend the ladder which would take them to the prison deck below.

After a week and a half at Newgate he was used to tight quarters but given the size of the ship he imagined their accommodations on this journey would be considerably worse. At least he'd have one night to enjoy without a full complement of prisoners.

Gulls squawked overhead, circling each boat moored at the wharves slightly offshore. Every now and then they'd dive from the clouds,

scrabbling with each other for the rotten morsels tossed overboard by the ships' cooks.

The salty air dried out Paddy's mouth, his skin felt scratchy. He'd rarely been near the sea before. The air smelled fresher than London, though the wind blew the stench this way, enough to taste the grit of the city. The tang of fear remained. Was there any spot in this entire world where men lived free of fear? Paddy couldn't imagine such a place.

Several of the ships looked more dilapidated than others. These were the prison hulks where men were often sent to await transportation. They appeared as great sea beasts resting on the surface, ready to swallow men alive. Some unfortunate ones served their entire sentence on the rotting, disease infested vessels. He'd been fortunate that *George III* was ready to set sail almost immediately following his sentence so he wouldn't be forced to spend any time on the hulks. A small mercy in the long nightmare.

The constant noise rung in his ears. Men shouting, loud hammering, thuds as cargo was dropped and loaded, all created an ear-splitting cacophony. Paddy had spent time around the docks of London, but Woolwich was a larger, busier and noisier monster.

He scratched at the constant—but now phantom—itch beneath his skin. The lice of Newgate had made themselves contentedly at home on his body. But he'd been bathed and sluiced before coming aboard, the captain not wanting any living thing on his ship he hadn't expressly invited, though Paddy suspected the man was fighting a losing battle. His clothes had been burnt, the king generously providing him with cotton shirt and canvas trousers decorated with broad arrows to mark him as belonging to the crown. He also had a jacket and waistcoat to go with his new shoes and long socks.

“You right, Paddy?” Benjamin whispered in his ear.

Paddy nodded. “You?”

“Very well, my lad,” Benjamin answered. He’d been delighted when he’d told Paddy that rather than a term on the hulks he was being transported. From the look of those behemoths a little way offshore, and the putrid stench occasionally picked up on the breeze and wafting to them from the hulks, Paddy understood why.

Hobart town would be no easy life, but good Christ Paddy couldn’t imagine worse than those hulks. At least they had the promise of fresh air to look forward to.

His thoughts wandered to Zeke, as they often did. At least his nephew would never face anything like hulks or transportation. The little one hadn’t had a chance to face anything much of life though. There might be plenty of misery in this world but there were also little joys too: walking barefoot in the green grass, the sweet smell of lavender as you brushed its petals, the intriguing sculpture of a man’s muscled back.

His chest ached; heart stuttered as always happened when he remembered Zeke’s sweet little face as he’d watched Paddy while he’d fussed over him. His arms ached to hold the tiny body, long since put in the ground.

“She’s not as big as I thought,” Benjamin continued. “Dunno how we all gonna fit.”

“Same way we fit in Newgate. We just squash in,” Paddy sighed.

He’d almost reached the ladder. He tipped his head up to peer at the sky. He thought he saw a hint of blue in its vastness. He stared, wanting to

have a picture of the sky stained on his memory because he didn't know how long it would be until he saw it again.

“Get movin’,” someone shouted before a whip cracked on the deck immediately to his right. He’d been lost in his head again, failing to move along and take his turn descending the ladder.

Paddy took one last look at the sky and then turned to grip the ladder. A rope ran down the length on either side to serve as a makeshift—and wholly impractical—railing. He held the rope as he lowered a foot to the first rung. The wood creaked under his weight, he felt unstable, frightened of what might happen if he fell. Worse, what if he fell while they were in the middle of the ocean? How competent was the ship's surgeon? He knew it was Wyse's job to get the convicts to Hobart town in a somewhat healthy state, but that was no assurance they'd all make it.

Twelve rungs down and Paddy's foot hit solid decking. Above him the small square of light he'd come through gave him the only view of the outside world. The smell was better than Newgate, but he shuddered at how pungent the air would be after months at sea. He turned to see yet another hatchway. He began descending this one too, moving further and further into the underbelly of the ship. Ten rungs down this time and his feet hit decking.

Gas lamps lined the walls, offering the men crated down here some semblance of light, though it would never be called bright. A narrow walkway led down the length of the ship, iron bars along each side caged men into crude cells like a cattle pen. Rows of hammocks swung with the ebb and tide of the bobbing ship. The low roof, not even a foot above Paddy's head, made the compressed space feel even smaller. Paddy's

breaths shuddered in and out and he wondered if there was enough air in this box to keep them all alive.

Many of the hammocks were already filled with the bodies of the convicted. An occasional moan echoed off the wooden hull.

So, this was to be his home. At least for the next four months.

Paddy waited for Benjamin to descend and then followed the stream of men down the passageway.

“Not so bad,” Benjamin whispered.

In truth, Paddy didn’t find his accommodations as bad as he was expecting, though he still yearned for the small room he’d shared with Molly and Zeke.

In the second to last cell on the left, Paddy and Benjamin found spare hammocks. There were several hammocks in each cell, some occupied others not. A handful of trunks were shoved against the bulkhead for those who had personal belongings to bring along. Most of the convicts had scant possessions, some—like Paddy—had none.

They were in the bow of the ship and most of the light was toward the port end, leaving them in almost complete darkness.

He scrambled into a hammock, gripping the edges tight as the boat’s bobbing movements tossed him about. The canvas hammock was far more comfortable than the wooden bench at Newgate and the lack of men pressed either side of him gave him a sense of space he hadn’t enjoyed since the peeler had nabbed him with an armful of stolen goods. Was it really only eight days ago?

“Benjamin?” he asked as he heard a thud.

“Down ‘ere.”

Paddy peered over the edge of his hammock. Sprawled on the ground, Benjamin looked up at him with a wry smile on his lips.

“Can’t get used to the swaying,” he said as he began dragging himself to his feet.

Paddy laughed. He hadn’t laughed in days, at least since he’d been put away. Before that only Zeke had been able to wring a smile or laugh out of him. He hadn’t had much to smile about for too long.

“Here,” Paddy said, extending his hand to Benjamin to help steady him. His friend finally managed to settle into the hammock alongside Paddy.

They lay there quietly. The dim lighting in the prison ship stealing the warmth his glimpse of the sky had given him. He yearned for open sky and rolling fields. He missed, more sharply now, the freedom of his youth spent in the countryside of Berkshire. Hours spent running wild in the fields of neighbours, splashing in streams, sunlight drying his body.

“Don’t think ‘bout it, Paddy,” Benjamin murmured.

“What?”

“Whatever it is your thinking ‘bout and making you sigh like that. Waint do you no good.”

Benjamin was right. Living in the past wasn’t any help to his present.

“You got anyone left, Benjamin?” he asked hoping to forget his own woes.

“Not a soul. Ma died before I could remember her. Pa last year. Never had no brothers or sisters—not real ones anyway. Always considered the people who helped me on the streets to be my family. None of ‘em left now. Couple got sent away and didn’t survive the hulks. Cholera took a few others.”

“Sorry,” Paddy muttered, guilty he’d forced Benjamin to recount his misery so Paddy could avoid his own.

“My Pa was a fierce believer in God,” Benjamin replied. “Even after He saw fit to take Ma from us, even when we hadn’t eaten in days. I never had that kinda faith. Could never understand a God who’d allow such misery. Anyway, Pa and everyone I cared ‘bout is with ‘im now and I hope they’re all happy up there. Maybe one day I’ll see ‘em again—just like you’ll see your little Zeke.”

“The little babe’ll be in heaven, Benjamin. I ain’t so sure that’s where I’ll be goin’.” Paddy wasn’t much of a believer, but he was reasonably certain of heaven and hell. Though maybe he’d already made it to hell—or was on his way.

“You’re a good lad, Paddy. Ain’t your fault you got no chink,” Benjamin said as he casually folded his hands behind his head.

Paddy thought of all the people he’d known in his short life. He couldn’t think of a single one—aside from Zeke—assured of making it to heaven. They’d all sinned in one way or another to survive.

“What’re you gonna miss most?” Paddy asked.

“Not the filth or the fog.” Benjamin laughed. “Truth is, Paddy, there ain’t nothing for me to miss.”

They fell silent again. Lost to their own thoughts. Benjamin was right. There wasn't anything for Paddy to miss, except for Molly. What did that say about the life he'd led until now?

"I had a girl once," Benjamin began after a while. "Louisa. Prettiest girl I'd ever seen. She musta been a bit balmy though, cause she thought I was something special."

Paddy turned in his hammock, his gaze settling on Benjamin. His friends' eyes were closed, but a single tear glistened in the low light as it trickled down his cheek.

"You ever have a girl think you were special, Paddy? There ain't a feeling like it."

"No, never," Paddy muttered truthfully. "What happened to her?"

Benjamin sighed, his grief may not be fresh, but it was palpable. "The pox. She suffered, my Louisa did. Before the end."

Paddy didn't have words to offer Benjamin. Sorry didn't seem enough. Paddy had never loved someone—not in that way at least. As he watched agony biting into Benjamin's expression he wondered if loving someone was worth the pain of their loss.

"I'd've married her. She'd a been a beautiful bride and we'd a been happy." Benjamin shrugged, transforming once again into the man who accepted his fate with a tranquillity Paddy had yet to acquire. "Guess God wanted it different."

Somewhere a bell tolled five and the men on the prison deck began to roll out of their hammocks. A few spoke, some jostling good-naturedly, most trudged forlornly toward the ladders leading to the upper deck.

“Supper, lads,” a grizzled old man called to them as he walked by. “We all gotta get up on deck while they clean down ‘ere. If we’re lucky they’ll give us some salted meats for supper, but as likely we’ll get the cooks foul gruel. Name’s Hawkins.” The old man smiled at them, showing a row of blackened teeth, with a few missing entirely.

“Paddy.”

“Benjamin.”

“Nice ta meet ya, lads. Now let’s get to the food ‘fore it’s all gone.”

Benjamin and Paddy slid out of their hammocks and joined the line of unfortunates heading for the deck.

Supper consisted of the cook’s gruel: a bland, tasteless, swill of god knows what, all slopped together and sloshed into the men’s bowls. Paddy ate every bite because he couldn’t afford not to. The voyage to Van Diemen’s Land was going to be perilous enough without Paddy adding to it by being weak from lack of food.

“Tastes like Maisy Galloways wash water,” Benjamin said from the corner of his mouth.

“How’d you know what the wash water tastes like?” Paddy asked.

“Got dared once to drink some. Couldn’t look like a milksop in front of my Louisa, so I guzzled it down. And then I went and cast up me accounts all over the place.”

Paddy laughed. For the second time in a day he’d found something to chuckle about despite the dreariness of his setting and life.

“Ain’t funny, Paddy,” Benjamin snorted with a grin on his face.

Paddy bumped his elbow against Benjamin, who bumped him right back. He might not be a huge believer, but he thanked God for putting Benjamin on this ship with him.

Before the sun even thought of rising the next morning Paddy was woken by the ship's bells. Half of the complement of convicts were taken up to the deck while the other half lolled about in their hammocks waiting for their turn.

When he made it up on deck, Paddy found wash tubs lined up for the prisoners to use to clean themselves under the watch of their guard. By the time he got to the tubs the water could no longer be called fresh, but Paddy didn't care because it was cleaner than the swill they'd been given to wash with in Newgate.

In truth Paddy hadn't felt clean in months. Not since he'd jumped in a stream that he'd discovered running alongside the road he'd taken to Epping when he'd done some messenger work for Lord and Lady Hawthorne. He'd had a good thing there, until they'd both died after the horses pulling their carriage run amok and launched them into a tree.

"Hey, Paddy," Benjamin said as he joined him at the tub. "Whitey says we're sailing early. Last batch of us poor sods'll be 'ere anytime and then Captain's takin' us out."

"Why?" Not that it mattered, there was no point delaying the inevitable.

"Dunno. Might be good winds or maybe Wyse wants his reward early."

They washed in silence, Paddy's gaze fixed in the distance, somewhere about where he thought London was. He'd likely never see the city again, though that was no great loss, for she hadn't been kind to one Patrick Maybrick. London had swallowed his entire family up and spat him out to face an unknown purgatory on the other side of the world.

A kerfuffle on the other side of the ship caught Paddy's attention. He looked up to find the last of the convicts boarding. He watched their faces and wondered if his own held the same hopelessness. He'd never seen his own face in a mirror, but most people said he had the same green eyes as Molly—he often hoped that's where the resemblance ended. She made a pretty girl, but he didn't want to be a pretty man.

Paddy recognised all the new arrivals from his brief time at Newgate. He'd never shared a word with any of them, but he guessed he'd know them well enough by the time they reached Van Diemen's Land.

Eventually, the last man stepped on board. Unlike the others, his face was not a mask of hopelessness. Frost looked much the same as he always did whenever Paddy encountered him—faintly amused mixed with something dangerous. He was glancing about, taking in his surroundings with an intensity more than just simple curiosity about his environs, when his gaze landed on Paddy. The corner of Frost's mouth ticked up, and he winked.

Paddy startled and lowered his gaze to concentrate on his bathing instead. His skin felt hot and prickly despite the cold, and his hands trembled. He didn't understand his reaction to Frost. Other than confused, he wasn't certain how the big man made him feel. He determined he should go to Frost and demand he stop playing with him as though Paddy really were the mouse and Frost the cat who enjoyed toying with him.

They were given half an hour on deck while they washed. The men who had finished at the tubs or were waiting for space to open at one, spent the extra time talking and looking about. Paddy kept his gaze from the hulks and instead watched the crew of a neighbouring ship as they set about their business. He watched in fascination as a handful of smaller men—perhaps some barely more than children—climbed the rigging. They were fast and agile, and Paddy marvelled at the height they reached. Each man seemed to know exactly what was required of them and he hoped the crew of the *George III* were as capable.

“Back below,” one of the guards bellowed and the convicts were herded to the ladders.

As he set his feet once more on to the prison deck Paddy turned to head back down the walkway. Leaning on the bars of the first cell was Frost, in a pose Paddy had become used to seeing: Legs crossed, arms casually at his side, eyes firmly on Paddy.

Paddy put his head down and walked past him, doing his best to avoid the man, though he noticed his heart pounded a little harder and faster, sweat slicked his palms, and his mouth was suddenly dry. Frost managed to knot him up every time they met.

He went to his hammock, climbing in carefully so he didn't end up on the floor as Benjamin had yesterday. He closed his eyes, enjoying the feeling of being somewhat clean. Shuffling sounds and cursing came from the hammock alongside his. Paddy turned to watch as Benjamin flailed about again in his woeful attempts to manoeuvre his body into his hammock. He smiled.

On his other side, the man who introduced himself as “Nathanial, and I ain't interested in being friends”, snored on, oblivious to the world

around him. Suited Paddy if the man didn't want to talk.

The door to the cell creaked open and Frost stepped in. He glanced about and made straight toward Nathaniel.

“Out,” he ordered.

Nathaniel stirred, one eye opening and then both eyes boggling when he recognised who'd spoken to him.

“Out,” Frost repeated.

Nathaniel rolled from the hammock, grabbed his meagre belongings and skulked to another empty hammock without argument or a word spoken. Frost replaced him in the hammock, not sparing a look to the stunned men in the cell, closed his eyes and laid there as though he had not a care in the world.

“What're you doin'?” Paddy hissed.

“Trying to rest,” Frost replied without opening his eyes.

Paddy slipped out of his hammock, determined to get some answers from Frost once and for all. “I mean why'd you shove Nathaniel outta his bed?”

“I didn't shove him. I told him to get out.”

Paddy blew out a frustrated breath. “What do you want from me?”

Frost rolled on his side, such as he was able in the hammock. He opened his eyes and held Paddy's stare. “I want you to live, little mouse.”

“But why?” Paddy asked, ignoring the return to the hated nickname.

Frost's gaze raked over Paddy's body, head to toe. He licked his lips, then lightly bit the bottom one. In Paddy's guts, butterflies danced a jig as

he watched Frost watching him.

Frost shrugged and finally answered, "I do not know." Paddy heard the frustration in the man's tone. Apparently Frost's actions toward Paddy were a mystery to them both.

"On deck, scum," one of the guards yelled.

Paddy turned to see the convicts once again amble from their beds and line up to ascend the ladder back on deck. He wondered what they were being herded up for this time and if this back and forth was to be normal. At least maybe it would pass some time. Benjamin was ahead of him, Frost behind. The warmth coming from the big man at his back was comforting. Frost's interest in his welfare might confuse him, but Paddy didn't want it going anywhere. He hadn't felt care for in too long.

Once all convicts were on deck and lined up to face the bow of the ship, a man came forward, resplendent in his naval uniform. By the end of the voyage he'd likely know the names of every part of the ship, but for now Paddy decided this man was the captain and he was addressing them from the Captain's stage. Around him were a group of important looking men, likely to be his officers. A handful of women stood to the side flanked by armed soldiers. Wives of the crew, most probably, for they certainly weren't dressed like prisoners.

"I am Captain William Moxey and I am here to tell you of the rules and regulations every man will follow whilst aboard my ship. Of upper most importance the prisoners will conduct themselves in a respectful and becoming manner to all the officers on board and will strictly obey all orders given to them by myself or through my officers."

Captain Moxey glanced down at the assembled men and Paddy would have sworn he was looking each and every one of them in the eye, so they'd know he was serious in these matters. He was a tall man; of the type his ma would have called stately. His white whiskers hinted at his advancing years, though the rest of him might have belonged to a man closer to Paddy's age.

“The prisoners must behave themselves in a decent manner at all times, but most especially during prayers. Cursing, all foul language, fighting, shouting, gambling away or giving away clothes is forbidden at all times. Stealing will be severely punished.”

Paddy's ears warmed at the mention of his crime. He felt the captain's stare boring a hole through him, though the impossibility of the captain singling him out at the time was not lost on him. Guilt was a cruel nemesis. He'd never wanted to be a criminal, never wanted to steal.

“The prisoners, on no occasion, shall hold conversation with the soldiers, crew or through the bars below deck, unless tasked with giving an answer to a question. There will be strictly no contact between prisoners and any of the ladies aboard. Prisoners will be divided into messes for their meals. Each mess shall have a captain who will be held responsible for the cleanliness of cutlery, utensils and area of that mess. Prisoners will take turns cleaning their mess and will sit with other members of their mess during meals.”

The captain began pacing as his list of rules dragged on. Paddy idly wondered how long the man could speak for and how many rules he'd establish before he wound down. The captain regularly reminded the prisoners of the severity of punishments on board for any infringements. He even brought out the cat o nine tails for all the prisoners to see. Paddy didn't

find it hard to imagine the damage such a weapon would inflict on the soft flesh of a man's back.

As the captain spoke on and on, a dizziness overcame Paddy as the reality of his situation became clearer and clearer. The cramped conditions, the squalid food, the ever-growing list of rules, the certainty of brutal treatment, all pressed down on him so heavily he thought he might go right through the decking and hull to be flushed out with the rest of the waste into the Thames.

His body swayed, vision dimming as sweat beaded on his forehead. Somewhere in the back of his addled mind he wondered if he'd be flogged for having a fainting spell. He was certain he'd wake on his back any second with the captain glowering down at him as he ordered Paddy's punishment.

Instead, a solid wall pressed against his side, something grabbing him, tilting him so he was leaning against the wall which was the only thing holding him upright. In his ear a soft voice whispered, "Easy, little mouse." Had the wall spoken to him? He wasn't sure. All he knew was if the wall hadn't been there, he'd have hit the deck.

Time passed in a most peculiar fashion, so Paddy had no idea how long he leant against the wall. Then suddenly air began to flow around him again as the rows of men dispersed. Benjamin's face appeared before him, his mouth moving but Paddy didn't think he was talking to him.

"I think he's coming around," Benjamin said, glancing to his right where the wall was.

"Get him some water," the wall answered in a voice Paddy recognised.

“Help ‘im down and I’ll get the water,” Benjamin replied.

Frost’s large hands gripped Paddy’s upper arms as he manhandled him toward the hatchway. The dizziness had passed but he’d been left weakened by the funny turn. He wasn’t sure how he was going to manage the ladder.

“I’m going down first. You follow me and try not to fall,” Frost commanded. Would Frost catch him if he fell? The man seemed determined to keep him alive, but Paddy couldn’t bear the humiliation of falling and being rescued like some damsel in distress.

“I won’t fall,” he confidently declared.

Frost grinned and then turned to climb down the ladder. Paddy followed him, his grip tight on the rope, his mind focused on each step because he was *not* going to fall.

Once he was safely down, Frost’s hand gripped his elbow and he was gently guided forward. He considered shaking off Frost’s grip but thought the man would probably just hold him tighter.

Once they’d reached their cell Paddy climbed into his hammock, glad for the chance to lie down. Frost stood over him, a concerned look on his face. For the second time since they’d met, his rescuer brushed a wayward lock of hair from Paddy’s face, tucking it behind his ear.

“It will be all right, little...Paddy,” Frost murmured.

Paddy didn’t see how, but for this moment he was content to believe Frost.

“Here,” Benjamin said, extending a mug of water toward Paddy as he entered the cell with a small boy at his side. Each man was given a ration

of water for the day, so Paddy had no idea where this mug came from, but he wasn't about to argue. He slurped a few mouthfuls greedily before offering the mug to Frost and Benjamin. Both men took a sip before handing it to the boy who eventually emptied the precious liquid.

"You right now?" Benjamin asked.

"Yeah. Sorry."

"You've had it rough, Paddy," Benjamin generously allowed.

"No rougher than any of us," he murmured, looking at the child standing still and quietly at Benjamin's side. Paddy knew he wasn't the most unfortunate on board.

"Rest," Frost commanded and though he'd said it kindly there wasn't a doubt it had been an order to be followed. This one time, Paddy didn't mind obeying Frost's orders at all.

FROST

Frost stood over Paddy as he slept soundly in his hammock. He remained thus for some time, content to stand sentinel over the young man. Since he'd first laid eyes on the lad, he'd felt this inexplicable need to protect him. He tried not to think too hard on why.

Instead he cast his thoughts back three days, to Olivia's visit to Newgate.

Daniel's sister was the very image of her brother. So much so that Frost's heart had shattered upon seeing her waiting for him in the small

room they'd set aside for visitors, just as it did every single time that he saw her.

The first time he'd met Olivia he had not been aware of who she was, but her resemblance to Daniel had startled him. She, of course, had known exactly who he was. She had been part of Daniel's conspiracy to trick him. Daniel had arranged the 'chance' meeting for his own amusement.

Frost had not even spotted the man sitting quietly in the corner of the roadhouse, eagerly awaiting his amusement.

"Sir," Olivia had begun that day. "I am delighted to make your acquaintance at last."

"I am afraid you have me at a loss, Miss."

Olivia's cheeks pinkened flatteringly but she'd soon recovered her composure. When she'd glanced about the room, he'd had no notion of what—or who—she was searching for.

"There you are," she'd tsked and made her way toward the figure in the corner. Frost had about jumped free of his skin when Daniel had stood up laughing and embraced Olivia. Once introductions had been made—and Daniel robustly apologised—they'd settled in for a meal. Frost had taken to Olivia immediately, so similar in appearance and manner to her brother it could not be helped.

And now here she stood, thin and pale, the mark of grief still tattooed upon her features, in the hell that was known as Newgate.

"Oh, my," she gasped upon seeing his haggard appearance.

"Olivia? What brings you here? You must leave immediately."

Tears were forming in the corners of her eyes. They were the exact same shade of blue as Daniels and it pained Frost to look upon them. She brushed quickly at them and then returned her gaze to him. "I heard of your misfortune and I wanted...I felt it my duty as Daniel's sister to see if there was anything that I could do for you."

So like Daniel in her compassion and sense of duty. "You must leave, Olivia. This place is not meant for the likes of you."

"Nor you, Ja--"

"No. I am not that man anymore. He died alongside your brother."

"Oh no. No. You must not lose hope. Daniel would want more from life for you than this."

"Daniel would—" What would Daniel want? He wasn't certain he knew much of anything anymore. The one thing he was certain of is Daniel would want to still live.

"Please, for Daniel's sake have heart. I knew my brother well and I know it would break his heart to see you so...so despondent."

"I am to be transported, Olivia. For the term of my natural life."

"I am aware." She looked at him, her eyes glittering with unshed tears. "I am aware of the particulars of your upbringing—you must forgive my brother for sharing them with me, but he was very much disturbed by them and needed a friendly ear. Knowing what I do, I fear a great injustice has been done."

Injustice. Perhaps in some eyes, but then his crime was against the commandments. "Olivia—"

“My brother loved you—I am aware of that. He loved you so much so that I think of you as my brother also. It grieves me to see you thus. Is there nothing I can do?”

“Nothing. Olivia, you must forget me. Forget that I ever knew your brother and most definitely forget what we meant to each other. I would not have your brothers’ good name besmirched.” Frost had no idea Olivia knew of her brother’s tastes. All those times he’d met her, she’d known, and he’d thought himself and Daniel so clever for deceiving her. He felt foolish—and grateful to her for her understanding.

“Nobody will hear of it from my lips, but I will tell you this—Frost—” she spat with some distaste of his adopted moniker. “—My brother’s heart was of a size that I know he would hope for you to find love once more, hopeless though your situation may seem.”

Love. Where he was going? Impossible. He had nothing to look forward to but a life of servitude and hardship. He kissed her on the forehead and wished her well, trying and failing to once more decline her offer of aid as she pressed a full purse into his hand. As much as he liked her, he was glad when Olivia took her leave, taking memories of Daniel with her. His past must necessarily remain exactly that. Past.

Paddy stirred in his hammock, grumbled something about a shoe and then fell quiet and still once more. Frost recalled the look of agony on the young mans’ face as Paddy had told him of the death of his nephew. Dark shadows underscored his haunted eyes, his mouth set in a firm grim line as though it alone was valiantly holding Paddy together, keeping him from shattering upon his grief. Strangely, his expression had reminded him very much of Olivia. But then perhaps it was not so strange. Perhaps there was a similar mask of grief worn by all mourners in common.

He had not looked at his reflection since Daniel's loss—too terrified of what might stare back.

Frost's experience of love had been that loss tended to go hand in hand with it, and the pain of that loss was at times unbearable. Precisely why he had no intention of following Olivia's advice and look for love once more. He'd had love and affection one time in his life and that would have to suffice.

For the first time since Daniel's death he found himself once more upon the ocean, Daniel's ghost walking every step with him along the wooden planks of the *George III*, his spectral voice a constant whisper in Frost's ear, urging him onward, to keep resolute in the face of his dreadful circumstances. Occasionally, Frost fancied Daniel whispering him to standfast over Paddy, to save the lad as he had been unable to save Daniel.

He might yet go mad before leaving this earthly life. Perhaps would be better too. Safe from wretched memories in a haze and fog of madness seemed fine by him.

He resumed his duty as guardian of the sleeping man, content to serve at least that purpose in what was left of his wasted life. He would see Patrick Maybrick safely to Van Diemen's land, even if it would see him dead. Perhaps then he will have earned Daniel's forgiveness.

PADDY

On the outgoing tide the next day the *George III* set sail under strong winds. Paddy was safely ensconced on the prison deck, unable to take a long last look at his beloved England as the Thames eventually spat them out into the North Atlantic. His fellow convicts remained quiet much of the

day, perhaps saying private goodbyes to friends and family, and likely the only home most had ever known.

The ship creaked and complained as the channel tossed her about. Paddy wondered how they'd ever make it safely to Van Diemen's land so far away on the other side of the world. His stomach rolled and dipped with every wave, his body shivering ever more as the bitter cold of the channel chewed through the flimsy clothes and blankets he'd been given.

Several men huddled together on the floor, doing all they could to beat back the icy air. Paddy's bones ached from shaking, his body soon tiring from the constant strain of trying not to freeze. He'd be lucky to make it past the white cliffs of Dover at this point.

At some point during the night he felt his hammock shift and a warm hand touch his cheek. "It's all right, Paddy," Frost whispered as he climbed into the hammock with him. Surprisingly, the convict's hammocks were one of the sturdiest items on the ship and easily held their combined weight.

"What're you doing?" Paddy whispered.

"Couldn't sleep with your teeth chattering that way," Frost answered, pressing his warm body along the length of Paddy's frozen one. "Just relax and sleep."

Paddy's initial discomfort at Frost's close presence soon gave way as the man's big body warmed him. Paddy's shivering eventually easing so he was finally able to close his eyes and sleep.

When he woke the next morning Frost was gone, but only recently because his body was still warm from the big man's nearness. His hammock swung with the rolling of the boat and his stomach blanched with the

constant movement. Paddy knew what was coming and moved quickly to avoid spoiling his accommodations.

He raced down the walkway searching for one of the piss buckets provided for the men's use during the night. He heaved and gagged, his vomit barely making it into the steel piss pot rather than all over the wooden deck. He retched and retched until his sides ached and his throat felt raw.

A warm hand gripped the back of his neck, hot fingers brushed his long hair away from his face. He didn't know how a normal human could feel so warm when the air was so bitterly cold. Perhaps a devil had him in its grip.

Paddy heaved a last retch then collapsed against the deck, drained and exhausted. Despite emptying his stomach of its meagre contents, he felt no better. If only the boat would stop its ceaseless movements for just a second so he could get his bearings. Around him other men moaned, their bodies likewise rebelling at the constant motion.

"Paddy?" Frost asked as he squatted in front of him. Paddy watched him recoil slightly from the stink of his breath.

"I don't feel so good," he mumbled.

Frost smirked at him and Paddy felt the urge to slap the grin right off his handsome face. "You do not say."

"Ain't funny, Frost."

"No, it is not," Frost replied seriously. "I will get you to the surgeon."

Frosts big arms wrapped around him and for a mortifying moment he thought Frost meant to carry him like a child to the hospital.

“I can walk,” he spluttered, flinching away from Frosts touch.

“I mean only to aid you to your feet,” Frost answered.

Paddy closed his eyes and took a breath. Truth was he wouldn't mind being carried to the hospital as poorly as he felt, but there was no way he was going to allow it. “All right,” he replied, holding onto Frosts arm as he slowly hauled him to his feet.

“This way,” Frost said when Paddy stood still, unsure where the hospital was. He wondered how Frost knew but it didn't seem important right then.

The prison deck was bathed in blackness aside from a dim lantern at either end which offered little more than a pinprick of light. Paddy followed closely behind Frost, his hand still on his arm as he allowed him to guide him through the dark.

They reached a lantern and Frost turned to him, his face shuttering with concern as he looked at Paddy. “Seasickness,” he declared as though he was the ships surgeon. “Seen it before,” he added.

“I'll be—” Paddy's vomit narrowly missed Frost as he retched to the side near the foot of the ladder. His body wobbled, vision darkening as dizziness overtook him. He searched for a handhold, his fingers coming to rest on warm solid flesh. Frost held him while he tossed his accounts once more.

When he'd finished Frost didn't say a word, he simply threw Paddy's arm over his shoulder, wrapped his large arm around Paddy's waist

and half dragged, half carried him to the hospital. By the time they arrived, Paddy's consciousness was fading to the same blackness of the prison deck.

FROST

Frost lay in his hammock, one long leg idly dangling over the edge. Around him men moved and groaned and fought personal struggles against the boredom of being trapped on the prison deck for hours on end. Despite being aware of every movement and sound about him, his mind was with his little mouse lying so ill in the ship's hospital.

Patrick Maybrick had stepped into the dreary halls of Newgate prison and brightened Frost's world as no one had since Daniel all those years ago. Physically, the two men were nothing alike. Daniel was tall and broad—much like himself—whereas Paddy's thin limbs and hollowed cheeks gave the appearance of a half-starving beggar. Daniel's hair, the colour of wheat husks had always been closely cropped to highlight his strong jaw and angled cheek bones, the pale blue of his eyes glinted like marble in the sunshine. He'd always reminded Frost of an angel.

In contrast, Paddy's dark hair fell in wild curls almost to his shoulders, the fringe a constant nuisance that Frost was compelled to brush aside as the hair covered his mesmerizingly rich green eyes. Paddy was handsome in his way, but his beauty lay in those eyes. Every thought flittering through the man's mind was evident in his intelligent, watchful gaze. Paddy could no more hide his feelings than go to the moon.

He recalled Paddy standing before the keepers doing his best to appear unconcerned about his position, but his body had been twitchy, as

though always ready to run, his mannerisms reminding Frost of scurrying mice trying to outwit the kitchen cat.

Regardless of their physical differences, Paddy had reminded him of Daniel to such an extent that he'd felt it as a physical blow. His heart ached on his first sighting of Paddy, the pain of missing Daniel almost overpowering him. Both were young, handsome men and both shared an innocence, or perhaps naivety because Daniel had been no innocent, that he yearned to protect. He imagined the two of them would have sat together for long hours bemoaning the plight of the world, sharing their frustrations because, despite their will, there was nothing they could do to change anything for the better. Daniel had always despised the unfairness of life giving so much to some and so little to far too many others. He'd often spoken of wanting a better balance to the suffering so common in life.

When he'd first encountered Paddy in Newgate, he'd felt little more than pity for a young man so down on his luck as to have the misfortune of ending up in the country's most vile prison with clearly no aid of any kind forthcoming. He'd been compelled to pay Paddy's garnish not only due to his sense of honour and decency, but because he'd immediately known another little piece of his soul would have been scratched away and perished if he'd allowed the young man to suffer and die—as he certainly would have if he had been forced naked into the bitter cold of Newgate.

Over the following days he'd watched Paddy settle into his new surrounds, feeling ridiculously protective and responsible for the lad. Several times he'd caught Paddy watching him back, a look of confusion, possibly even concern on his face. He'd overheard a handful of conversations between Paddy and his friend Benjamin and liked what he'd heard from the young man. He believed Paddy had sense enough to survive

and make something of himself, despite this setback. He only hoped Paddy would live long enough to fulfil his promise.

Frost's sense of duty toward Paddy had followed him aboard, a part of him now probably until they would at last be separated. There was much to protect Paddy from. Disease, starvation, other convicts, the day to day perils of a long sea voyage. Physically, Paddy could not be described as hearty, and yet there was an underlying strength just beneath the surface, as though his bones were made of steel, which gave Frost hope for his survival.

The hammock swayed gently as his mind wandered more and more not only to Paddy but to being back on the ocean. Every moment on board this ship reminded him of Daniel. Memories he'd pushed away to prevent the unbearable pain they always brought with them, now flourished on the open waters.

Once, he'd loved sailing; the scent of the sea and the freedom of the vast ocean had given him such joy. But that had all been tainted the day he'd lost Daniel. His refuge on the waters of the world had instead become a torment. Being upon the seas brought nothing now but a brutal recollection of a pain which had cut him too deeply for words.

In a fashion, he was glad to have Paddy on board with him—much as he'd like the lad not to suffer—because his presence gave Frost a reprieve from the memories. With Paddy about he was able to think upon more than Daniel and his terrible loss.

“Up we go, lads,” Tibbins words cut into Frost's reveries.

Finally, they were to go on deck for their exercise. With luck Surgeon Wyse would allow Frost a small visit with Paddy. The surgeon

seemed to be an honourable sort of fellow. Decent and willing to aid the prisoners, Frost did not fear neglect from the man charged with the health of the ship's prisoners.

Frost rolled from his hammock, wishing he was able to stand tall to stretch out his back and long limbs, but alas, he was far too tall for such a low roof. He shuffled behind Benjamin and the other convicts slowly making their way to the hatchway leading them to their far too brief moments of fresh air and sunlight.

“Might I visit the hospital, Mr Steele?” Frost asked the wards man as he stepped by. Steele, too, seemed to be of a good sort. Perhaps frost's luck had finally taken a turn for the better.

Steele thrust a set of fetters toward him, easily setting them in place as though he'd done the task a thousand times. “Move on, then,” Steele replied, hardly shifting his gaze to Frost. The fetters were meant to ensure the safety of the free men aboard while Frost walked unguarded to the hospital. He was uncertain what they expected one man to do. Frost had no intention of causing trouble. He'd committed his crime and was willing to face his punishment.

The ships hospital shared a deck with some of the officer's quarters, one deck up from the prison. Frost made his way as quickly as his fettered limbs would allow. He'd have little enough time to spend with Paddy without wasting it on a slow trip there.

“Well, Mr Ar—Frost, what is it I can do for you?” Surgeon Wyse questioned as Frost stepped into the hospital. He'd been well-known by his birth name, and notoriously known by his given moniker. Surgeon Wyse obviously knew him under both names.

“I have only come to see about Mr Maybrick, Sir.”

“Maybrick?” Wyse’s thick brows furrowed as though he had no clue of whom Frost spoke. Then recognition dawned on the man’s face. “Ah yes, Paddy. He suffers terribly with his sickness. Once he is accustomed to the sea, I have no doubt he will be restored to full health.”

“May I visit with him?” Frost had led a life of others bowing to him, asking him for his leave, but none of that mattered anymore. Frost would do what he must, grovel and beg if needed, to ensure his survival and the survival of those he cared for. Currently there was only Paddy, but even that felt more of a responsibility than care.

“A few minutes only, Frost,” Wyse murmured and then walked away. The hospital was tiny so there’d be no privacy for them, but there was nothing to be private about anyway.

Paddy lay quietly on a small bunk. Several blankets were pulled around him, tucked under his chin to ward off the bitter chill in the air. His eyes were closed, his skin pale, his chest slowly rising and falling with each breath. Frost took up the stool at Paddy’s bedside. He spread his knees as he sat, enjoying the space—scant as it was—that the hospital afforded him. He was quite tired of being crammed in amongst so many others. He remained thus for some time while Paddy slept on.

The ship was never quiet, always creaking and groaning, or else the noise of the men and handful of women on board disturbed any peace that may have been offered. He listened to Paddy’s soft breaths and the occasional rattle of a snore. A part of him desired the man to open his eyes and yet another hoped he remained in slumber, all the sooner for him to heal.

“Ain’t he the sweetest little ‘un ever?” Paddy mumbled.

“Pardon?”

“Molly’s gone and christened ‘im Ezekiel. I call him Zeke.”

“Paddy? Are you awake, little mouse?” Frost suspected Paddy was dreaming. His dream words escaping his slumbering body, but his eyes remained closed.

“Reckon he’s gonna be the best of us. Rich. Handsome. Don’t ya think he’s beautiful?”

“He is,” Frost replied, playing along with Paddy’s dream.

“Yep, he’s gonna be somethin’ someday. I only gotta make certain he lives. Gotta find me some coin, warm clothes for ‘im.”

“I know you will do your best for him, Paddy.” Frost reached out and smoothed the hair away from Paddy’s face. Despite the cold, his skin was warm and slicked with sweat.

“I’ll take ‘im to Mr Heller’s and teach ‘im his letters. Read ‘im any story he wants. He’d like that, I reckon?”

“He will enjoy any time spent with you Paddy.”

Paddy’s face scrunched as though he might cry, but then his features smoothed down and he lay quietly for a time. Frost knew all about Paddy’s nephew, Paddy had told him. As always Paddy had not been able to conceal his pain as he’d spoken about the little boy’s death. All the pain he was sure to be feeling was etched into his face, his eyes heartbreakingly sad. Frost had wanted nothing more than to ease the young man’s pain.

“Frost?”

“Hello, little mouse.” Frost smiled down at Paddy. He knew he didn’t especially like the moniker he’d given him, but seeing Paddy snap his lips together each time he used it offered a hint of amusement in the drudgery of convict life.

“Told ya I ain’t no mouse.”

Frost shifted on his stool, so he was facing Paddy. “How do you feel?”

“Like I’m about to meet me maker.”

“A little dramatic, do you not think?”

Paddy rolled his eyes and huffed. “You ain’t the one been casting up yer accounts for days. Bleedin’ ship won’t stop moving.”

“No. Quite right it will not. But you will become accustomed to the movement. Your stomach will settle.”

Paddy’s head turned from side to side as he disagreed with Frost. Of course, to him this misery would seem as though it would never cease, but Frost knew better. He’d witnessed many occurrences of seasickness in his time. Eventually, a man’s belly would settle into the rhythm of a rocking ship to the point where the stillness of the land would upset the fellow more than the roll and tumble of a vessel upon the waves.

Frost sat silently alongside Paddy as his eyes closed once more. His pallor, Frost noticed, was not simply pale. An unbecoming green tinge settled in the young man’s cheeks giving him an altogether otherworldly appearance.

Suddenly, Paddy’s chest heaved, and more quickly than he would have thought possible he’d been shoved out of the way as Wyse stepped in

with a bowl in which to catch Paddy's vomit. Paddy was already too thin for Frosts liking but if this seasickness kept up, he worried Paddy would not have the strength to fight off the myriad other diseases likely to be already festering on board their ship.

“Is he quite well?” Frost shook his head at his own stupidity for such a question. “Of course, I mean other than the seasickness, is he quite well?”

“Aye,” Wyse answered at the same time stepping back a little to avoid the splash of vomit in the bowl. “He is otherwise quite all right. He would benefit from several hearty meals of course, as most men aboard would.”

Paddy heaved a last time before collapsing back onto his cot. His thin body trembled as though the effort of being sick had exhausted it. Wyse wiped a wet cloth across his brow and then backed away, vomit bowl in hand. Frost resumed his place on the stool beside Paddy, his fingers curling in frustration. His touch would do nothing to abate Paddy's sickness, yet he yearned to touch the pale skin, feel the tick of pulse beneath to reassure him the young man was still amongst the living.

He sat immobile for a time; gaze fixed upon Paddy. Wyse would doubtless toss him out shortly, and besides which, he should make his way to the deck in time to get at least some sunlight upon him today.

He'd lost Daniel so quickly. Alive and vibrant one moment and the next irrevocably gone from this world. Frost had witnessed everything that had befallen Daniel in that fleeting moment—seen the broken body—and yet at times still could not believe Daniel was gone. The pain of his loss snuck up on him on occasion, stealing his breath and doubling him over with the force of the ache. After one such occasion, he'd declared himself determined to never care for another again.

And despite his current concern for Patrick Maybrick, he ordered himself to keep that promise.

CHAPTER FIVE

PADDY

Paddy ticked off the two-week anniversary of his sea voyage with little fanfare. He had little memory of the first week on the ocean as sea sickness had claimed him so badly, he'd been forced to stay in the small hospital on board. He had some vague recollections of Benjamin visiting him and would have sworn he'd woken once or twice to Frost's concerned face.

As his body acclimated to the toss and turn of the ocean, Paddy began to feel better and better. He'd been released from the hospital in time to celebrate Christmas with his fellow prisoners just yesterday. The day had been a dreary affair all round. Grey skies forebode the misery of the mass the captain organised in apparent celebration of their saviours' birth. Paddy hadn't found much to celebrate in the constant assertions the clergyman had made that they were all headed to hell. His detailed descriptions of what they could look forward to once there hadn't been of a festive nature either.

The convicts had been gifted with an extra piece of salted meat for their Christmas feast and an extra half a mug of water to swallow it down with.

Benjamin and he spent much of their time chatting, about anything and everything. The hours spent below deck dragging out with excruciating boredom. Once on deck for their exercise the men became livelier, but conversation eased off as they spent time with their private memories and reflections—the Atlantic a poetic backdrop to their regrets.

“To mess, scum,” their wards man shouted. The convicts around Paddy began to move, no hustle or speed. Mess and exercise were times to be dragged out, for they offered reprieve from the gloom and dreariness of the prison deck.

Paddy quickly slid his shoes on and joined the line of men shuffling along the deck. The still freezing weather meant he slept fully clothed in everything he owned, aside from his shoes, in a futile effort to stave off the bitter cold. Benjamin walked behind him, with the child Jimmy squeezed between them. While Paddy had been suffering in the ship's hospital, Jimmy and Benjamin had become attached. Somehow, Benjamin reminded Jimmy of his local minister and the resemblance brought the boy comfort.

“Don’t feel as I can stomach cook’s biscuits today, Ben,” Jimmy whispered. The ship's cook was anything but, really. Paddy had yet to taste anything onboard even remotely edible. Like them all, Paddy forced down his meals, knowing he didn’t have the luxury of being picky. Not eating every skerrick was a death sentence when they were offered so little to begin with.

“Add a little sugar, Jimmy.” Paddy was certain the voice belonged to Frost, though he spoke so rarely it was hard to be sure.

Jimmy didn’t answer, though Paddy expected him not to. Frost was a big man for certain, but there was an air about him which inspired caution in those around him. To a child he must have been positively frightening.

He and Benjamin were surprised to find themselves regularly joined by Frost, who rarely offered a contribution to the conversation save for an occasional chuckle when something amused him.

Many times, Paddy tried to draw the quiet man out to learn something—anything—about him. But Frost was a vault. He told them nothing. His silent company had become, at first, a distant sort of comfort and then something more. Paddy looked forward to Frost's presence: the tingle on his skin whenever they touched whether by an accidental brush or the times Frost grabbed him to steady his feet on rough seas. Sometimes Frost walked closely beside him as they took their exercise, so their hands occasionally skimmed against each other. Paddy no longer felt cautious around Frost. Instead, there was a hungry curiosity which Frost refused to satisfy.

He'd even caught himself studying Frost when on deck, the sunlight providing him detail the darkness of the prison deck could not. He'd noticed Frost's eyes were not black at all, as he'd first thought, but in fact a dark navy, only the brightness of sunny days showing hints of blue. His long lashes were as dark and thick as his wavy hair. His skin was smooth and clear of any scars or blemishes aside from a single birthmark on his right forearm the shape of which reminded Paddy of a turtle. His body was trim, yet strong in spite of the scanty rations they were all subject to. He was taller than most men on the ship, yet Paddy didn't think it was Frost's size that intimidated most of the other convicts. He had a presence, at once gentle with Paddy, but then fierce and threatening with others when needed.

The mystery of Frost was alive and well. Paddy hadn't even learned his full name.

"Maybe we'll get oatmeal today," Benjamin mused.

"Ain't much better," Paddy grouched. He shouldn't complain. As awful as cook's food was at least he was eating twice a day, more than

could be said for his last few months of freedom when he'd given up more meals than he could count to Molly.

The mess where they ate had the same low ceiling as the prison deck. Paddy was often amused watching Frost's hunching steps as he tried to avoid dragging the top of his skull along the roof. He dared not laugh, but he enjoyed it none the same.

The table they sat at was often wet from being scrubbed by the men who'd eaten before them. Surgeon Wyse was determined to get as many of them to Van Diemen's Land alive as possible and so insisted upon as much cleanliness as possible. Paddy was grateful the bonuses the surgeon would get for every living convict who made it to Hobart town had been brought in, otherwise conditions might be even worse, though he found it hard to imagine how.

Paddy took his seat, waiting for Hawkins to serve their portions. Hawkins was a fair man, well chosen to be their mess captain. There'd been no arguments yet of men claiming favouritism or larger helpings.

"We got oatmeal," Jimmy excitedly exclaimed when Hawkins came with his pot and ladle. The oatmeal might not be the tastiest fare ever, but it was a change from the hard biscuits they'd had the last six mornings running.

The oatmeal looked as unappetising as Paddy suspected it'd taste, but it was warm and filling and would keep his energy up to fight off whatever diseases were bound to infest the ship eventually. He took a small bite, scrunching his nose in expectation of the taste. The oatmeal was salty, far too salty for his tastes, but edible.

"You dunno how lucky you are, lad."

Paddy glanced up at Nathaniel as he spoke. The man was like Frost in that he rarely spoke. He seemed to be of a pleasant sort though. He'd certainly shown no anger toward Frost for tossing him out of his hammock, but then few men would dare to go against Frost.

“How d’ya mean?”

“This is me second go on the boats. First time round we were chained up at night to a steel rod along the hull. We had to wake each man if we needed to use the facilities and make them march up the end because we couldn’t get around ‘em. You soon learned to hold on til morning.”

Several of the convicts at the table let out a small gasp at Nathaniel's words. Paddy remembered that night he'd been sick. He'd have vomited over everyone if he'd have had to get them up and moving to make it to the bucket.

“Had a real nasty master too,” Nathaniel continued. “Filled the ship with belongings to sell so as we had even less room. Didn’t bring enough rations so we were half starved by the time we arrived—those of us still alive.”

Less room. They were already packed in too tightly, so little space to move comfortably anywhere aboard. And each day Paddy’s stomach groused at being so very empty.

“Where did you serve your time?” Paddy asked.

“Sydney, lad. Out on the farms near Parramatta.”

“Is it as hot as they say?”

“Like hades. So hot it sucks the life outta you.” Nathaniel shuffled a little closer, leaning in as though about to share a great secret.

“Opportunities aplenty, though. Stay outta trouble, work hard—a man could make ‘is fortune.”

“How’d ya mean?” Benjamin leaned in, mirroring Nathaniel’s movements.

Nathaniel took a mouthful of his oatmeal, appearing to enjoy keeping his listeners in suspense. “Governor can give you a plot of land. Plenty of business type opportunities for the smart.”

“What were you transported for, Nathaniel?” Frost asked, a hard edge to his tone.

“A man don’t like to share that—does he?”

“He might want to reconsider if he’s asking other men to trust him when it comes to certain things.”

“I don’t mean no harm, Frost.”

“Make sure you do not.”

Paddy glanced at Benjamin, the pair sharing an astonished look. Surely Frost didn’t think them so naive they’d get themselves into some kind of mischief with Nathaniel. Both he and Benjamin had been alone a long time and though they’d wound up sent to the boats, neither had ended up fodder in some gang.

“No matter,” Nathaniel continued, shifting his gaze from Frost with apparent relief. “Heard tales of Van Diemen’s Land. Some say it’s a hundred times worse than Sydney. Some, that it’s better.” Nathaniel shrugged, lending him an air of indifference, though Paddy was beginning to suspect he was anything but.

The cool early afternoon air blew through the mess, the ship's rocking worsening. There was a feel to storms on the ocean that even after only two weeks at sea Paddy had learnt. Today didn't feel stormy, but the cold was brutal enough to set an ache through his bones. Frost shifted closer, his thigh pressing against Paddy's, their shoulders scraping as they ate. Paddy welcomed the warmth the bigger man provided.

Not a scrap was left in the bowls of the convicts once the meal was over. Despite the poor taste, each of them understood the importance of keeping up their strength and eating what they could when they could. Nathaniel's tale of mistreatment was enough to remind Paddy his situation might get worse.

Once they'd finished their meal, they trudged back down to the prison deck. After they'd finished eating each morning, the men in his mess were sent back down to the prison deck so others could have theirs. They'd stay down for much of the morning, but by early afternoon they'd be sent on deck for their exercise. Other than the bells used by the sailors, which Paddy was yet to understand, there was no way for him to tell the passage of time.

But today, by the time far more than half the day had passed they were still locked away on the prison deck, nor had Paddy seen any other convicts making for the top deck. He heard no beating of rain against the ship, so he doubted weather was preventing their exercise. Had Moxey decided to punish them for some offense—imagined or otherwise? The last time he'd gone an entire day without fresh air had been while he was in the hospital, but then he'd been too sick to notice.

“Can't get no air,” he mumbled. The hull of the ship was shrinking, pressing in on him from all sides, the great beams of wood looming over

him, threatening to crush the breath from his body. There were too many men and too little space. There was no possibility of enough air reaching them.

Paddy took a breath; certain it may be his last. His limbs shook, sweat beaded his forehead in spite of the cold. Where was all the air? He rolled from his hammock and made for the cell door. It was locked. Of course, it was locked, the wardsman had locked it when they returned from the mess, just as he did every time. He gripped the bars and shook them. Maybe the door would come off in his hands.

In a cell opposite his own, men watched him, their expressions varying between amused, concerned and disinterested. He must get out. He must get air.

“Paddy?”

“I ain’t got enough air, Ben.”

“You’re all right, Paddy. You’re all right.”

“No. No I ain’t. Why haven’t they taken us on deck? Why can’t I get enough air?”

“It’s just your brain playing tricks on ya. There’s enough air. Plenty of it.”

Paddy stopped shaking the cell door and turned to his friend. Standing behind Benjamin, the other men of his cell were watching him cautiously. Jimmy stood close to Benjamin, a hint of fear on his young face. Frost stood to the side of the others, his sharp eyes missing nothing as they trailed over Paddy.

He was making a fool of himself. But he couldn't get rid of the notion that the captain meant to keep them locked down here forever, and he knew there wasn't going to be enough air for them all.

“Why won't they let us out?”

“Here now!” the wardsman shouted, “What's all this noise?”

Paddy turned to him, determined to get an answer, even if talking to those in charge normally terrified him. “Why aren't we getting on deck?” he squeaked.

Wardsman Steele stepped closer, his voice lowered as he said, “One of the littlies died this morning. Captain's giving him a fitting service.”

There were three children—aside from Jimmy—on board that Paddy knew of. Two were walking age, maybe no more than five and one he'd spotted crawling about on deck once or twice.

“Which one?” Paddy whispered, memories of Zeke flooding his heart with grief.

“The littlest. Poor lad, not even a year old.” Steele took a breath, and then seemed to remember who he was talking to. “Now quiet down before you upset the poor lad's mother even more.”

Paddy took a step back and then another. His cell mates must have moved aside to make way for him as his back soon collided with the hull. Paddy dropped to his haunches. Another young life lost. The pain of Zeke's death was too fresh; he hadn't had enough time to mourn before being confronted with the death of another baby.

Suddenly, he no longer cared about being stuck down here, or how miserable he felt. He knew his pain was insignificant next to the agony the

little boy's family was enduring. Life was short and harsh, especially amongst the poor, and could be expected to end at any moment. Even knowing this, didn't make accepting the death of a child any easier.

The ship rocked and rolled on the ocean, the hard wood of the deck beneath him added to his discomfort. Paddy pulled his knees to his chest and wrapped his arms around his legs. In the background, the soft murmurs of his fellow convicts droned on. He didn't care about any of it. He felt somebody beside him, squatting down to sit as he was, close but not too near. Paddy didn't need to see to know it was Benjamin, and Jimmy was likely on his other side.

"Gonna be all right, Paddy," Benjamin murmured.

In front of him, Frost lowered himself to sit, so his back leant against one of the wooden beams that held their hammocks. He said nothing, but kept his gaze fixed on Paddy.

He felt foolish, because these men were suffering as much as he was, perhaps even more. He had no idea what had brought Frost here for example. What weight did he bear upon his shoulders?

Other men began to sit, finding whatever space they could, using whatever they could to lean on. Today's gentle sea rocked the boat soothingly, rather than the harsh rises and falls they were used to.

In the silence a deep voice suddenly rang out, the strains of Amazing Grace effortlessly rolling from the singers' lips. One by one, others joined in, Paddy eventually lending his own voice. This was the closest he'd ever get to a proper farewell for his tiny nephew, despite knowing the other men were singing not for Zeke, but for the little boy onboard.

Even Frost joined in, his voice clear and loud over the others, his gaze fixed on Paddy. These men, who were treated abominably, often for such harmless crimes, were singing for the little boy who'd died on their ship. A little boy whose parents would likely not bat an eye at the mistreatment they were all suffering, yet this didn't stop the convicts from mourning his loss. They grieved because they were not animals, they were not heartless. The death of this child allowed them to mourn openly for all they had lost.

When the song was over, they sat in silence. Each man left with his own memories, his own heartache as company while the long day drew to a close.

FROST

“He ain't gonna find this easy,” Ben eventually murmured in the long silence that followed the end of the men singing Amazing Grace.

Frost grunted and nodded his head. He knew Benjamin referred to Paddy. The young man lay curled on his side, top of his head resting against Benjamin's leg. Frost had been watching the soft rise and fall of his chest for some time.

“He's stronger than he looks.” Frost did not look for Benjamin's agreement. He'd been watching Paddy from the moment he'd first seen him at Newgate. Paddy hid nothing of how he felt, every emotion so clear on his handsome face.

Many times, when he'd looked at Paddy there'd been a faint stirring of want, something he hadn't felt in too long—but also something

unwelcome. He'd sworn to himself he'd never feel again, never want again.

"Aye." Benjamin shifted slightly, mindful of the young boy, Jimmy, sleeping on his other side. He moved carefully until he was close enough to Frost for their words not to be overheard. "I ain't found out nothin' 'bout you."

"Is that so?"

"All I need to know is if you're dangerous."

Frost took a deep breath as he pondered Benjamin's' question. Several answers flitted through his mind before he finally answered, "Not to you, nor to Paddy."

"You ain't gonna say what yer done?"

"No."

"Fair," Benjamin muttered, "but you promise you ain't gonna hurt 'im." Benjamin flicked a nod toward Paddy, so Frost did not doubt whom he spoke of.

"Strange that you show more concern for Paddy than yourself."

"Ain't so strange. He's good and kind. I ain't."

"I suspect you are better than you give yourself credit for."

"No, I ain't." Benjamin twitched and fidgeted beside him while Frost waited patiently for the confession he knew was coming. "I wished her dead," Ben finally whispered.

The admission startled Frost. He did not know who Benjamin spoke of, but the pain from his actions was evident in his voice. Frost turned to the

man across from him, wrenching his gaze from Paddy who slept soundly on.

“Who?” he asked quietly.

“My Louisa. She had the pox and she was suffering. So, I...”

“Wanted her suffering to end. There is nothing evil in that, Benjamin.” Having loved Daniel fiercely, Frost knew without doubt he’d have done the same. His one consolation when he’d lost Daniel was that he had not suffered. “When hope is lost and suffering is all that remains, wishing for an end is natural.”

“I loved her,”

“I am certain you did.”

“You ever loved someone like that, Frost?”

“Once, but I too lost them.”

“Hurts. It hurts real bad,” Benjamin said, pain saturating his tone.

“It does.”

They sat in silence for a time, Frost lost to his memories of Daniel, his gaze wandering once more to Paddy’s sleeping form. The jagged edges inside him from where his heart had been torn out by Daniel’s death throbbed mercilessly, though watching Paddy twitch in his sleep managed to pull a smile through the agony. The young man started out a curiosity to Frost, yet his feelings were growing into real affection for him. He did not want to see Paddy hurt—he would not allow it.

“I’m sorry, Frost,” Paddy’s soft voice murmured in the dark.

“For what, little mouse?”

“Earlier. I was being a coward. Just felt for a moment like I couldn’t breathe.”

Frost slid closer to Paddy. Though the weather was warming, the nights were still cool. Paddy’s too thin body shook against the cold. Frost yearned to wrap his arms about him to try to warm his blood. Too many of the men were awake, and though many had huddled together for warmth at the start of the voyage, most had ceased the practice.

As he watched Paddy shivering, he found he did not care. What more could they possibly do to him?

“Come,” he murmured, gently pulling Paddy towards his body. The young man moved willingly, whether as a sign of desperation to find relief from the cold or a need for human touch, Frost wasn’t certain.

Regardless of Paddy’s reasoning, Frost found his relief in the boy’s willingness to accept the comfort he offered.

“Are you warmer?” Frost asked after time had passed and Paddy’s body ceased its incessant shaking.

“Yes.”

“Good.”

Silences were simple with Paddy. Growing up his parents had enforced strict rules of etiquette and conversation upon him. If they were to associate with the ton, his father wanted to ensure Frost would not shame him. He’d been taught silences were awkward and to be avoided or filled when in company.

Yet, sitting here with Paddy in his arms and a content silence stretching between them, Frost did not feel uncomfortable at all. For a

moment he allowed himself to imagine nights such as this, but in more comfortable surroundings. He pictured the rich burgundy and gold chaise which had graced his mother's parlour. It was of a size where he'd be able to stretch out upon it with enough space spare for Paddy to nestle beside him. A fire would blaze in the large marble fireplace, soft lamplight glowing. They'd lie together simply enjoying the comfort of each other's bodies, or perhaps one would read aloud to the other.

Paddy had an unquenchable thirst for knowledge. He'd spoken of books he'd read, myths and histories, accounts of travel to distant lands. Frost could teach him so much and he easily imagined spending time thus.

As pleasant as those thoughts were, he did not allow them to linger. That life belonged to a different man, in a different time. Frost would die in Hobart town, a prisoner of the realm for whatever years remained to him. Paddy would one day be free to return to England or maybe he'd stay and make a life for himself in Australia. Neither option left room for Frost. Daniel had been a dreamer and look where it had gotten him. Frost had always been a realist, yet it had not prevented tragedy, or allowed him to accept Daniels death any easier. All Frost knew was life was a constant struggle, and happiness an illusion to hold onto for the brief moments it presented itself.

Daniel rested soundly in his arms. The glow of the flames from the fireplace illuminated the crescent of his face which was not buried in his chest. Sweat from their exertions glistened on Daniel's brow. He was, as ever, breathtaking.

Not an inch of Daniels body remained untouched by him and yet despite the many times they'd lain together, each time was a revelation, a

discovery of pleasure he had not known he was capable of.

“I hear you thinking, my dear,” Daniel whispered, his lips scraping against the flesh of Frost’s chest, his breath stirring the hairs.

“I am thinking of what a wonder you are.”

Daniel’s laugh was soft, sated. “There is no need for flattery to get me between your sheets. As you well know, a simple ‘come Daniel’ from you is quite sufficient.”

His response was to pull Daniel’s body tighter against his own, if that were even possible. He never imagined his heart so capable of love, so full of Daniel that he wondered at times if it may burst.

“Tis not flattery. I never imagined it possible for love to find me.”

“Love?” Daniel propped his body up on one elbow. Serious, beautiful light eyes stared into Frost’s own black pools.

Frost ran the pad of his forefinger gently down Daniel’s cheek. “Surely, you must know that I have loved you all along,” he murmured, smiling softly. The fire light twinkled, cast shadows to make the room and this moment in it appear magical.

“I didn’t dare to hope.” Daniels fingers sifted through the hair about Frosts nape, tender and intimate. “I only wish...”

“I know, my love. You wish we were free to live together as a couple, hold hands as we stroll along the street. I know what you wish for Daniel, but that is not to be our lives.”

Many times, they’d had this conversation. Daniel dreamed of a better world, a fairer one. Frost was content to let him dream, while he

remained firmly in the world they had. One of them had to remain sensible of societies expectations and laws.

Smiling softly, Daniel kissed him, sweet and gentle as he liked. Before long desire would rekindle between them and the kiss would grow fierce, proprietary—as he liked. He cupped Daniel’s cheek, his thumb stroking against the warm flesh there, but something felt amiss.

The cheek seemed—not wrong, but different. Softer. Less stubble. Smoother. Neither was the face he held as plump as Daniel’s. This one felt thin, hollow between his large hands. Gaunt. The lips were thinner, far timider than he was used to from Daniel’s kisses. There was something changed about the taste, also.

He drew back, suddenly afraid of what he’d find. But he’d never been one to hide from his fear, he always needed to face it instead. Eyes unlike Daniel’s stared back at him. Vivid green replaced warm brown.

He held Paddy in his arms. The young man wore a small smile on his kiss swollen lips and yearning danced in those emerald eyes. The room had not changed from the very last one he’d shared with Daniel, but the man had been replaced.

At first thought he meant to leap away, for how could he hold another when his arms yet ached for the feel of Daniel’s body once more. But Paddy smiled so beautifully. Beckoning. Calling to Frost like a siren song.

He surged forward to take those tentative lips once more, to brand them as his own, but once more there had been change. Now, the kiss was wrong. No. Not the kiss. The man he kissed. Once warm and vital, now cold and limp.

Deafening, ear-splitting noise replaced the silence. His limbs shook, recognising exactly what the sound foretold. His body recalled exactly as he had felt that terrible, terrible day. He knew was to come from the shadows, what stalked him and the beautiful man watching him with fear frozen in his dead green eyes.

The slight body lay in the identical fashion to Daniel's after the cannonball. Torn and bloodied. Not whole. He searched frantically for Paddy's severed leg as he had done for Daniel's, vainly hoping that if he found it perhaps life might be restored.

He dared not chance another look to the face, for he knew what awaited him. A man might survive a missing limb but not a portion of his skull.

He placed a firm hand on the thin chest, searching. Feeling. There was no beat of the tender heart, nor had he expected it.

In his stomach he felt the mass, as though the cannonball had lodged there, but soon to erupt from his mouth in a scream torn from his soul.

Daniel.

Paddy.

The scream rose, tearing at his insides as it fought its way from his gorge. If it were to escape, he knew it would blow the ship apart.

Frost woke with a jolt, his body slick with sweat, limbs shaking, stomach in his mouth. He hadn't screamed. He knew because all around him men slept on. And against his chest, Paddy slumbered, alive and peaceful.

A dream. Nay, nightmare. That is all it had been. Paddy breathed on, yet Frosts relief was tempered by the recall that Daniel remained cold and dead in the ground. One could not replace the other, and was it unfaithful to Daniel to even try?

Not for the first time Frost rued the clemency he had been shown at his sentencing. Far better he had swung by his neck weeks ago.

CHAPTER SIX

Somewhere near the Equator, January 1835

PADDY

They walked in nothing but their canvas pants during the days now, the blazing sun bigger and hotter than Paddy had ever seen. He'd never believed such a heat was possible until he'd felt the fierce rays of the equatorial sun on his skin. His skin burned red the first day he'd removed his shirt, but now it had taken on a darker shade of pale, bordering on a fawn colour. Some of the men were almost as dark as the deck planks.

The heat dried their throats, making them thirstier than he'd have thought possible, but despite being surrounded by water, their thirst went mostly unquenched—this was a special type of torture to the men on board. The captain was nervous of running low on supplies and rationed accordingly.

Paddy lived for these moments when he was released from his irons and allowed to walk the deck. He received barely two hours a day, but he made the most of his exercise time until he was forced back down into the increasingly rotten prison deck.

Occasionally, he caught sight of the ladies on board. They huddled together in conversation, never glancing in the direction of the convicts, but often casting flirtatious gazes at the sailors or guards. Paddy wondered what their husbands would think. Many of them were pretty with their pale skin, golden curls and dainty features, but none of them attracted Paddy's admiration. Dark eyes, black hair and rigid planes were much more appealing.

The ache in his chest from Zeke's death had eased, but only in those moments he wasn't thinking of his nephew. When he did recall the tiny baby, the pain was so sharp he'd have sworn a butcher's knife was imbedded in his heart. He often wondered how Molly was faring, her loss so much greater than Paddy's own. He hoped Aunt Jane had been able to show some kindness to her.

"Paddy," Frost called, one of the rare times he used his proper name.

Paddy wandered over to where Frost stood leaning on the railing of the pen, looking out over the rolling seas. Benjamin wasn't with them today; he'd taken ill after eating yesterday's gruel and had chosen to rest in his hammock.

"Look there," Frost said as Paddy drew near.

He followed the trajectory of Frost's outstretched arm and spotted a creature leap from the depths of the ocean, before diving back under the churning water.

"A dolphin," Paddy cried, his excitement making him more animated than usual.

"There's an entire pod," Frost replied.

"Pod?"

"That's what a group of dolphins is called," Frost replied matter-of-factly.

"Look! Look!" Paddy shouted as five dolphins leapt from the sea.

"Look Frost!" he screamed again when even more leapt into the air. His hand impulsively rested on Frost's forearm, the muscles bunching as

Frost startled at the touch. Paddy hardly noticed, too distracted with the dolphins.

“Have you ever seen something like this before?” he asked, not taking his gaze from the animals.

“Once or twice,” Frost replied.

Paddy turned to him, realising this was the first real piece of personal information he’d gotten out of the stalwart man. Frost’s gaze was locked on where Paddy’s hand gripped him. Paddy ignored the soft expression on his face and asked, “You’ve been to sea before?”

Frost’s eyes lifted to his, the sun lightening them, so Paddy saw the blue, the lightened hue almost the colour of the sea. “I was a sailor once... in another life,” he answered mysteriously.

“In the navy?”

“On the Asia, under Curzon,” Frost spoke as though Paddy would understand the significance. He did not.

“I dunno—”

“Little matters,” Frost said, and Paddy knew he wasn’t going to get any more from the man, his armour had dropped back into place. Instead they stood silently together watching the dolphins play in the ocean. For those few moments the horror of his life was forgotten. The sky was blue once more.

The freedom and joy of these simple creatures warmed Paddy’s heart while simultaneously blazing a palpable envy within him. To be free and joyful was a state of being Paddy yearned for as powerfully as the air he breathed. He had no want or use for gold and jewels. Fine clothes and

stately mansions held no appeal. He wanted only what the dolphins of the ocean had in abundance. Liberty and bliss.

“Fire! Fire!”

Paddy froze as the scream came. Frost didn't. He shoved Paddy to the side, putting his body between Paddy and the screams coming thicker and louder.

Men began scuttling about the deck like ants on a picnic, some carrying hessian sacks, others with pails of water from the wash tubs. The captain came to stand on what Paddy had come to know as the foredeck barking orders to all and sundry.

Already the stench of smoke permeated the tropical air.

Frost swung around to face him and gripped his arms too tight. “Do not move from here. And if it comes to it, get your arse in one of the cutters. Do not wait for anything,” he ordered.

Paddy nodded; his gaze drawn over Frost's shoulder where smoke was now belching from the deck below.

“Promise me, Paddy,” Frost demanded, shaking him a little.

“All right.”

Frost looked at him a moment longer and then turned and ran. Paddy tried to follow his path, but he was soon lost behind the crowds of men pouring onto the deck from the prison deck below. Where was Benjamin? He'd been so sick earlier. Was he trapped below?

FROST

Once before he'd been aboard a ship when fire had broken out. He'd had training and knew what was required. Of course, he was a prisoner now and there was no guarantee his help would be allowed or wanted, but he'd offer, nonetheless.

He strode toward the gate of the pen where Lieutenant Adams stood guard. Moxey stood on the foredeck, arms flailing about as he delivered orders to the men assembled about him. Several ladies were gathered on the poop deck and thus far appeared quite calm. Once they caught sight of the flames that would soon change.

“Lieutenant, can I be of service?” Frost asked once he'd reached the gate.

Adams looked him up and down briefly, indecision in his eyes, but then he glanced somewhere over Frost's shoulder and made his decision. “Come on, then, and be wary, Frost, do not think the fire will distract me from keeping an eye on you.”

Frost bowed, giving a slight nod. Adams wasn't a bad sort of fellow, but he was certainly fond of his own importance. Frost learnt long ago to stay well clear of a man overly fond of his position and looking to improve it.

“Has a bucket line—”

“Captain Moxey is not a fool, Frost,” Adams interjected before Frost was able to complete his inquiry. He'd had no doubt a bucket line had been formed; his only concern was whether Moxey was using all available resources—including the convicts. Now was not the time to be overly concerned about keeping the prisoners under lock and key.

“The gunpowder, Captain!” a young sailor cried as his head cleared the hatchway close to the quarter deck.

“Where?” Frost called.

Moxey turned to glare at him for a moment, but then quickly answered him, “The powder store. Third deck.”

“I’ll go,” Frost volunteered. If the flames reached the gunpowder, then there was no hope. The *George III* would be destroyed in a fiery explosion Frost had no desire to experience.

“And me.” Another man—a convict Frost realised—called.

Moxey merely nodded and then turned back to the men who stood around him either offering suggestions to the captain or awaiting orders. Frost immediately made his way toward the hatchway. The second man, whose name escaped him in this moment, was close on his heels. He hoped the man was as courageous as his offer of aide because once they were on the third deck there would be no room for error, no turning back.

“We gonna get there in time, Frost?”

“We will most certainly try.” Frost arranged his feet on the edges of the ladder and allowed himself to slide down to speed up their pace. It was a sailor’s move and one that his accomplice adopted. The man had either been a sailor once or was a quick study.

He pushed through the men on the prison deck who were currently being herded up on deck. A few shoved him back, perhaps thinking he was attempting to jump the queue, as it were, to save himself. He paid them no mind, only kept shouldering men aside to make the next hatchway down. He took this one in the same manner, landing easily on the third deck.

Most ships, in his experience, were laid out in a similar fashion and this one proved to be no different. The powder store was a small room to the aft of the deck. They would need to make their way past the ballast and other stores to get there. Evidently, they'd have to fight through flames as well.

Frost watched the orange flames lick the wood of the storage crates and then tickle the hull. The fire needed to be extinguished quickly, before it ate its way through the hull to be put out by the waters of the Atlantic. Of course, by then it would be too late. The flames would have opened a hole and their ship would quickly sink to the bottom of the sea.

Several men were swatting the flames with hessian sacks, a handful more were tossing water about in a vain attempt to put the fire out. The ship shrieked its horror, wood creaking under the stress, metal rivets popping, fire roaring. The bucket line needed to make it down here swiftly, before the flames took hold more than it already had.

"This way," he called over his shoulder. He moved forward, passing the men battling the flames. Not one paid him any attention as they fought on, their faces blackened with soot, sweat drenching their clothes so the material clung to their bodies.

Frost bent low; the roof not high enough to allow him ease of passage. He felt his lungs labouring under the strain of both exertion and smoke. They did not have much time. The smoke gathered toward the ceiling but began lowering as more and more smoke belched from the flames. Soon they would not be able to see an inch in front of their faces. Frost must reach the powder store before that time.

He quickened his pace, his partner staying with him. He did not slow down as the powder store came into view, instead he barged through the

door, indeed he may have broken it from its hinges, but he did not give the matter a thought. The powder kegs sat to the far side of the store.

Flames erupted through the gaps in the wall behind, happily devouring the wood around them. In minutes, Frost estimated the kegs would be consumed. He ran.

“Roll them,” Frost shouted over the roar of flames. “Get them out the door.”

If they were able to get the kegs passed the fire, toward the hatchway where the fire had not yet taken hold there would be a chance of survival.

Each keg, though made of wood, was surrounded by copper bands. The nearness of the flames suggested the copper would be hot to the touch, but Frost had no time to be considerate of injury to himself. He knocked over the first keg and began rolling it back the way they had come.

The heat from the copper bands was intense but he bit back the pain. Once he had the first barrel to safety, he went back for another and then another. He passed his helper on the way and knew from the grimace on the man’s face that his hands were similarly burnt.

The pain was sharp now, biting into his flesh so badly his stomach roiled, and dizziness hampered his every step. Only two kegs remained. Frost reached for the second to last hoping to see his partner at his heels. But he was alone. He rolled the keg, racing for the door and the relative safety of the hatchway.

A few steps beyond the powder store door he found the man who had been aiding him, curled on his side, screaming as he clutched his hands to his chest, ineffectively blowing on them as though this might ease the burn. Frost didn’t stop for him. One life must be weighed alongside many.

He left the keg with the men at the hatch who were doing their best to guard them against the approaching flames and ran back into the powder store. He hacked a cough and spat, thick sputum bursting from his throat. The smoke was ever thickening, and his breath ever labouring.

He grabbed for the last keg, allowing a scream to tear from his throat as the hot copper seared his flesh. His burns would be terrible, but nothing in comparison to his fate if the kegs caught fire. He rolled the last barrel, fighting his pain and weariness to remove the danger as quickly as possible.

Past the other convict who was now being aided by a sailor and onwards to the hatchway. Buckets of water were constantly being lowered to the men on the third deck. They wasted no time tossing them onto the flames. Moxey had a bucket line firmly in action now. With luck the fire would soon be extinguished.

“That’s the last,” Frost called to the senior man below deck, one he did not know.

“Get yourself and Schofield back up,” the sailor yelled. His face held no fear, only determination and Frost was consoled by the man’s demeanour. A cool head was needed, and it appeared one was present.

“I’ll get him to Surgeon Wyse,” Frost replied, nodding toward his wounded companion whose name he at least now knew.

“Let Wyse look at you too,” the sailor replied, glancing at Frost’s hands.

Several of the men battling the fire were making for the hatchway, replaced by fresh men ready to take up the fight.

Frost bent to grip his compatriot under the arms and heaved the man to his feet. They both swayed a little, Frosts efforts draining him of much of his usual strength. “Come on, then,” he murmured, hoping to stir the man in his arms into action.

Together they carefully made their way to the hatch. Another of the sailors leaving the immediate danger aided him in getting the injured Schofield up the ladder. Their work was slow, heavy and laborious but finally they reached the prison deck. It was empty of convicts. Moxey must have had them all moved to the upper deck.

Gripping Schofield tighter he began to drag him toward yet another hatchway. The man was not much help at this point, delirium from his burns making him all but useless in his own rescue.

“Come now, Schofield, lend a hand,” Frost begged as he approached the ladder to the mess deck and hospital. No one was around to aid him on this occasion. Schofield barely had the wherewithal to assist, but somehow, they managed to ascend another deck. He had only to manhandle the man to the hospital and then he might rest.

Nothing of the mess room appeared out of place or damaged, the fire clearly had not reached here. The entire deck held the stench of smoke, and likely would for some time. An olfactory reminder of how close they had come to doom.

Frost found Wyse in the hospital, pottering around mixing up tinctures and the like, clearly expecting patients at any time.

“Frost?” he asked, rather surprised, “Is that you under all that soot.”

“Indeed, it is. I’m afraid we have some burns—”

“Yes. Yes. Come on through.” Wyse took a few paces towards him and then stopped. “Lie him here, if you please.”

Frost eased Schofield onto the very cot Paddy had occupied weeks ago. The memory brought the young man to mind after being momentarily forgotten during the height of the drama. He prayed Paddy had followed his instructions and kept out of trouble. He smiled as he recalled he was as likely to ignore his order and get himself into an infernal pickle.

The smile soon morphed into an expression far more pained as the agony of his burnt hands resurfaced. He gasped as he looked down at his red raw palms, blisters already pustulating. Somehow the sight of his injuries intensified his pain. He’d had many wounds over the years, but the burn of his flesh was of a magnitude of pain he’d yet to experience. He wondered if Daniel had felt this kind of agony before passing.

“Here now, Frost, get yourself down,” Wyse was saying, his concerned face suddenly before him. “McGregor, help me with him.”

Frost had a moment to register another man approaching before the world tipped sideways and he fell into a welcome oblivion.

PADDY

“It’s spreading too fast,” someone shouted.

“The gunpowder, Captain!” a sailor bellowed loud enough for Paddy to hear even over the roar coming from the fire below and the shouts of panicked men.

“Where?” someone called back. Someone who wasn’t the captain.

“The powder store. Third deck,” the Captain answered.

“I’ll go,” a man volunteered.

“And me,” another offered.

Paddy strained to see the brave souls—or fools—who’d volunteered to try to save them all. He only managed to see the line of men shift to let them pass.

A line soon formed with each man passing a bucket to the next until it reached the last man somewhere below deck to pour on the flames Paddy was yet to see. Despite his promise to Frost to remain where he was, Paddy joined the line. He couldn’t bear the notion of perishing from a fire while he was surrounded by the waters of the Atlantic.

Thank God he’d been on deck when the alarm was raised. Being trapped below while fire raced through the wooden ship was a terrifying notion. He thought again of Benjamin and prayed to God he was safe. And what of Frost? Where had he gotten to?

Nobody had yet to order abandon ship. How bad would it need to get before hope was lost and they left *George III* to her fate?

His hands soon ached from passing pail after pail of water. He watched detachedly as a snake of flames appeared to his right. One of the crew beat at the deadly blaze with his hessian sack and the fire disappeared as quickly as it appeared.

Beside him Jimmy Elliott shed tears. The boy was ten, if that, and still the crown had seen fit to send him on this god forsaken journey to be treated like cattle for the crime of pick pocketing. He’d taken to shadowing Benjamin around. The kindness Ben had shown the boy fostering something like worship in the young lad.

“All right, Jimmy,” Paddy said, doing his best to keep his own fear from bleeding into his voice. “We’ll have it out soon enough.”

“I don’ wanna go in the water, Paddy. There’s monsters in there,” the boy replied.

“We’ve got the cutters if we need to use them.”

Jimmy nodded, biting his bottom lip firmly. His tears continued to fall but he kept going, passing every bucket Paddy handed him to the next man.

The slight breeze that’d been billowing their sails all day now worked against them, fanning the smoke over the men as they worked. Paddy’s eyes began to sting, the smoke watering them until he too looked like he was crying. Men closer to the hatches where the smoke billowed from were hacking, a handful falling to their knees until they were dragged away. He thought about the fate of the men who’d gone down to the powder store.

“More water!” the Captain shouted. Paddy fought the urge to roll his eyes. Of course, they needed more bleeding water.

A soldier ran past, his face terrified, his words frantic. “We’re losing her.”

Paddy’s stomach dropped. He’d hoped for death not that long ago but now he was standing at the gates of mortality he was afraid, and he didn’t want to go. He was so young and still so much he hadn’t experienced. He wanted to feel the grass beneath his feet once more, smell the spring flowers. He wanted to feel the kind of love Benjamin had for his Louisa. He wanted to know how it felt to want somebody in his arms more than the air he needed to breathe.

“Paddy!” the man to his right shouted. The roar of the fire, the thundering of his heartbeat, the screams of men as they fought the flames so loud now, he’d barely heard him. “Come on.”

Paddy reached for the next bucket and then the next. His arms ached so badly he was hardly able to lift them, but he kept going, because he wasn’t ready to die after all.

“They got the kegs, Captain, but their hands are burnt bad,” a guard shouted from the hatch to his right.

“Get them to the hospital and get the fire out,” the Captain ordered. Huddled behind him stood a mass of women, eager for the reassuring presence of their captain. Moxey might mete out stern rules and harsh punishment but he had an air of competence needed to assuage the fear of the ladies—and the men alike.

Paddy’s fear eased knowing at least they wouldn’t be blown to kingdom come by the powder kegs. But they still had a fire to put out. He looked out to the water wondering what it’d feel like to jump in. The ocean was so deep, and Paddy didn’t know how to swim. How far would he sink before his breath stopped? Were Jimmy’s monsters real? He had no craving to find out.

He couldn’t have said how long it took, but finally the all clear was given. The ship was saved. Paddy flopped to the deck, his back leaning against the bulkhead. His body shook with exhaustion, his arms aching, head pounding from breathing in the smoke. Jimmy sat beside him, his head resting on Paddy’s shoulder as he drifted to sleep.

“Paddy?”

He looked up to find Benjamin staring down at him. His face was pale, his skin sweat slicked and sooty.

“Ben. I didn’t know where you were.”

“Below. Everything’s a mess down there.”

Benjamin slid down to join Paddy. He reeked of smoke but then they all did. “You all right?”

“Yeah. I’m sorry about Frost.”

Paddy stilled as Ben’s words froze the blood in his veins. His trembling began anew. “Frost? What ‘bout ‘im?”

“He went below to get the powder kegs with some other balmy cove. They got ‘em out alright, but last I saw, Frost’s hands were a bloody mess.”

Paddy gently tilted Jimmy away from him and stood. “Where is he?”

“Hospital. Fire didn’t go near that end of the ship.”

Paddy ran. Most of the guards and crew were too busy with other chores to pay much attention to him as he made his way toward the hospital. Fear held his foot to the first rung as he considered descending into the heart of where fire had raged. His heart thumped in his chest wildly. He was sick with worry, achy from helping to put out the fire and exhausted from breathing in the smoke. He wondered if he’d feel any better once he got to Frost.

“You hurt, lad?” a guard asked as he approached the hospital.

“No, I ain’t.”

“Then you need to get outta ‘ere.”

“I was sent to help,” Paddy lied. The guard wouldn’t care much if Paddy wanted to see Frost with his own eyes, but if they needed help and Paddy was offering, maybe the guard would ignore the lie and let him through.

Black soot covered the guard’s face, his darkened skin glistening from sweat in the lamp light. The whites of his eyes stood out stark and terrified in the gloom. He’d look more monster than man, if not for the fear and exhaustion etched into his features. “Go on, then.”

The guard wearily stepped to the side. Perhaps he was too bloody tired to guard properly, easier to let Paddy on through. Or maybe he simply didn’t care anymore.

He stepped beyond the guard toward the door of the hospital, his hands shaking, his legs felt hollow and weak now his terror of dying by fire had drained from him. The hospital was a small sectioned off portion of the lower deck. The fire hadn’t touched it, yet the air still reeked of smoke. Lanterns blazed in every corner, but the low light did little to brighten the small space. Perhaps ten men might have fit inside in a pinch.

“Get that mixed up,” the surgeon shouted to an unknown man as Paddy walked into the small hospital room. Two men lay prone on the tiny cots lined against the hull wall. Both faces were black, eyes closed, only the pink of their lips showing. Low groans filled the silence as the surgeon sat beside one, wrapping the poor man’s hand in filthy rags.

In the dim lighting and with their faces covered in soot, Paddy picked out Frost only from his size. He crept closer, expecting at any moment to be dragged out. Frost lay on his back, eyes closed, his breath hitching every few moments, a grimace stealing across his features.

“Get on then, Lad. Cover his hands with the ointment,” surgeon Wyse called from where he was tending his other patient.

Paddy startled and turned to the old man. The surgeon nodded to a second man coming from behind a room divider to his left, a bowl in his outstretched hands. “Come on,” said the second man Paddy now recognised as McGregor, the ships assistant surgeon.

“Get it on his hands so as I can help surgeon,” McGregor continued when Paddy stared at him.

“I dunno—”

“Use the wool strips there and coat his hands,” Surgeon Wyse shouted.

Paddy reached for the wool strips and the bowl McGregor held out to him. He set them down on a small stool alongside Frost’s bed and then dragged a second stool over to sit on. He looked down at Frost’s arms resting on his stomach, palms down turned. The backs of his hands seemed fine, though it was hard to tell with the soot covering his skin. Paddy gently turned both of Frost’s hands. Here was the damage the man had sustained while saving them all.

Frost’s palms were a multitude of colours, blacks and reds mixed with the whites of his already blistering skin. He knew he must follow the surgeon’s instructions to help Frost yet the thought of touching the burnt flesh made him sick. He was terrified of causing more pain.

He laid Frost’s hands on his stomach and reached for a wool strip. He dipped it in the mixture he’d been given and then ever so gently dabbed the skin of Frost’s palms. Frost answered with a groan, his body flinching from Paddy’s touch.

“Easy,” Paddy whispered. His mouth filled with saliva as he watched the skin on Frosts’ hand peel away as he worked, the stench of burnt flesh roiling his stomach.

“Paddy?” Frost murmured.

“It’s me, Frost. I’m sorry.” He wasn’t sure if he was apologising for hurting him more with the ointment or for Frost getting burnt in the first place.

“Paddy,” Frost sighed, his voice drifting off and Paddy wondered if he’d fainted.

He kept dabbing the ointment. “What is this?” he asked aloud, not really expecting an answer.

“Linseed oil and lime-water,” Wyse absently answered as he continued working on his patient. “It’ll help with the pain. We’ll need to change their dressings daily. I’ve given them both morphia, but we don’t want to waste too—” Wyse cut himself off as though he suddenly realised what he was about to say.

Paddy understood perfectly. The surgeon was unwilling to waste morphine on convicts. Despite receiving a bonus for every man who made it alive to Van Diemen’s Land, the surgeon wasn’t going to risk precious morphine which may be needed for the worthy sailors or guards later in the voyage.

Paddy ignored him, concentrating instead on Frost’s damaged hands. Wyse’s patient began panting as the surgeon worked to dress his injuries. Maybe he’d been burnt worse than Frost, but then maybe he hadn’t. Though Frost winced with each dab, he bore his pain well.

After he'd covered both hands with the ointment, Paddy sat quietly beside Frost, unsure what to do next. He kept expecting a guard to come for him at any moment, but perhaps they were too busy with the aftermath of the fire.

“Are you well, little mouse?” Frost asked suddenly, surprising Paddy who'd been sure he'd fainted a while back.

Frost's eyes were open—barely—and he stared at Paddy as he spoke. The whites of his eyes stood out in stark contrast to the black of the soot and the natural dark colour of his eyes. Paddy wanted to throttle him.

“Me?” he replied with all the indignation he was able to muster. “I ain't the bloody fool who ran into the fire.”

Frost's lips curled into the amused grin Paddy seemed to provoke in the man. “Bloody fool,” Frost muttered, his eyes falling closed once more.

They remained silent for a while longer as Paddy waited for Wyse to come to tend to Frost. Instinctively Paddy's fingers sought the feel of Frost's body. He'd touched him only moments ago while tending his burns, but he needed to feel Frost whole and healthy.

He pressed only the very fingertips of his hand to Frost's upper arm. His skin was slick with sweat but he still felt strong—too strong to die. Paddy allowed his fingers to gently brush Frost's arm.

“Move on then, Lad,” McGregor said.

Paddy jumped, pulling his hand quickly away from Frost. He'd think about why he'd wanted to touch the man so much later.

“This is gonna hurt 'im,” Wyse said as he came to stand beside McGregor, the two of them standing over Frost.

“Hurt him?” Paddy muttered.

“Mm. His burns on his left hand are severe. Wrapping the dressings will cause considerable discomfort.”

Paddy stood and backed away, unsure if he had the courage to witness Frosts pain. Wyse and McGregor moved in to fill the space Paddy so recently left.

Frosts body was almost lost to sight as Wyse and McGregor stood over him.

“Easy, now,” Wyse said, leaning down to grip Frosts shoulder. “Easy.”

Murmured words were spoken but Paddy couldn’t make them out. Frost was becoming increasingly agitated, his body beginning to buck, his groans becoming louder.

“Hold his legs,” Wyse ordered, and McGregor moved to pin down Frost’s thrashing legs.

Paddy pushed passed the surgeon, dropping to his knees beside Frost’s bed. “Sh, Frost. Come now. The surgeon has to tend your burns.”

“Stay,” Frost whispered.

“I’ll stay if you keep still,” Paddy replied, hoping to bribe Frost into cooperation.

Frost opened his eyes a little wider, his gaze fixed on Paddy and he nodded. Paddy gently gripped Frost’s shoulder and the big man closed his eyes and relaxed.

“Good lad,” Wyse said.

Paddy ignored the surgeon, his focus solely on Frost. Sweat left tracks through the soot on his face making him look like he had a tiger pattern to his skin. His hair was a bedraggled mess. Through the soot and dirt and sweat, Frost still managed to look handsome.

“That’s it, lad. Keep ‘im calm,” Wyse spoke again, and again Paddy ignored him.

He kept his gaze away from where the surgeon was working on Frost’s hands, not wanting to see more of the blackened, burnt flesh. He whispered quietly to Frost whenever he made a sound or gave indication he was agitated. Mostly he simply kept his hand on Frost’s shoulder, so he’d know Paddy was there.

“Thought he’d be stronger,” McGregor said after a while.

“Didn’t give him enough morphia. He’s a big man, he needed more than the other,” Wyse replied.

“Heard ‘bout this one on the Asia. They say he saved Curzon and all the others. Damn shame he ended up here.”

“Damn shame,” Wyse said, gritting the words out as he worked, “he had the father he did.”

Paddy listened as the surgeon and his assistant spoke. What had happened to Frost on the Asia and what had been so wrong with the man’s father? Curiosity rippled through him. He’d give anything to know Frost better.

“There now,” Wyse said, “He’s all wrapped up. He should be able to sleep some now.” Wyse stood back, assessing his work and from the satisfaction on his face, obviously pleased with himself.

“You best get back now,” McGregor said to Paddy who still knelt at Frosts’ side. The notion of leaving Frost alone in the small dark hospital made him feel all hollow inside like his insides had been scooped out. Paddy didn’t understand himself around Frost.

“Can I stay a little longer?”

“There’s work to do, lad. Whole damn ship almost burnt down. You best get up and see where yer wanted,” Wyse answered.

“I can come back?”

“I’ll speak to the captain,” Wyse said in dismissal.

Paddy spared a last look at Frost, who slept peacefully now his hands had been tended to. He’d give anything to stay but he wasn’t a free man. What he wanted to do and what he had to do were largely two different things these days.

He made his way back up to the deck. By now the panic amongst the men had subsided, though a palpable undercurrent of nerves ran through convict and sailor alike. He headed to the spot where he’d left Benjamin and Jimmy, he wasn’t sure how long ago. Time meant nothing on this ship

“Over with the rest, scum,” a guard snarled in his ear, the barrel of his musket pressed between Paddy’s shoulder blades.

Paddy didn’t answer him, didn’t acknowledge him in any way other than to do as he’d ordered. He walked to where many of the convicts lulled on the deck, surrounded by guards armed with muskets. They weren’t all here and Paddy didn’t know if that meant some had died or they were still helping below with the ship.

“Paddy. Good Christ, where ya been?” Benjamin asked as he joined the group.

“Hospital. I saw Frost.”

“He all right?”

“Burnt ‘is hands. Bad.”

“He’s a bloody hero,” Benjamin said. “’im and that Schofield got the gun powder out. Barrels must have been scorching hot.”

Paddy nodded. No one had been able to tell him what crime Frost committed to get himself transported. He’d seen nothing but goodness in the man.

All around the guarded convicts, sailors ran to and fro. Loud banging echoed from below deck as repairs were hastily made. Paddy hadn’t seen the damage the fire had wrought on *George III* but as the day stretched on, he imagined it must be severe.

The heat from the blazing sun barely eased as day turned to night. The assembled convicts were offered no water, but then Paddy noticed the sailors rarely stopped to take refreshment themselves. Occasionally, a handful of convicts were taken below, coming back some time later dripping sweat and reeking of smoke.

“You lot,” a guard called while waving his musket to indicate the small group Paddy sat with. “On yer feet.”

They stood and followed the guard. Moonlight brightened the deck enough for Paddy to see the weary faces of sailors as they passed by. Several slept curled in whatever small spaces of room they’d found on

deck. Paddy and his group of convicts were marched to one of the hatchways and ordered down the ladder.

Past the prison deck and down to the hold they ambled, the stench of smoke stronger the closer they got to where fire had scarred their ship. The ceiling down here was lower even than the prison deck. Paddy was not a tall man, but even he wasn't able to stand upright.

Sacks and crates were pushed down one end of the space. Closer to the hatch was a pile of indistinguishable items charred by the fire.

"Listen up, men," one of the officers cried, "haul this mess on deck and toss it over."

One after another they approached the pile to grab an armful of debris and began the slow journey back up to the deck. Benjamin was ahead of Paddy, and Jimmy behind. Paddy wondered how the small ten-year-old would possibly manage his task, but then he hadn't faltered when he'd helped in the bucket line earlier.

When his turn came, Paddy pushed Jimmy ahead of him. If the young boy struggled at least Paddy would be behind him to lend a hand. He thought of Frost down here, flames licking all around him as he struggled to move the powder barrels, the heat burning his hands. Had he been afraid? Why had he saved them all?

"I'm all right, Paddy," Jimmy murmured to him as he turned with his burden loaded into his small, thin arms.

"I'm just watching yer back, Jimmy."

The boy smiled and Paddy had never seen him look so young. He'd spoken to the lad many times but didn't know anything much about him.

Paddy leaned down to grab a load of debris. Brittle wood and twisted ruins of metal filled his arms. He held the weight awkwardly, his nose curling at the stench. He walked carefully toward the ladder, Jimmy a few steps in front.

How was the boy supposed to climb the ladder with his bundle? How were any of them meant to?

“Jimmy,” Paddy called, “I’ll take yer load while you climb up. Then I’ll pass it up to you.”

The small boy nodded, his arms already trembling under the weight of his load. “All right, Paddy.”

Paddy carefully dropped the debris he carried and took Jimmy’s bundle. He watched as the boy climbed the ladder then climbed after him almost to the top. He passed the load up before heading back down to collect his own.

Climbing the ladder was awkward and difficult with his arms full but he managed, helping Jimmy at each ladder until they finally made it back to the deck. For what felt like hours they continued in this way until the pile of debris was finally cleared. Only then were the weary men allowed to resume their hammocks—unfed and only a few mouthfuls of water—to try to sleep.

Paddy lay awake, his mind churning with the events of the day. He’d been so happy in that one moment with Frost on the deck as they’d watched the dolphins before everything had turned awful. He’d been scared when the roar of ‘fire’ had first been bellowed, but that fear was nothing to how he’d felt when he’d learned Frost had been the one to fetch the powder barrels and been hurt for his trouble. The tall, quiet man had become a

staple in his life, a source of comfort Paddy hadn't even realised he'd needed until he'd nearly lost it.

"Paddy, you sleepin'?" Benjamin asked.

"Nah."

"Me neither."

"You all right?" he asked Benjamin because he'd been sick earlier and in the chaos Paddy had forgotten.

"I'm a' right." Benjamin drew in a loud breath. "We nearly died," he said sounding younger and more afraid than Paddy had ever heard him.

"Yeah."

"Least we didn't end up in the water with 'em monsters," Jimmy's small voice added. He slept in a hammock alongside Benjamin and obviously wasn't sleeping either.

"They ain't monsters, Jimmy," Paddy began. "There's dolphins and they're wonderful."

"Not the dolphins, Paddy. Me da used to be a sailor and he told us 'bout the sharks. He said they'd eat a man whole."

Of course, Paddy had heard tales of sharks so big they'd dwarf the biggest of men. But eating a man whole? The notion was terrifying.

"You didn't say yer dad was a sailor," Paddy replied, ignoring the shark comment and hoping to distract Jimmy.

"He were," the boy whispered. Perhaps talking about the family he'd never see again wasn't the best way to divert the young boys' attention.

“Ma said he were a good man who didn’t deserve what he got. But me ma’s good too and she were left with six young uns’ to feed and no husband.”

“Is that why you picked pockets?” Convicts generally tried to keep their crimes secret from others, whether from shame or, on occasion, to give the impression of being more grandiose, Paddy wasn’t certain. Henry Bothill told all who’d listen he was a type of Robin Hood who gave away what he stole to the poor. Yet, it turned out not to be true at all. He’d been nabbed for being a *bearer-up* and hadn’t even shared what he stole with the woman who aided him.

“Yeah. It was easy to *buz* some of ‘em toffs. Too busy in their fairyland to notice what was what around ‘em. And we didn’t have no chink and all those mouths ta feed... Me poor ma near died when I was nibbed.”

“You did yer best, Jimmy,” Benjamin added.

“Don’t matter none now. Won’t never see any of ‘em again.”

Paddy was at a loss what to say. Paddy would never see Molly again, but he was a man. Here was a ten-year-old child facing a life of misery on the other side of the world from his entire family.

“I’m real sorry, Jimmy.”

“Ain’t yer fault, Paddy.” The boy yawned. “Only ‘ope me brother Reggie ain’t daft enough to start buzzing folk. Ma couldn’t stand to lose another.”

This day had been long and difficult. Despite the heaviness in his bones, the weariness tugging at his lids, Paddy’s eyes wouldn’t close. Images from the day swam through his head. His feelings tumbled through him: happiness, terror, sadness. Seven years of this life he had to look

forward to and after not quite seven weeks he was already exhausted. He'd never survive.

CHAPTER SEVEN

PADDY

“Man’s going to be the death of us all,” Surgeon Wyse muttered as he pushed passed Paddy in the passageway.

Three days had passed since fire tore through the ship almost sending them all to a watery death. Since aiding in the clean-up of the vessel the convicts had been kept locked down on the prison deck while more repairs were made. Paddy was almost insane with the need to get out of the dark to breathe fresh air by the time the officer of the watch set them free from the prison deck a short time ago.

Paddy had asked if he could visit Frost in the hospital. Fortunately, Officer Steele was one of the kinder of the guards. He’d allowed Paddy to venture up to the hospital where he’d found the small room locked up. Even with his ear to the door, he’d heard not a sound from the room within.

Possibly he should have headed straight up to the deck for his exercise, but he’d chosen to wait with the hope of the surgeon or his assistant returning. He’d leant against the wall, taking the time to consider why he was so eager to check on Frosts’ condition, until Wyse had blundered by him.

“Well?” the surgeon thundered.

“I came to see Frost, sir.”

Wyse eyed him as though he’d never laid eyes on him before despite the man nursing him to health after his seasickness and Paddy assisting him with Frost only days ago. “Come on, then,” he finally allowed. Men such as Paddy were invisible to the likes of Wyse and others of means and standing.

Frost was on the same cot as Paddy had last seen him on, his back turned to the hospital entry as he lay curled on his side. Paddy approached quietly, not wanting to wake the sleeping man. He stood over him, watching the slow rise and fall of Frost's chest. The simple movement sparked hope somewhere deep inside Paddy. He felt better seeing the evidence that Frost yet breathed.

There was little comfort in Paddy's life these days, but Frost's presence eased his mind, somehow reassured him there was still a slender chance that everything would be all right. Frost had always *seen* Paddy, looked *at* him not through him.

"He's healing well," Wyse said. Paddy hadn't even noticed the man step up beside him.

"His hands...?"

"They'll be fine, lad. Strong as an ox, this one."

Paddy turned to look at the frowning face of the ship's surgeon. He appeared troubled but had said Frost would be fine. What was bothering him then?

"Who's going to be the death of us, sir?" Paddy asked, remembering Wyse's muttered utterings a few moments ago.

The surgeon blew out a breath and scratched at his beard. "I suppose you'll hear of it soon enough." Wyse wasn't a big man but had a bearing of importance that seemed to take up much of the space about him. He took a few steps away from Paddy and then sank into a chair which groaned under the burden of the surgeon's weight.

“I asked the captain to put in at Cape Town to replenish the stores we lost in the fire. He has refused my request and we shall sail on at half rations for all hands.”

Paddy winced at Wyse’s words. What little food they were allowed now was hardly enough to keep their bodies strong. Losing half would be a disaster for some. For the rest, their journey would be plagued by the constant gnaw of hunger tormenting them almost to the point of madness.

“We’ll have scurvy on our hands for certain,” Wyse mumbled more to himself than to Paddy.

Later, when he was back in his hammock on the prison deck with not even a window to allow in the cool night breeze, when all others were asleep and he was alone with his thoughts, Paddy would allow himself to fret about scurvy. For now, while he was with Frost, he’d push the worry down and try to bring some comfort to his friend.

“A good thing you’re here, lad. I’m about to change his dressings.”

Paddy wanted to excuse himself and leave the old surgeon to it. He had no interest in again seeing the damage the searing flames had done to Frost’s skin, but what kind of coward would he be to leave Frost when he needed him.

He grabbed a stool and sat at Frost’s side while Wyse pottered about the small hospital collecting the tools he required for his task. Frost stirred at the noise the old man made but made no attempt to roll over or open his eyes. The second victim likewise remained still and silent on the cot adjacent to Frost’s, Paddy hardly gave him a thought. He was grateful to the man, but his attention was all drawn to Frost.

“Right, lad. You get ready to hold him, should he start thrashing about,” Wyse said as he moved to take his place beside Paddy. “Come on, Frost, let’s get on with it.”

“Already?” Frost muttered but didn’t move.

“That’s right, now. Show me your hands.”

Frost rolled to his back, his eyes eventually landing on Paddy. “Little mouse?”

“Hey. I came to see ya.”

“You aren’t hurt?” Frost asked, his hands reaching for him as though he were going to pet him all over to be certain.

“I ain’t. I told yer I wasn’t.”

“I cannot remember,” Frost answered, a frown on his handsome face. Paddy wondered if he had a wife. Surely women had fallen all over themselves for Frost, as handsome as he was. He’d never given it much thought before and didn’t much like thinking of it now.

“Talk to him, lad, while I dress his hands,” Wyse advised.

Paddy turned his back a little, so he couldn’t see what the doctor was doing and focussed his attention firmly on Frost.

“D’ya remember what yer done?” he asked.

“Not rightly. I remember bits and pieces of the fire. Surgeon here tells me I went down to get the powder barrels.”

“You did—”

“And you called me a bloody fool for it,” Frost interrupted with a smile on his face.

“I did.”

“Not many would dare call me a fool, little mouse.”

“I thought we agreed my name is Paddy,” he replied with a grin of his own. “And I’ll call ya a fool if ya deserve it.”

Frost did something then Paddy never expected—or had heard before. He laughed. A full and proper laugh. The sound was musical and set off little flutters in Paddy’s belly. He liked hearing Frosts laughter more than he could explain.

“Hold still, now,” Wyse shouted over the noise of Frost’s amusement.

Frost’s smile morphed into a grimace as Wyse worked on his hands. Paddy would give anything to see Frost happy again.

“Talk to me, Paddy,” Frost murmured.

Paddy ignored the scraping sound coming from where Wyse was cleaning Frosts burnt hands and concentrated on occupying Frost’s mind. “Why don’t you talk to me? Tell me somethin’ ‘bout you.”

Frost watched him for a moment, his eyes hardening like flint before softening once more. “I had a horse once called Henry the Eighth.”

“Why’d you call ‘im that?”

“Because he was always getting in amongst the mares. Couldn’t seem to get enough of the females. Seemed like a fitting name.”

Paddy laughed. “I had a dog once, called ‘im Hyperion cause he was always fightin’ with his sire.”

“You know quite a bit of mythology.”

“I ain’t glocky. I had an education til my pa died. Then Mr Heller let me read in ‘is bookshop some nights. He was a decent old stick. I read all ‘bout everything you can imagine.”

“I’ve never thought of you as dim-witted, Paddy.” Frost spoke in a quiet tone of absolute authority, so Paddy didn’t doubt the candour of his words for a moment. “You’d have enjoyed the library at my—”

“Go on,” Paddy encouraged when Frost faltered.

“My father had an extensive library. I spent many nights curled before the fire, my mother reading to me when I was young and then I read to her when her eyesight began to fail.”

“You were rich?”

“My father had money,” Frost sneered. Whatever had transpired between father and son, it was clear that Frost had no love for the man.

Paddy knew he was getting close to a world Frost kept hidden from everyone. He wondered how much closer Frost would allow him to get. “Are they still alive?”

“No.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I am sorry about your Zeke,” Frost said in response.

“He weren’t mine.”

“I know, but you loved him. He was your nephew and you were willing to sacrifice for him—you did sacrifice for him.” Frost had previously heard the tale of Paddy’s woe and how he’d ended up being put away and sent to Van Diemen’s Land for seven years.

“Do you have children?” Paddy asked and received another of Frosts’ full-bodied laughs as an answer.

“No, mercifully,” Frost finally managed to answer.

“All done. Now you’d best get some rest, Frost. Your friend here has you livelier than I’ve yet seen, and you need rest not excitement,” Wyse interrupted.

“A little longer?” Paddy asked, not wanting to go now Frost was finally opening up to him.

“No. You can come again tomorrow, but Frost needs rest. Burns are a nasty business and we don’t want to risk him.”

“All right,” Paddy replied and then turned back to Frost. “Would you like me to come again tomorrow?”

“I would.”

“Very well. I’ll see you then.”

Paddy left with little more fanfare. He felt the weight of Frosts stare on his back as he went. He couldn’t explain why Frost seemed to like having him around nor why he wanted to be around Frost so much. They seemed to be like magnets, simply drawn to each other.

Paddy went back the next day and then the next. They didn’t talk a lot, mostly Paddy simply sat with him while Frost slept. When they did talk it was usually Frost asking Paddy what was happening in the rest of the ship. Frost and his past seemed to be a forbidden topic once more.

He visited Frost daily until the surgeon finally released him from the hospital. Frosts’ hands were mostly healed, though he was to return each

day to have the linseed oil and lime water applied. New skin was replacing the charred burns and Frosts pain seemed to have greatly eased.

Two weeks after Frost's release from hospital the first case of scurvy struck, exactly as Wyse had predicted.

Perry Dawes complained loudly and frequently of feeling ill and having a sore body. Paddy watched his deterioration each day. His skin became dried and scaly, his eyes bulged as though they may pop out of his head. Most of the convicts had a skeletal look to them after so many weeks at sea, but Perry Dawes looked like a cadaver after recently clawing its way out of the earth in which it'd been buried.

Dawes had been taken to the hospital this morning and rumours spread within hours that scurvy had him in its vicious maw and was slowly devouring the man.

"What'd he look like?" Paddy asked Frost after he returned from having his hands dressed by Wyse.

"He's not good, little mouse." Frost was leaning on the rail of the ship, the setting sun behind him appearing like a ball of fire hissing as it touched the ocean on the far horizon.

"He'll die?"

"Likely," Frost mumbled, his gaze focused somewhere over Paddy's shoulder. "You eat everything they give you, Paddy."

Paddy would have laughed if not for the seriousness of Frosts expression. He got little enough to eat so there was no chance he'd pass on anything he was given. "I'd eat the bowl if it weren't so hard," he replied, smiling as he spoke.

Frost nodded, apparently satisfied with his answer, but did not smile at his joke. His face was creased with worry, his eyes intense as they held Paddy's while demanding his assurance.

Two days later Perry Dawes died.

CHAPTER EIGHT

FROST

There was nothing else for it. He must steal the food Paddy would need if he were to avoid scurvy on this accursed voyage. Moxey's foolishness in not replenishing their supplies at Cape Town would take a heavy toll upon the convicts. Indeed, the lack of food was already having an impact upon the unfortunate prisoners.

Frost had witnessed the devastating effects of scurvy over the years and possessed no desire to see it again, especially in Paddy. If he retained any sense, he would keep his distance and not worry over the young man, but good sense had apparently fled him.

Despite his current circumstances, Frost was no criminal. He had no experience or knowledge of the act of stealing. But what more could be done to him? Short of death there was little more the crown could take from him. He felt the risk worth it if stealing food would keep Paddy alive, because perhaps by preventing Paddy's death he might go a short distance to assuage the guilt he felt over Daniel's. The second death on his conscience weighed little upon him.

His advantage in his criminal endeavour was that he knew the layout of the ship. Though the *George III* bore little resemblance to the warship *Asia*, there were certain similarities. Food would be housed in similar barrels and in the same area of the ship. All Frost needed to do was make his way down to the hold, unobserved, and pocket a few extra morsels.

Of course, what the men needed most was fresh fruits and vegetables, but Frost was as likely to pull the stars from the sky as lay his

hands on treasure of that kind. Steele was a good enough sort of fellow and was the most likely of the guards to allow Frost a measure of freedom to make his way to the hold. He'd need a ruse, some excuse to be freed from the prison deck without guard.

Perhaps he might tell Steele that his burns were troubling him and request a visit to Wyse. Of course, his burns were healing quite well by now, but Steele did not need to know that.

The sea breeze blew across the deck, the salty air once as alluring as cologne to Frost. He'd loved the ocean before Daniel's death. He still missed days on a ship. Of course, he spent every moment of his life on a ship these days, but this wasn't the same. He was not free to enjoy sailing. Circumstances aboard were dire, so much so that he was unable to relish being once more upon the ocean. And as always, memories of Daniel accosted him at every moment. If he were here, Daniel would counsel him to remember the good times, but Daniel was not here and without him, Frost was lost.

Across the pen, Paddy stood against the rail, Benjamin at his side, Jimmy was with them as usual. They reminded Frost of three brothers, banded together to face whatever the world might throw at them. Frost would give anything to be a part of their camaraderie. He had no siblings, only a cousin he'd once been close with, but who'd tossed him aside once Frost had been arrested.

"Still tryin' to be the hero, Frost?" Peter Mander sidled beside him, foul breath ghosting over Frost's face. Frost only gave Mander a quick glance before turning away from him.

"Don't see why you'd risk your life with those powder kegs. You coulda survived no matter what. Got in a cutter and be gone before she

blew.”

Of course, Mander wouldn't understand honour and decency, he possessed neither of those qualities. Frost remained silent. He had no interest in conversing with Peter Mander, or indeed most of the other convicts. He was certain many here deserved their fate, but still others such as Paddy, should still be free.

“In fact, I was just saying to old Parrish, you'd be a fine man to have on side in a fight.”

“What is it you want, Mander?” Frost asked, fed up with Mander's presence.

“A few of us are thinking it might be best if we don't make it to Van Diemen's land...if you know what I mean.”

“I do,” Frost replied, “And I am not interested.”

“All we wanna know is, can we count on your assistance?”

“You cannot.”

Mander glared at him. “A mistake to be sure.”

“Unlikely.” Mander was a fool. Frost had met many such men over the years. Men who believed themselves courageous and smart, but who in fact were the worst kind of cowardly fools. A man did not need to puff himself up by harming others. A man knew his worth without having to seek it in the misery of others.

“You'll not say a word of this,” Mander continued, “Or your little mouse there might end up goin' for a swim.”

Frost tensed but said nothing. To react would be to prove to Mander that Paddy may be his weakness. Better to appear nonchalant to his threat to Paddy in the hopes Mander might believe the young man meant nothing to him.

Aside from his distaste at Mander's company, Frost had work to do. He needed to get extra scraps of food if he wanted Paddy to remain at least somewhat healthy.

“Allow me to make this quite clear for you, Mr Mander. You stay away from me, and I will happily stay out of your way.”

Mander glared at him a moment longer before turning away. Frost thought the man would leave him, but he turned a last time, sneering as he said, “Remember I warned ya.”

Frost did his best to remain unmoved by Mander's threats. In truth he was unafraid for himself, but Mander hadn't threatened him. Paddy was the one who'd pay if Mander felt at all intimidated by Frost.

He waited until Mander had moved to the other side of the pen before approaching Steele. “Mr Steele?”

“What is it Frost?”

“I wonder if I might see Surgeon Wyse for a moment? My burns are paining me.”

Steele, as many others on board, had been grateful to Frost for getting the powder kegs away from the flames. He'd thanked Frost twice since his release from hospital. Frost was hoping the gratitude he felt might extend long enough for Steele to allow him below.

“Go on. Quick now,” Steele answered, his gaze on Frosts’ hands. “How are you healing?” he added.

“Quite well, thank you. Only pains every now and then.”

Steele watched him a moment longer before opening the pen gate and nodding for him to pass. Frost made directly for the hatch, not bothering to look back at the convicts. He wasn’t overly worried about them wondering what he might be up to.

He encountered no one on the first deck. Most of the crew were hard at work, those not on duty were resting before they were required to report for duty. He crept away from the hatchway leading to the prison deck. The guards would certainly stop him and question his presence.

Instead, he made his way to the mess. At this time the cooks would be preparing for the afternoon meal. They’d be busy and hopefully less inclined to notice him loitering about. he only needed a moment to slip an extra piece of bread into his pocket, or perhaps a carrot. Whatever he managed would have to do, he could not afford to be too particular about what he stole.

As he neared the galley, he heard voices talking and laughing, a few humming as they worked. A half wall offered some protection from the men working to prepare the meal. Frost kept his back to the wall, carefully sliding along to try to get a better view of where the food barrels might be.

A quick glance told him they must be lined along the other side of the wall at his back. Getting to them would be difficult but necessary. He’d often been told he had a silver tongue, but how could he possibly explain his presence here—let alone finagle food from them if he were caught.

Another peek showed him three men working with their backs mostly to him. One was at a table carving and chopping whatever culinary delights the convicts had to look forward to. Two more stood over a large pot, their faces, from the side view Frost had of them, serious, as though the fate of the world rested upon their shoulders.

“A little more carrot p’raps just to thicken it up?” The larger of the men said, voice terse and gruff.

“Moxey said no. Ain't got much left and it's ta go to the crew first.”

“Bollocks. Fool man shoul'da put in at Cape Town like old Wyse wanted 'im to.”

“Everybody but Moxey knows that, Gibbons, but ours isn't ta question them that are above us.”

“We bloody well need to. Who do ya think'll be next? Moxey and his officers'll be well fed all the way to Van Diemen's Land, but he don't care much more about us than the bleedin' convicts.”

Frost listened as the men's voices raised with their fear and anger. He stepped quickly and quietly around the corner, hoping they'd be too consumed with their argument to notice him. He squatted low, knees aching, and did his best to stay close to the barrels as he inched toward the nearest one. Whatever was inside would do as a supplement to Paddy's woefully insufficient rations.

His heart pounded in his chest, loud enough he thought for sure the men would hear it even over their growing argument. Despite his current situation and what he'd done to get here, Frost was not a criminal. He'd never stolen in his life, never broken the law, save for the one time which led him here.

A small measure of good fortune was afforded to him when he realised the lids were off the barrels. At least he wouldn't have to attempt to pry them off in silence. Keeping his back to the barrel, he pushed upwards until he was almost standing.

His hands shook as he reached behind, fumbling until his fingers closed around bread. Hard and brittle, it would nonetheless serve Paddy well. The lad was too skinny, he had nothing to him he could afford to lose.

Grabbing as much as he dared, Frost kept his gaze fixed on the cooks, expecting at any moment for them to turn about and catch him with his hands quite literally in the breadbasket.

As he squatted back down, he willed his heart to cease thundering against his chest. He crept back toward the wall; bread safely ensconced in his shirt. Once he reached the corner, the twitching in his legs began to ease, his breath slowing. He was safe.

Before heading back to the deck, he took a moment to ensure the bread was well hidden. He flattened the hard dough as much as possible to disguise any giveaway bulges in his clothes.

Good fortune stayed with him on his return to the deck as he encountered no one. Now he only needed to wait for the opportune time to pass his stolen cargo onto Paddy—and prepare himself to regularly repeat the process if he wanted Paddy to live.

PADDY

'Nother one gone, Paddy,' Jimmy whispered as he took his seat in the mess.

“How many’s that now?” Benjamin asked having heard the young boy.

“Eight. And four more already taken to hospital.” Scurvy was doing the rounds of *George III*, striking down several of the already weak convicts. But the disease did not discriminate. Two officers had taken ill just last week, though they seemed to be on the mend. Not even the illness of his officers had convinced Moxey to put in somewhere to replenish supplies. Van Diemen’s Land was calling him, and the captain meant to make it there will all due speed, regardless of the cost to lives on board.

“Well, at least we can’t be like Aesop’s mouse,” Paddy mused as he let the gruel run from his spoon to slop back into the bowl.

“What’s Aesop’s mouse, Paddy?” Jimmy asked, wide, curious eyes focused on Paddy.

“Aesop’s mouse were hungry, just as we are, Jim. But he were greedy. He found ‘isself a corn basket and pushed ‘is puny little body through a hole in it. And he gorged and gorged on the corn until he were as round as ya grans ball o yarn and couldna get back out.

“T’were a weasel standing close by who laughed and laughed at the poor mouse. The weasel told the mouse he oughtna been so greedy and mayhap he wouldna be stuck so.”

Paddy looked at his bowl of gruel. This slop he’d thought barely fit for the pigs in the sty Father Cambridge kept, was all that stood between him and scurvy. The salted meat was all but gone. Paddy couldn’t remember what fresh food looked like let alone the taste. Hunger had become his constant companion, shadowing him every second of every day.

“So, we ain’t to be greedy, Paddy?”

Nodding distractedly, Paddy said, “Aye, Jimmy. Not that we ‘ave much choice ‘ere. Ain’t enough food on the whole ship to make as round and plump.” He smiled as he looked at the boy.

“Here,” Frost said as he took the seat beside Paddy and shoved a chunk of stale bread into his bowl.

“Where’d you get it?”

“Never mind. Just eat it.”

Despite the many questions he had, Paddy ignored them all and stuffed the bread into his mouth. Hard and tasteless, it was still the best thing he’d eaten in weeks. Frost had offered little extras over the weeks: stale bread, extra tiny portions of gruel, two or three straps of salted meat before it had run out. Usually, Paddy shared them with Benjamin and Jimmy, giving them perhaps an extra mouthful or two each. From Frost’s scowls he suspected he wasn’t pleased Paddy was sharing the certainly stolen food, but Paddy’s conscience wouldn’t allow him to do otherwise.

Other than hunger, boredom was a convict’s feckless friend on this journey. Paddy lived for the two hours a day spent exercising on deck and sharing meals in the mess. These were the only times he had any sense of still being human. The remainder of the time he wore fetters of tedium locked in the dark, bloody heat of the prison deck and felt more animal than man.

“It will not keep the scurvy from you, but it’ll give you strength,” Frost murmured as Paddy ate the bread.

“How’s yer hands?” Benjamin asked.

Frost held his hands up, palms facing Benjamin. The skin was pink and new, and looked tender. Paddy gently stroked his fingertips over Frost's healed flesh. He felt smooth skin beneath. Beside him, Frost shivered.

"Sorry," Paddy murmured thinking he'd hurt him.

"Do not be," Frost whispered.

"You was a sailor, Mr Frost?" Jimmy asked. For weeks they'd been around each other, but the boy had been too afraid to speak to Frost, despite Paddy's assurance the man wouldn't bite.

"I was."

"Me pa was a sailor. P'raps you knew him?" The boy asked hopefully.

"There's plenty of sailors, Jimmy." Frost smirked. "What's his name?"

"Colin Elliot, sir."

"Mm," Frost murmured, giving an expression as though he was searching his memory. "Knew an Elliot once. Damn fine sailor. Couldn't say his Christian name though. Might have been your pa."

"Reckon it was. He were killed on 'is ship. Some big battle, me ma says, but she didn't know much about it."

Paddy had known Jimmy's father was dead but not the circumstances.

"You been in a battle, Mr Frost?" Jimmy asked after a few moments silence.

"I have."

“Were it bad?”

Paddy leaned closer. He wished he'd found the courage to ask Frost such direct questions himself, but now that Jimmy had, he was curious to hear his answers.

Frost looked at his bowl of food, and then flicked a glance at Paddy before saying, “Very bad, Jimmy.”

“You saw men dead?”

“Some,” Frost answered, his gaze clouding over as though his memories were darkening his soul.

“Reckon some rain may be coming,” Benjamin interjected, catching Paddy's eye as he did and giving him a small nod.

“Hope it comes when we're on deck. Cool us down right good,” Paddy replied. They looked at each other, Benjamin raising his eyebrows at him.

An awkward silence fell around them. Frost caught in his memories, Jimmy looking between each of their faces as he tried to understand the exchange, and Benjamin and Paddy rooting around in their minds for conversation more interesting than the weather and less troubling than dead men and war.

“Come on, Jimmy,” Benjamin eventually said. “Our turn to clean the utensils.” They stood, Jimmy giving one last glance to Frost before following Benjamin toward the galley.

“Frost?” Paddy asked once they'd left.

“Mm,” he muttered half-heartedly.

“Are you all right?”

Frost finally turned to look at him, his stormy eyes struggling to focus. His skin beaded with sweat, hands trembling. Paddy wondered what horrible memories might be frolicking through Frost’s mind.

“My...friend was killed at Navarino. A lot of men were killed.”

“What happened?” Paddy didn’t know anything about Navarino but assumed it to be a battle Frost had been involved in.

“Do you know what Navarino was?”

“No.”

“We were supposed to be there to aid Greek independence from the Ottomans. The French and Russians were with us. Admiral Codrington was the Commander-in-Chief aboard *the Asia*. My ship.

“There was an incident and Codrington opened fire on the *Fahti Bahri*. We destroyed her in twenty minutes,” Frost continued almost wistfully. “A man was sent to the *Guerrie* to parley, but he was shot dead as soon as he stepped on board. Then the *Guerrie* opened fire. We took heavy fire from smaller Ottoman boats in the second and third line and Dan... Daniel was hit. Blown to bits right beside me.”

“I’m so sorry,” Paddy whispered, gently squeezing Frost’s clammy hand where it rested on the table.

“He was so young and brave and beaut—There wasn’t much left of him afterwards.”

“Frost—”

Frost cleared his throat and took a breath. “Nothing to say, Little Mouse. Life is what it is, and we aren’t given more than we can bear.”

“I don’t know if I believe that,” Paddy whispered.

“You think you cannot bear this?” Frost cast his hands around to encompass the mess of the ship and beyond.

“How can anyone bear this?”

“Because we must.” Frost suddenly grabbed his arms, turning him so they faced each other. “We must bear whatever we are required to, Paddy. It is foolish to think otherwise.”

Paddy felt as though one of the great ocean waves had broken upon him. His heart pounded, his body shook as all the pain and terror forced its way to Paddy’s surface. “Zeke and your Daniel. So many others dying so young and horribly. Years to face as nothing more than slaves to be beaten at another man’s whim. No freedom, no joy. We have nothing, Frost. We are nothing.”

Frost shook him, his grip tightening. “You are not nothing, never nothing. Seven years, Paddy. Seven. That’s all you’ve got to make it through and then you’re free and you will be all right. You will be.”

“What about you?” Paddy murmured. He didn’t even know how many years Frost had been transported for, wasn’t sure he wanted to because either way Paddy would lose him at some point. Either they’d be separated when Frost’s time was up or when Paddy’s was. For some reason the idea of that separation drilled another hole in his chest to be filled with nothing but pain.

“Paddy. I’m here for life,” Frost replied in a stern but resigned tone.

“No.”

“You don’t get less than life for murder. It’s a miracle I didn’t swing.”

“Murder,” Paddy whispered. This man who was so kind to him, who had been close to tears when remembering a fallen friend and who had risked his life to save them all had killed someone? Paddy couldn’t reconcile the notion.

“Still got yer little pet, Frost?” a voice came from the darkened corner of the mess and then Mander, the man Paddy had hit weeks ago, stepped into a shaft of light. His giant friend only steps behind him.

Frost tensed, but his hands remained on Paddy’s arms, his navy eyes turning obsidian as he glanced at the two men.

“One day yer waint be there and I’ll have ‘im all to meself,” Mander snarled, leaning in closer. “But don’t ye worry, I’ll give him back to ya... maybe not in one piece, mind.” His giant friend laughed, Mander joining in.

Paddy had mostly forgotten about the altercation with Mander and, perhaps naively, thought he had too.

Frost stood, the bench he’d been sitting on scraping backwards along the wooden floor with Paddy still on it. Mander took a step away, backing into his giant friend. The laughter dried up, replaced with a tension Paddy felt thickening the air around them. He stood, wanting to feel as a part of this exchange as the other three men.

“Not a finger will be laid on him, Mander. Not by you, or anybody,” Frost stated as though he’d spoken the simplest thought in the world.

Mander wouldn't look at him and his big friend seemed to shrink as Frost stood there staring them down.

After a pregnant pause Mander nodded, attempted a smile and said very quietly, "We'll see."

Frost stood so still, like one of the statues Paddy had seen dotted about London. Paddy wasn't even sure if the man was breathing. "Stay away from him, Paddy," Frost eventually murmured after Mander and his giant skulked away.

Paddy had no intention of going anywhere near either of them. He'd seen them around over the months on board, of course, but they moved in different circles. He was more than pleased to keep it that way.

When Frost relaxed and turned back to him, his handsome face was etched with such pain it took Paddy's breath away. He knew he'd missed his chance to find out more about Frost's crime, but he didn't care. All he wanted right then was the sorrow Frost wore like a mask to be gone.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Liar," Paddy replied, smiling a little.

Frost's lips twisted into the barest hint of a returning smile, his eyes lightening once more. "I will be all right if you stay out of trouble, little mouse."

"I ain't goin' lookin' for it."

"And yet trouble seems to find you." Frost's expression twisted into curiosity as though he found Paddy a puzzle, one he was unable to solve—much the same way Paddy thought of Frost.

As they stared at each other the ship around them disappeared, the constant noise of three hundred men, women and children crammed onto a small boat quietened. For a single moment in time, there was only the two of them. Two men equally confounded by each other and yet drawn together. Paddy had never kissed, or been kissed by, anybody, but his body drifted towards Frost and he knew if they were really alone, he'd have kissed him right this second.

“C'mon, Paddy, Mr Frost. We got our time on deck now,” Jimmy called, breaking the spell.

“Coming, Jimmy,” Paddy answered, the first one to collect his thoughts. He dragged his gaze from Frost and walked by him to follow Jimmy and Benjamin up to the deck. He knew without turning Frost was on his heels.

They took their turns washing in the tubs on deck. Though the saltwater hardened on his skin making him feel tight and brittle, Paddy much preferred that to the feeling of dirt and rot when they were forced to go too long without bathing.

The dark clouds trailing them for days were still there, but no rain fell as Paddy and his friends lapped the deck. They'd seen no more dolphins. In fact, they'd seen no other sign of life for weeks. The rest of the world might have disappeared, and they'd never have known.

“Where'd you think we are?” Paddy asked as it occurred to him, he had no sense of where on the earth he was.

“From the wind we've been getting, we're in the roaring forties. I'd say somewhere well passed the Cape of Good Hope,” Frost answered, his hair fluttering wildly in the breeze he'd just mentioned. Unable to shave

regularly, Frosts beard had grown in thickly making him even more handsome—if such a thing were possible.

“Roaring forties?” Benjamin asked.

“The name they gave to the strong westerly winds in the southern hemisphere generally between latitudes forty and fifty degrees. Should give us a good push to get there quicker,” Frost answered.

Paddy wanted off this ship badly, and yet he feared his arrival in Van Diemen’s Land and all the unknown it would bring. But could there really be worse than his voyage?

“Southern hemspher?” Jimmy asked.

“Hemisphere,” Frost corrected.

Paddy smiled as he listened to Frost explain hemispheres to Jimmy. The boy was a sponge, soaking up every word Frost uttered and asking a hundred questions.

“You there! Frost!” a guard bellowed as he approached them with his musket lowered so it pointed at Frosts middle. “I heard you been takin’ some extra feed fer yourself.”

Frost remained at ease, but Paddy stiffened. Frost would be flogged for stealing if they’d found out about the food that he’d mysteriously been laying his hands on for weeks now.

“Did you, now?” Frost responded easily. Paddy caught a glimpse of two men just beyond the guard, grins on their smug faces: Mander and his giant.

“Captain’ll be up in a moment to deal with ya, and he don’t take no fancy to thieves.”

The guard came no closer, and even though he held a musket on Frost, Paddy saw fear in his eyes. He hoped Frost tore the man to shreds.

“Get below, Paddy,” Frost murmured.

“No.”

“Please.”

Paddy wanted to do as Frost requested but he couldn't leave him here alone. If the captain had him flogged, Paddy needed to be here to help in whatever paltry way he could.

“I'm staying, Frost.”

Frost responded with a soft sigh. “You cannot ever do as asked, can you?”

Paddy's reply was cut off by the sound of marching feet as a guard of four men escorted Captain Moxey to the group of convicts who'd been enjoying their only moments of freedom for the day minutes ago.

“This the man?” Moxey asked as he came to a stop before Frost and Paddy.

“Aye, sir.”

Moxey's gaze travelled the length of Frost's body. “It's a terrible shame what's become of you, Master-at-arms Armstrong.”

Frost said nothing, never even stirred when Paddy gasped at his side. Paddy wasn't well acquainted with the Royal Navy, but he'd heard the term Master-at-arms. He knew enough to recognise Frost had at one time been responsible for discipline aboard a naval ship. How had he ended up as a convict on this ship?

“Do you deny the charges of theft?” Moxey continued.

“I do not.”

“Why?” Moxey asked, shoulders hunching a little as his bluff and bluster seemed to escape him with Frosts easy admission.

“The rations are not enough, and more men will die. You might say I was safekeeping the surgeon’s bonus.”

Paddy wanted to hit Frost for his flippant tone. Moxey wouldn’t take kindly to a convict speaking to him in such a way.

“You should have put in at Cape Town for more provisions,” Frost continued, to the horrified expressions of the men within hearing range, convict and crewman alike.

“You forget yourself, Armstrong,” Moxey replied, a glint in his eye. “Fifty lashes with the cat. Now.”

Mayhem broke out as two guards stepped forward to grab Frost by his arms, towing him toward the sail pole. Frost made no effort to fight them, going willingly in their grip. Paddy had no such hesitation.

“No! No!” he cried. “He stole it for me. He never ate it himself. He gave it to me. I asked him to.” He never mentioned Frost’s stolen morsels being shared amongst others, worried they might be whipped for eating it. He also lied about asking Frost to do it, hoping that by shouldering this portion of the blame Frost’s punishment may be lessened.

Paddy moved, running to stand between Frost, the guards and the pole he’d be lashed to in only moments unless Paddy could stop this.

Another two guards moved toward Paddy, each taking an arm and dragging him to stand before Moxey. He caught a quick glance of Frost

before his back was turned to him. Frost had looked, for the first time Paddy could recall, afraid.

“You asked this man to steal for you?” Moxey asked.

“He did not,” Frost shouted before Paddy uttered a word.

“I was afraid to get scurvy and I asked him if he could get me more food,” Paddy said. Moxey studied him as though he were an exhibit in a museum and then flicked a glance to Frost.

“Continue,” Moxey said over Paddy’s shoulder. “And you, lad, since you asked him to steal for you, you must witness his punishment up close.” Moxey nodded to the guards either side of Paddy.

He was dragged backwards, his feet scrambling for purchase, his shoulder joints aching as though his arms may be ripped from his body. The guards slammed him against the wooden wall of the quarter deck. Another guard approached with shackles, easily capturing Paddy’s wrists and hoisting them overhead to attach him upon a stake embedded in the wall. Fetters were attached to his feet—too tight—and he was manacled to the deck.

As the guards finished their work and moved away, Paddy found he was secured to the ship, directly facing Frost who was being similarly manacled to the mizzen mast. His dark eyes remained fixed on Paddy even as the guards roughly shackled him so tightly to the mast, he’d barely have room to flinch from the blows.

Behind Frost, the guards were assembling the men, ensuring the convicts on deck had the best vantage points for the show about to be put on. Frost’s punishment would serve as a deterrent to others who may consider stealing on Moxey’s ship.

In the front line of assembled men Benjamin stood, his face pale, eyes wide. Jimmy stood beside him, his ten-year-old body turned into Benjamin, his face pressed into his side so he wouldn't have to watch. Benjamin had one arm around the boy doing his best to shield the child.

Paddy's heart thundered, sweat streaked his skin, his limbs shook. His wild gaze tracked over the entirety of the ship, desperate for aide though there was no help to be had. Frost would be flogged, and Paddy would bear witness to his suffering.

"This man has admitted to stealing food," Moxey began, his voice booming across the deck of the *George III*. "He has been sentenced to fifty lashes. Let this be a lesson to all those who might think to do crime aboard my ship."

Moxey stepped back in line with his other officers who had, at some point, joined the throng on deck. He nodded once to a man Paddy only now noticed standing to Frosts right, the dreaded cat hanging loosely and non-threateningly in his hand.

Paddy was still coming to terms with the speed of the assembly when the guard lifted his right hand and swung. He heard the cat swish through the air momentarily before it struck the delicate flesh of Frosts exposed back with a wet *thwunk* and then another and another.

Blood flew with the sixth strike, tiny droplets peppering the face of the man charged with flogging Frost. The guard never recoiled with disgust as his victims' blood sprayed over his face. Paddy's body was taut with horror, limbs aching, heart racing so fast he thought it might bolt from his chest.

Paddy watched in terror as the guards' arm pulled back once more, flicking the cat so blood and flesh flew from it onto nearby observers as he readied to deliver another blow. Frost had forty-four more lashes to endure.

Finally, Paddy turned his gaze to Frosts' face. A sheen of sweat had broken out on his brow, his lips were pressed so tightly together they appeared as a white line. His dark eyes were sharply focused on Paddy. Their gazes caught and held, even as Frost flinched from another blow, Paddy did not look away.

He wouldn't look at the faces of the assembled men, couldn't bear to see their disgust at Frost's brutal treatment, nor could he stand to see the gleeful delight he was sure to find in others. He concentrated solely on Frost, absorbed by the other man's gaze.

Frost uttered no sound, not a groan or a scream of pain. He endured each punishing blow with only Paddy's gaze as company. In the periphery Paddy heard counting: eight, eleven, sixteen.

Warmth flowed over his wrists and ankles and he knew he'd drawn blood from pulling against his fetters so hard they'd cut into his flesh. He did not turn away from Frost. He felt no pain, other than that in his chest at the sight of such brutality to a man he cared for.

Frosts body remained upright, the tight hold of his shackles allowing no room for him to sag, though his body shook. Tears mixed with sweat pouring down Frosts beautiful face, his skin bloodless as his torture continued.

Twenty-seven.

Thirty-two.

“Stop,” Paddy whispered, though he knew even if he’d managed a shout he’d be ignored. “Please. Stop.” How could he feel so exhausted when he remained so still?

Forty.

Forty-three.

Forty-eight.

Somewhere, someone vomited, another was crying louder than any sound Frost had made. Quiet, angry muttering began amongst the convicts and Paddy wondered if Moxey’s deterrent had instead fired up the convicts to mutiny. He didn’t care. All he wanted was for Frosts suffering to end.

Fifty.

“Surgeon Wyse,” Moxey shouted, “What say you?”

Wyse stepped out of the crowd and approached Frost, a troubled look on his face. He examined Frost’s back, his face blanching at the sight. “This man has strength enough to bear a hundred more.”

Paddy’s heart stopped in his chest as he wondered if Wyse’s words would provoke more punishment for Frost.

“Cut him down and get him below,” Moxey replied, a small smirk on his face. Paddy’s body surged against the fetters as he fought to get his hands on Moxey and wring his bloody neck. “Leave the other.”

Paddy watched as the rope shackling Frost to the mizzen mast was cut and his body was roughly manhandled, so he was lying face down on the deck, his torn and bloodied back exposed to Paddy’s gaze for the first time.

Bile surged from his guts to flood his mouth, but he swallowed it down because Frosts eyes were still on him, even from his awkward position. Paddy bit his lip, drawing blood to prevent a scream from tearing loose. Frost's back was cut to the bone across his shoulders, the remaining flesh like jelly. He couldn't stomach to look more, so he returned his gaze to Frosts' eyes.

"Haul him up and bring him to the hospital," Wyse said as though nothing untoward had occurred before his eyes.

The guards bent, grabbed Frost's arms and hauled him to his feet. Frost promptly shook them off and walked toward the hatchway under his own steam. Paddy wasn't sure whether to admire him or scold him for being such an obstinate twit.

Only when Frost was out of sight did Paddy turn his attention to the still assembled men. Benjamin held Jimmy cradled against his body as the boy hid his face, shaking with tears as he wept. The front row of convicts wore Frosts blood and gore as a testament to his suffering. Moxey had already turned away in deep discussions with his officers. Mander and the giant stood to the side, grins on their faces.

Paddy never thought he could kill, but if he'd have been freed right then he was certain both men would lay dead by his hands.

Nobody paid him any attention, leaving him to hang there, tied to the quarter deck long after the other convicts had been sent below. Minutes dragged into hours, his body long since numbed to the ache in his shackled limbs. Even as night fell nobody came for him.

His only company was the occasional sailor passing by as he carried out his duties and his constant thoughts of Frost. He yearned to see him,

comfort him, hear the comforting pound of his heartbeat. He prayed to a god who'd long since abandoned this ship to ease Frost's pain.

The stars were brighter than he'd ever seen them, but even the sight of them was of little comfort to Paddy. He yearned to be able to enjoy such simple pleasures once more. To be free to lie back and watch the stars without fetters chaining him to the ship.

At a little after six bells the squall came. Wind whipped around the ship, holding *George III* in its firm grip as it tossed the ship ferociously about on the ocean. For the first time Paddy was glad he was still lashed to the ship because he was sure he'd be swept overboard otherwise. The wooden hull creaked and groaned loud enough to be heard over the bluster. Sailors ran to and fro in a panicked frenzy of exertion to batten down the ship.

Rain tumbled from the sky as though giant buckets in the clouds had been spilled upon them, the deluge blinding Paddy as he bore the torrents descending on him. He abided the rain with relief as its drops washed away the humiliation of him soiling himself after being left to hand there for so long.

The day had been devilishly hot but now at three in the morning and with the coming of the storm, a coolness grabbed him and held him fast. His body shook, part strain from fighting the push and pull of the storm, and part cold.

Amongst the shouts of captain and crew, he waited to hear somebody call for his release, but it never came. *George III* rolled and tossed to the whim of nature. If the storm sank her Paddy didn't stand a chance. He'd be dragged to the bottom of the sea, tied fast to his fate.

He thought of Jimmy, so terrified down on the prison deck because he might end up in the water with his monsters. What of Benjamin? Was he scared or was he too busy trying to soothe Jimmy's fears?

His mind leapt to Frost. He pictured him on the hospital cot, lying face down, his damaged body thrown about as the ship floundered and struggled through the storm. Was he hurting? Had Wyse given him some morphia to ease his pain? Did he wish Paddy was with him?

"Bear away!" Paddy heard a man yell again. He understood none of the orders being given, he only hoped they would save all their souls.

In the distance, lightning flashed from the sky like daggers cutting through the black curtain of night. Paddy longed for the dawn. There was something comforting about the light, even though he knew it wouldn't save them from the storm. At least he'd be able to face what was coming head on.

The tempest raged on, uncaring and unfeeling toward Paddy's pain and distress. The sailors worked on, doing what was ordered of them and likely saving all of their lives, though Paddy could feel no gratitude toward them, nor their captain who was leading them to safety.

Finally, not long after the sky lightened to usher in the day, the winds died down, the sky draining itself of rain. The grey clouds remained but the sea calmed, and the ship rolled calmly on the smaller waves.

Paddy hung on the wall, wet, weary and pushed beyond endurance. He would have wept if he had the energy. Sailors scuttled about him, looking every ounce as exhausted as he felt.

"Get him down," Moxey's voice was close, but Paddy had no energy to look for him, to see if he was the one Moxey was talking about.

Rough hands grabbed at him, twisting and pulling until he was released from his fetters. Tiny pricks of pain ripped into his limbs now he'd been freed so his blood could flow. Walking after his long stretch of immobility was difficult, but Paddy was determined to push the guards off as Frost had done hours ago.

He trudged to the hatchway, readying himself for the difficult climb. Slowly, he made his way down the ladder and then the second until he was on the prison deck. He walked to his hammock, glancing at the convicts as he went. None were asleep, and all looked as though they'd past a sleepless and terrifying night.

Jimmy was curled up with Benjamin in a hammock. Benjamin spoke softly to the boy who didn't acknowledge Paddy's presence.

"You a'right, Paddy?" Benjamin asked quietly.

"Yeah. You?"

Benjamin nodded, his hand brushing the hair from Jimmy's forehead as he comforted the boy.

"Frost?" Paddy asked, desperate for news.

"Nothing," Benjamin answered.

Paddy stripped off his sodden pants and strung them up as best he could for them to dry. He was cool now but before long the scorching tropical sun would turn the prison deck into an oven. He laid on his hammock and tried to fall asleep before that happened.

FROST

Frost found himself in a never-ending, monstrous nightmare, never certain what was real and what was not. He recalled the weasel talking to the captain, accusing him—and rightly so—of theft. The image of the captain morphed between the distinguished older gentleman he knew him to be and a three headed beast from the mythology Paddy talked about for hours on end.

In a more lucid moment, he shifted slightly, the fire on his back blazing to life as though the flames of hell had been unleashed upon him. He vaguely recalled a sermon from a particular fire and brimstone type of pastor on the evil of sodomy. Frost had been barely seventeen at the time but already aware of his own proclivities. He'd earned a pinch from his mother for fidgeting and squirming in his seat while the pastor shouted and yelled from the dais that he would burn in hell for the sin of loving or lusting after another man.

His scarred back ached relentlessly from his whipping, yet the pain was nothing to what the pastor had inflicted that day as he'd ranted that men such as him were an abomination, a disgrace, a shame to their families and the good Lord.

As he'd matured and seen more of the world—and eventually fallen in love with Daniel—he recognised the pastor's sermon for what it was. He'd read histories of ancient Greece and Rome. The Sacred Band of Thebes, a group of fierce warriors consisting solely of homosexual couples. They remained feared and virtually undefeated until Alexander the Great. Those men fought so fiercely and effectively because they were protecting the man beside them—the one they loved best.

That was then he'd begun to wonder whether God really did condemn those who loved their own sex or was the religious man from the

pulpit that day simply filled with hatred and fear for something he did not understand?

Once Daniel had come into his life he'd decided not to care. His love for him so deep and joyful he'd never been able to imagine a loving God being angry with either of them for the happiness they'd found together.

The pain in his back throbbed, every beat like a sick and twisted heartbeat counting out each torturous second of his life. He'd learned from Daniel's death that love had the potential to cause both the extremes of joy and the depths of agony. He'd endured his heart ripping from its moorings, tearing through the meat and muscle of his chest and flaying him open when he'd watched Daniel die.

And now, as he'd begun to care for Paddy, his back had been flayed open by the guard's whip, a physical pain which paled in comparison to the ache in his soul, yet still burned. As the guard had repeatedly swung the cat, tearing the tender flesh of his back, Frost had never taken his eyes off Paddy. The young man had been frantic, tears streaming down his cheeks as he'd watched Frost take his punishment. As always everything Paddy felt in his heart was clear on his handsome face. But he'd been an anchor for Frost, not one keeping him tethered to reality, but rather dragging him through the horror of his situation into another world, another life, where he was happy and safe and warm—and with Paddy.

In those moments of torture, he'd seen it all so clearly: Paddy soft and warm as he slept beside him, long walks together through the moors, quiet talks before the fire as day melted into night. The strange thing was, usually when Frost went to this fantasy realm Daniel was with him. Somehow, though, this time Paddy had squeezed his way through the curtain separating his worlds.

Perhaps Frosts heart was finally releasing its tether to Daniel, setting him free to reach for someone new, someone living, someone Daniel would want him to find.

“How do you feel?” Wyse asked, startling Frost from his reveries.

“As though someone tore open the flesh of my back,” he answered, lacing his words with the bitterness he felt.

“Aye. You took quite a beating.”

Frost lay on his stomach to avoid causing further pain to his back. He saw only the boots of the surgeon as he stood over him, gently prodding and assessing his ruined back.

“You are a hard man, Frost. Men still talk of the *Asia* and all you did that day.”

“I did nothing more than many others,” he bit out through clenched teeth as Wyse poked a particularly tender spot.

“Not how I’ve heard it told. Curzon himself holds forth to all who’ll listen that had you not been aboard that day and taken charge as you did, all would have been lost.”

“His Majesty might disagree. He gave merit to Codrington.” Among so many other disasters on the day Wyse referred to, Frost had watched Admiral Codrington fall apart under pressure. He’d given dubious orders which almost certainly would have gotten many more men killed had Frost not taken Codrington out of the equation with a blow to the back of his head. Fortunately, no one other than Daniel had seen what Frost had done to save so many--and Codrington had no memory once he’d awoken.

“Still,” Wyse continued, “upset many of us when we heard...when we found out you’d ended up here. Word is some of your old crew mates were in Newgate and put the word out about who you are. Guess that’s why most stay well clear of you.”

“Guess so,” Frost grunted. He had no desire to open old wounds with Surgeon Wyse, as kind as the man had been to him.

“You may not be aware, Frost, but I studied with Mr Morley, the same Morley who tended your mother on several occasions. He and I remained friends all these years. One of our pastimes is, shall we say, expressing our feelings regarding certain of our patients.”

Frost stiffened beneath the surgeon’s hands, not liking where this conversation was heading. He’d lived a small fraction of his mother’s torment; he had no use for—and no strength to bear—more revelations of her plight.

“I know well what she suffered, and what you did to relieve that suffering. I find I cannot fault you for it.”

Frost neither needed nor desired this man’s absolution of his sins, and yet a small part of his soul warmed at the words. Perhaps he was not the monster he thought himself.

“Wyse?”

“Yes, Frost?”

“How is Paddy?”

“Young Maybrick?” Wyse covered his wounds and stepped back. “Moxey kept him tied on deck all of that first night, even during the storm. When finally, he was taken below, Moxey ordered him kept there until...”

“Locked on the prison deck?”

“Yes. I have not seen him since.” There was a slight pause before Wyse hesitantly continued, “Would you like me to check on him?”

“Please.”

“He certainly did his best to defend you. An old acquaintance, perhaps?”

“No.” Frost winced, sucking in a breath as a lightning shot of pain flashed down his back. “A young fool who thinks the world can be better than you and I know it is.”

“Aye. I’ve seen too many of them in my time. Not many last too long where we’re headed.” Wyse confirmed what Frost had long believed, though the old surgeon had perhaps not seen the steel lurking beneath Paddy’s fragile frame.

“He’ll make it,” Frost whispered as he slipped back into his nightmares, his physical pain dragging him from the waking world.

When next Frost woke it was to another visitor. He’d been having a rather lovely dream of Paddy visiting him, his soft hands gently tracing the scars developing from his flogging. In the absurdity of the dream world, Paddy had whispered into his ear how beautiful he still found him despite the disfiguring wounds. A nice dream, but just a dream, nonetheless.

Now, instead of Paddy’s entrancing emerald eyes, he woke under the hard glare of Moxey’s dark brown ones. He couldn’t imagine why the captain would be here to visit him and didn’t really care to know.

At some point he'd turned onto his back but was surprised to discover only a dull ache in his wounded skin. He must be healing well.

"I've come to get some assurances from you, Frost," Moxey said, drawing himself to his full height and stateliness. "I know full well who you are and what you've done."

Frost said nothing in response. He wasn't certain where Moxey was headed but had a sneaking suspicion. If he was right, Moxey had no cause for alarm.

"I want no mutiny aboard this ship. Do I make myself clear?"

"Perfectly, sir."

"I have watched the interactions of the convicts on my vessel. I know there are a handful with designs for mutiny. None of them concern me. They're an unorganised, inept bunch. However, with a man such as yourself..."

"I have no intention of mutinying."

"Yet, as loud as anything you challenged my leadership only days ago."

"I only spoke the truth. The convicts...half will not make Hobart town at this rate. We need more rations--"

"Do you think my men and I are faring any better? We are on half rations too."

Frost resisted the urge to roll his eyes. The crew's rations were always much larger than the convicts so their sacrifice at worst put them on equal rations the convicts started out with. Frost had met many men such as Moxey. His mother, who'd been a lover of the English language, would

have called him a mumpsimus for his refusal to change his mind despite being proven wrong.

“I can offer you my promise,” Frost began, tiring of the captain’s presence and wishing for an end to it. “I have no intention of joining or leading any sort of mutiny.”

Moxey eyed him for a time, his small, beady eyes taking in every inch of him, before nodding. “Very well. But know this...I have my men watching you and they have orders to keep you locked in chains at the first indication of any trouble.”

Frost nodded in response, unwilling to waste more breath on this man. He was yet to see confirmation, but he suspected Moxey was some kind of Scaramouch who was apt to wax eloquent about his achievements and bravery yet turn tail and run at the first sign of trouble. For his part, Frost wanted no part in any strife, perceived or otherwise, on this voyage.

In fact, all he wanted was to see the *George III* safely to Hobart town with as few as possible lives lost. He especially wanted Paddy to set foot, safe and hearty, on the distant land.

Moxey turned on his heel and left without delay, as though being in Frost’s presence was repulsive to him. Not everyone thought as Wyse. Many cursed Frost to depths of perdition for his crime.

Once he was alone again, he allowed his thoughts to wander to Paddy, trapped a deck below him as he had been for days. Paddy had already been suffering from boredom, always looking forward to the small sliver of time he was allowed on deck each day. Moxey could not have chosen a better punishment for the young man than to keep him locked away on the prison deck.

As much as Paddy's defence of him had warmed the icy heart Frost carried in chest, he was furious Paddy had put himself in harm's way for him. Not only was he not worth the risk to Paddy, he'd hated seeing the young man tied and traumatised on the deck.

"Well, Frost, I think some fresh sea air might be in order," Wyse said as he walked into the hospital. "You have lazed about quite enough."

With the aid of Wyse's underling, Frost found himself on deck only minutes later. The bright sun heated his skin, drawing beads of sweat to the surface. He wiped his brow, licked his parched lips. He'd endured the Mediterranean climate, yet this was a different kind of heat entirely.

He took a few steps around the pen, delighted to see Mander and his friend flinch as he passed them by. Frost had no intention of causing trouble, but he'd see them taken care of if they continued to menace Paddy and himself.

"Frost?"

"Benjamin, Jimmy."

"Cor, Mr Frost. Your back is a right mess," Jimmy exclaimed, eyes wide. Obviously, Frost had not been able to see his own back, but he'd witnessed floggings and their aftermath before, so he had an idea of how he appeared to the young boy.

"It is healing, Jim. Surgeon Wyse has me out getting some exercise, so I am mending." He bit his tongue to prevent himself from screaming at them both for news of Paddy. In due course he'd find out from them.

"Must hurt like the devil."

"It does, Jim."

“Paddy’ll be happy we seen ya,” Benjamin said softly.

“Is he well?”

“That bastard Moxey has ‘im locked down in the deck. He’s outta his mind, but you know Paddy. He keeps gettin’ back up again.”

Frost swallowed around the lump in his throat. Paddy’s life, like so many others, had not been an easy one, and yet he’d managed to stave off any bitterness. It was an admirable quality in the young man. “Tell him to keep his bloody mouth shut next time.”

Benjamin laughed briefly before his expression turned dark once more. “I’ll tell ‘im, but that one goes ‘is own way, mind.”

“That he does,” Frost mused with a wry smile.

“What they doin’, Mr Frost?” Jimmy pointed to a couple of sailors toward the stern.

“Tying a sheet bend. There are many knots each sailor must know how to tie.”

“My pa woulda taught me that one day...” Jimmy’s small voice faded away on the wind as though his soul were fading with his words. The boy was still devastated by the loss of his father.

“Would you like me to teach you?” Frost offered.

Jimmy smiled and nodded eagerly, and so Frost spent the remainder of his time on deck attempting to teach a young boy how to tie a knot, without the benefit of having actual rope on hand.

CHAPTER NINE

*Indian Ocean, well off the coast of Western Australia, late February
1835*

PADDY

For seven days Moxey held Paddy on the prison deck. No exercise. No sunlight. No fresh air. By the sixth day Paddy was certain he'd go mad. By the seventh he was ready to kill any man on board to escape.

He'd heard no news of Frost, only that he was still alive. Benjamin had tried to get into the hospital, but Wyse was keeping it locked up tight. The convicts couldn't catch scurvy from each other but with so much illness about and the rats the only living creatures on board having a merry old time, it was a matter of time before other diseases took hold.

He was forced to eat in his cell, the guard taking his cutlery as soon as he was done, just in case he tried to use a blunt knife or a dull spoon to carve his way through the guards armed with muskets on his way to freedom.

"Still no sign of Frost, Paddy," a cold voice spoke from the entrance to his cell.

Paddy glanced up from his meal into the face of Mander. For once there was no sign of his giant friend and Paddy wondered he'd found the courage to confront Paddy on his own. Though Paddy was no real threat: thin and frail, few fighting skills, but most importantly he lacked a bloodthirsty nature to see him through an encounter with a man such as Mander.

But Mander had hurt Frost, had him flogged for his own sport and the memory of Frost hanging limp, his back torn open, was enough to boil the blood in Paddy's veins. His fist clenched around the spoon he'd been shovelling gruel into his mouth with only moments ago and he leapt for Mander.

His body collided with Mander's' unmoving frame. He might not have strength, but Paddy was fast. He had the handle of the spoon shoved under Mander's' chin in a second. There was no way it would pierce through his skin, but Paddy wasn't going to threaten to cut him with it. "You come near me, Frost or any of my friends again and I'll scoop yer eye out with this spoon. Understand?"

Mander had no substance, no real courage other than the false pluck his giant friend gave him. His body shook against Paddy's even as he tried to school his features to show a fearless face. Paddy swore he read Mander's' thoughts spinning behind his eyes as he searched for a way out. "I've had me revenge...for now." Mander winked and stepped away.

Paddy wasn't entirely certain he'd won the encounter, but he'd done something. He'd stood up to Mander.

"You really gonna scoop 'is eye out?" Benjamin called from a few feet away. Paddy jumped and turned to find his friend and Jimmy watching him warily.

"If I have to," Paddy replied, just in case Mander was still nearby.

"I'm glad I ain't your enemy, Paddy," Jimmy said with a wide smile.

Paddy laughed at the absurdity of his life. Crammed on a ship with hundreds of others, sailing around the world to god knows where and

threatening to tear a man's eye out with a spoon. How had things come to this?

Benjamin and Jimmy laughed with him. There was scant enough to be happy about on board, might as well take it while they could.

Later, as he lay alone, staring at the one spot on the roof he'd stared at hour after hour, Paddy idly wondered if maybe he'd bore a hole in it one day. He thought about anything to keep his mind off all the happenings in his life to cause pain: Molly and Zeke. His transportation. The memories of Frosts flogging.

Sometimes he imagined himself a different person. A rich, well-to-do gentleman with time on his hands to do nothing but read and muck about with the other toffs of society. He pictured a library in his mind. Wall to wall books of all kinds, a great fireplace with a comfortable chair beside where he'd be able to curl up. He'd read more about the Arctic and then the deserts of Africa. Ancient Rome, Greece, the pharaohs of Egypt. Curiosity itched beneath his skin; he'd always yearned for knowledge.

No matter how hard he fought though, his traitorous mind always led him back to what hurt him most. He remembered when he'd first laid eyes on little Zeke, his pink, scrunched up face peeking out of the swaddling the midwife had wrapped around him like a cocoon. He smiled as he thought of how he'd near jumped out of his skin the first time the baby wailed, surprising him with the strength and loudness of his cry. How tiny and light Zeke had felt in his arms and the surprising surge of protectiveness he'd felt around the little babe.

He remembered Molly's soft smiles as she'd done the most mundane of chores for her son. Humming softly to him as she'd changed his napkins

and swaddling. Paddy had never seen a person so completely happy as Molly had been when little Zeke was with her.

How was she coping now? Had Aunt Jane taken her in? What if she hadn't? Molly would likely end up a dollymop if Aunt Jane shunned her. He swallowed thickly on bile at the thought of his sister passed around from man to man for a few bits of coin barely enough to feed herself. His own woes seemed to pale in comparison to Molly's wretched circumstances.

"Paddy," Benjamin called as he walked down the passageway between the convict's accommodations, Jimmy—as always—close on his heels.

"Ben. How's it looking today?" he asked. Every time Ben returned from his exercise on deck Paddy asked him about the weather. Pathetic as it was, this was the only way to cope with his imprisonment below deck. Paddy used Benjamin's descriptions to imagine himself free once more.

"Fine and fair. Winds have dropped off," Benjamin said as he approached Paddy's hammock. "I saw Frost."

Paddy sat up, desperate to hear Frost was recovering well. "How was he?"

Benjamin smiled. "He gave me a message for you."

"Well?" Paddy encouraged when Benjamin remained quiet.

"He said to tell you 'next time, keep your bloody mouth shut'."

Paddy laughed, even though the suggestion of a next time turned his stomach. If Frost was well enough to tell Paddy off, his wounds must be healing. "How'd he look? His back I mean."

“Is back’s a proper mess, but surgeons done him good. Everything’s closed over and healing.”

“Was he on deck or did you get into the hospital?” Paddy asked, desperate for every tiny skerrick of information, no matter how mundane.

He’d thought long and hard in his hours locked on the prison deck about Frost. His feelings toward the man had always seemed so inexplicable: the butterflies Frost triggered in his stomach, the tug in his body dragging him toward Frost whenever he was near, the rapid beat of his heart at Frost’s appearance. He couldn’t make sense of how Frost knotted him up so much. And the one way he could find sense, didn’t seem possible.

“He were on deck. Wyse wants ‘im to get exercise to regain strength.”

“He looked fine, Paddy,” Jimmy added. “He spoke to me a long time about this and that on the ship. Too smart to be ‘ere.”

Frost was too everything to be here: smart, kind, brave. Paddy had tossed his feelings for Frost about and finally settled on something he’d never expected. Feelings he’d never be able to share. Benjamin had once described Paddy’s feelings toward Frost perfectly when he’d spoken of his Louisa, of how he cared for her above all others, how she made him feel giddy with just a look, how he could have listened to her voice for hours upon hours. He wasn’t sure such a thing was possible between two men but there it was in every beat of his heart, every look he gave Frost, every time he simply conjured the man’s name.

“Mander and that giant of his, near died when Frost strode up on deck,” Benjamin continued.

“They should be afraid. Frost knows what they did, same as I do, and they’ll pay for it,” Paddy said, venom lacing his words.

Mander had seen to it Frost was caught for stealing and suitably punished. Paddy spent some of his time imagining all the ways he’d seek his vengeance on them. His favourite involved tossing them to Jimmy’s monsters, though chances were the ship would sail right on by before Paddy had the satisfaction of seeing their blood flow when caught in the jaws of the great sharks.

“They been leaving you alone?” Paddy asked, frightened Mander would expand his hatred of Paddy to include Benjamin and Jimmy, especially after his threat to Mander earlier.

“They’re cowards, Paddy. They waint do nothing upfront.”

Benjamin was right. When they came for him, Mander and the giant would do it sneakily, striking before Paddy knew what’d hit him. Especially now after they’d had so much success with Frost.

“I saw that Miss Finch on deck again today,” Jimmy said, speaking of the young lady travelling with her father, Lieutenant Finch, to Van Diemen’s land. She was one of a handful of women aboard travelling with husbands or fathers. She looked to be about Paddy’s age and had taken a shine to Jimmy, often speaking to him when she had the chance.

“She talk to you, Jimmy?”

“Yeah. She said she were gonna ask her pa if I can work for them once we arrive.” Jimmy blushed as he spoke. He’d been mesmerised by Miss Finch, once telling Paddy he thought she must be an angel come down from heaven. “Says she can’t stand the thought of me doin’ hard labour with the men.”

“Plenty of the rich families have convicts come work for them. That’d be real good for you, Jim.” Ben scuffed the young boy’s hair as he spoke.

Jimmy was the youngest of the convicts aboard and most of the men looked out for him. Even the crew spoke to him kindly. Paddy smirked at the thought of what might happen to Mander and his friend if they were fool enough to go after Jimmy.

“Reminds me a lot of me ma, she does. Younger, mind, but she’s kind like ma and has the same golden hair.” Jimmy’s eyes watered as he spoke of his mother. Paddy seethed once more at the cruelty of taking such a young child so far from his home for such a mild offence.

“Come on now, Jim,” Benjamin began, “there’s a chance you’ll see her again.”

Jimmy shook his head. “Can’t think that way, Ben. Hurts too much,” he whispered.

The hurly burly of the convicts returning to the prison deck for the night drowned out their conversation. Soon they’d be told to lie quietly and sleep as per Captain’s orders. Paddy found the silence when he was surrounded by bodies far more disturbing than the silence when most of the prison deck had emptied out with convicts in the mess or on deck. Two hundred odd men and not a word between them seemed unnatural.

Paddy lay back in his hammock, smiling as he listened to Benjamin’s graceless attempt to get into his hammock on the first try. He sniggered when he heard a muttered oath. He glanced across at Frost’s empty bed. A week since he’d seen the man and he missed him badly. What kind of balmy bloke was he to be so mixed up over a man?

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“You awake, little mouse?”

Paddy jumped at the voice in his ear, knowing he must be dreaming because it was a voice he hadn't heard in too many days. He wasn't certain if it was morning or evening and had long ago lost track of the day. He hadn't even been allowed on deck for Sunday masses.

“Frost?” His voice cracked and croaked from underuse.

“You look too pale, Paddy.”

“Of course, I bloody do,” he grouched as he sat up, praying that this time this was not a dream. “I been locked down here since—” He cut himself off not wanting to remind either of them of Frost's terrible flogging.

“I'm sorry, little mouse,” Frost whispered, his fingers gently tucking Paddy's long locks behind his ear.

“What for? You didn't bloody lock me away.” Paddy was unaccountably angry with Frost. For needing him, for needing to be near him, for wanting him. Paddy wasn't sure. But when Frost responded with a smile, Paddy thought he might just want to wipe that grin off his beautiful face.

“What the hell are you smiling at? You been gone and I haven't been able to see you. I didn't know if you were all right or not and Benjamin couldn't tell me all I wanted to know.” Paddy took a breath trying to calm the storm he'd worked up inside of him. “What the bleeding hell were you thinking in the first place? Stealing? You knew what the punishme—”

Frost's lips were suddenly on his.

'Twas the gentlest of touches but an inferno blazed to life inside Paddy. Frost's lips were warm and soft, and Paddy wanted to feel them everywhere on his skin. Too soon though, they were gone.

His eyes had become accustomed to the dim light of the prison deck over the long days of his confinement, so he saw Frost clearly: his darkened eyes, pupils blown wide; the peek of his tongue as he licked the lips that had so recently kissed Paddy, the tiny smile.

"What the bloody hell did you do that for?" Paddy blurted.

"I had to shut you up."

They stared at each other, Frost's gaze occasionally dropping to Paddy's lips so that he was forced to wonder if Frost was going to kiss him again. He wanted him to—more than he should, but he'd never felt anything like Frost kissing him and he wanted more of it, again and again.

"How's your back?" Paddy asked as the silence stretched on.

"I will be fine—"

"Show me," Paddy demanded.

Frost turned. He wore no shirt, from the heat or discomfort against his wounds Paddy wasn't sure, maybe both.

Paddy gasped, tears pricking his eyes. The blood was gone but Frost's broad back was a criss cross of slowly healing gashes, the skin puckering around the wounds. Some of the lashes clearly had struck him in the one spot, those wounds wider and deeper and slower to heal. Wyse had stitched the skin together in some places. Fluid oozed from several of the wounds, the smell of blood, gore and iodine potent.

Closing his eyes, Paddy drew in a steady breath and reopened them. He reached out with his right hand, his fingertips ghosting feather-light over several of the welts. “I’m so sorry,” he murmured, his voice catching on his tears.

Frost turned. He carefully took Paddy’s outstretched hand in his own and drew it to his lips. He gently kissed Paddy’s fingers, holding them pressed against his lips for a moment.

“You did nothing wrong, little mouse,” Frost whispered.

“You stole for me.”

“And I would again.”

“Why?”

Frost smiled and then leaned forward until their foreheads touched. “Because I care for you, Paddy.”

“I don’t understand.”

Frost’s hands came up to cup Paddy’s face, holding him still while Frost watched him, his dark eyes soft as they traced over Paddy’s features. “Paddy—”

“Mr Frost. You’re back, sir,” Jimmy’s voice pierced the connection between Paddy and Frost, sending them scuttling apart. Frost’s gaze never left him though, even as he answered the boy.

“I am back, Jimmy.”

“I watched ‘em on the quarterdeck, Sir. Saw them use the sheet bend again just like you’d said.”

“You will be a sailor one day,” Frost answered, his focus still on Paddy. “Just like your pa.”

“Your back’s looking better,” Jimmy added as he approached.

Paddy blanched at the idea of Frost’s back ever looking worse, though he knew it had.

“It’s feeling better, Jim. Reckon I won’t need to go back to the hospital.”

“Yeah? Maybe you can teach me more about sailing,” the boy asked hopefully.

“Whatever you want to know.”

As Frost finished his sentence Paddy heard the unmistakable sound of more convicts returning to the prison deck. Frost was greeted with curious looks, a couple of snarls and Benjamin’s cheery greeting. Paddy watched with satisfaction as Mander startled when he walked past, his gaze catching on Frost standing against the wall, arms crossed as he sneered at the man.

“Have they come near you, Paddy?” Frost asked as Mander and his giant went by.

“I ain’t afraid of them,” he answered boldly.

“Stay clear of them, nonetheless.”

“Paddy’s already taken care of that Mander, Mr Frost,” Jimmy helpfully added.

Frost tensed and turned a glare on Paddy. “What do you mean?” he asked. Though any present could have answered, Frost’s gaze remained on

Paddy, so Jimmy and Benjamin stayed silent.

“I had words with ‘im,” Paddy reluctantly admitted.

“Words?”

“He stuck a spoon under his throat, Mr Frost. Told ‘im if he went near you—or any of us—again, he’d stick ‘im with it and pluck out ‘is eye.” Jimmy said, pride lacing through his voice.

“Christ, Paddy.” Frost sounded exasperated, but Paddy felt nothing but insult and frustration.

“I can take care of myself,” Paddy snorted.

“You do not want enemies, Paddy.”

“I got ‘em already and I ain’t gonna let ‘em hurt you—or any of us—again.” Paddy meant all of them: Frost, Benjamin, Jimmy. They’d become like a family of sorts and Paddy meant to protect them. He wasn’t going to let a bastard like Mander get to any of them.

Frost’s expression softened, his hand darting toward him before pulling back almost as quickly. There were unspoken words left between them, but perhaps here and now was not the time or place.

Lights were out not long after the return of the men from on deck. Boredom on board, especially now he was confined to the prison deck, led to Paddy sleeping more than he ever had. Perhaps his body had decided to hibernate until he reached Van Diemen’s Land.

Tonight, Paddy lay awake. Images of Frost’s ruined back danced behind his lids, duelling with the remembered sensation of the man’s lips on his and the way he’d held Paddy’s face so gently between his big hands. Before his father’s death, Paddy’s mother had been loving and gentle with

her children, but her grief had turned her to bitter resentment and neglect. Paddy struggled to recall the last time anybody had touched him with the tenderness Frost had displayed this evening.

As he remembered the warmth of Frost's fingers, the strength he felt in those hands, yet they'd been so gentle with him, heat pooled in Paddy's groin. He experienced a yearning he'd never known before.

Growing up as he had, he'd heard and seen people taking their pleasure from each other, but he'd never before experienced a need for somebody the way he felt now toward Frost. He wanted Frost's hands on him, his lips pressing on him. He wanted Frost to take his pleasure from him and he knew somewhere deep inside, Frost would return that pleasure to him tenfold.

So lost was he in his dreams of Frost, Paddy didn't hear a man come up behind him until a warm hand folded over his face, covering his mouth so he couldn't scream.

"Shh, Paddy," Frost crooned in his ear.

Paddy nodded, telling Frost he understood. He remained quiet as Frost carefully settled in behind him on the hammock as he'd done that first night so many weeks ago. He wasn't offering Paddy warmth this time. Tonight, he was taking comfort from Paddy just as Paddy took it from him.

"Let me hold you, little mouse?" Though he'd phrased it as a question, Paddy never could have denied him.

Frost's thick arm curled around him, tugging him back so their bodies were tightly aligned front to back. He felt a hardness against his arse, his mind giddily explaining what he was feeling. He'd known of boys back in the slums who'd whored themselves out to men for money, but he'd

always considered something like that nothing more than one man seeking physical pleasure from another.

Confronted with how he felt for Frost he realised how much more it might be.

“Frost?”

“Mm?”

“How did you get here?”

CHAPTER TEN

FROST

Frost stiffened where he lay behind Paddy and remained quiet for a long time before finally murmuring, “My story is not a pretty one, Paddy.”

“I don’t think any of us here have much pretty,” Paddy replied. “Every man I met had a tale of woe, some far worse than others. I don’t judge ‘em who’re just tryin’ to survive.”

“My father was a wealthy man, but he was a cruel man.” Frost continued, determined now to get his tale out. “He never showed any affection for his wife or son. All he had to offer was a harsh word and a closed fist.” Frost inhaled a deep breath, his body trembling slightly.

“All that interested him was his pocketbook. We had a manor house with servants, we associated with the ton. But no matter how much he accumulated or how far up the society ladder we climbed, nothing seemed to satisfy father. When one of his investments went bad, my mother bore the brunt of his rage. She was a sweet woman who thought she’d made a good match with my father. She didn’t realise until it was too late, she’d wed a devil in disguise.”

Frost fell silent, and Paddy allowed him time with his memories. His memories of his father were sharp and painful. He’d often thought he’d prefer to have never known the man. Better to have no memories than poisonous, hurtful ones. His entire life may have been different had his father not been around.

“I’d always been fascinated by the sea, ever since I was a young lad. We often travelled to Brighton for father’s business interests as much as to

be seen amongst society. I came to love those times. Father was always out, leaving my mother and I to our own devices for days on end. We spent much of our time by the water. Mother could relax without father around and she sat for hours with her books by the shore.

“There were always ships moored off the coast and I’d watch them for hours. I’d watch the men on board who looked like beetles scuttling over the ship from such a distance. Then I’d watch cutters come and go with their cargo of men or product.” There was a wistfulness to Frosts tenor that Paddy seemed to have caught on to. The young man lay quietly at his side, hardly daring to breathe. Frost knew he was usually so stoic and miserly with his words, so perhaps Paddy was afraid of shattering the moment if he moved or breathed too loudly.

“Mother encouraged me to become a seaman. At first, I thought she didn’t want me around, but now I realise she was attempting to protect me. And, of course, father was pleased to have me out of his hair and in a suitable vocation for his son. So, I left. I was fourteen and I abandoned my mother to that monster.” Frosts voice was strained, and if Paddy could see his face, he’d see the fearsome mask he reserved for others had slipped into place. Paddy had a way of tearing that mask apart.

“You don’t have to tell me,” Paddy offered. Frost tightened the thick arm he had about Paddy’s waist and gently pressed his lips to the tender skin behind his ear.

“I want to,” he whispered.

“All right.”

“I was away for years and I loved every second. I was free of my father’s tyranny and I was young enough to be selfishly unconcerned about

my mother. I never understood how terrible things really were.” Again, Frosts arm tightened—maybe too tight this time. “I’ll never forgive myself for that.”

Paddy tentatively reached for Frosts hand, linking their fingers in a gesture which gave such comfort while he felt so exposed and raw. Frost squeezed his fingers—just once and gently, but enough to tell Paddy he welcomed his presence.

“I went to war and engaged in battles and lived a thousand lifetimes in my years away, but of course the happiness was never meant to last, not for someone like me.”

“What happened?”

“I cannot speak about what drove me from the Navy—not yet, but I went home. I went home and found a mother I didn’t recognise and a father who was more devil than man—” Frost stopped abruptly and took a moment. “Paddy, turn to me.”

Paddy rolled in the hammock, the natural dip pulling their bodies together, so he had to push against Frosts chest to make space between them. The darkness of the prison deck at night was absolute. No matter how bright the moon or how many millions of stars shone, they could not break through the veil of darkness shrouding the convicts who had the misfortune of lying in the middle deck, away from the lanterns at either end.

Despite his efforts Frost was unable to make out even the outline of Paddy. He didn’t need to see the man to gage his sincerity anyway. What Frost was about to tell him, regardless of how Paddy took it, was at least the truth, and Frost valued honesty between himself and those he cared for.

“I will not speak of everything that man subjected my mother to, but she was the shell of a human when I came back. He had hollowed out everything good in her and left nothing but a living corpse. There were beatings... and worse,” he spat. Even in the blackness Frost felt his anger as a living thing rolling from his body.

“The second day I was home I came home early from a ride after my horse threw its shoe. I walked into the parlour and mother...mother was sprawled on the floor, her dress ripped open at the back and my father’s whip marks lashed across her skin—fresh ones over the top of much older scars. Despite the promises I made to mother I would not let it stand.”

Silence bled into the darkness, as Frost became lost to his grief.

“She was sobbing,” Frost continued eventually, so quiet Paddy may not hear him over the grunts and snoring of other men. “And the sounds she made were animalistic. Something broke—inside me, in her—it was too much. This was too much. I’m not certain exactly what happened next, but I killed him. My despicable father lay dead at my feet by the time I’d finished, and I didn’t care at all. Not when the law came for me. Not when I was sentenced to transportation for life. My mother was safe and that was all that mattered.”

Paddy’s fingers easily found him in the dark, the tips gently scraping against Frost’s cheek. Frost’s pain echoed around the deck, buzzed beneath his warm skin. But somehow sharing his story with Paddy eased the ache as though the young man had been able to leach the hurt from him, take some of it into himself.

“I’m sorry, Frost.”

“She died,” Frost continued, ignoring Paddy’s sympathies. “Her wounds became infected because she could not pay for medical care. Everything was frozen when father...died. As his final act of cruelty, he had changed his will claiming I was an illegitimate bastard. Everything went to a distant cousin who bore the same cruel streak of his relation, cutting my mother off completely.”

“Oh, Frost,” Paddy whispered.

“Don’t—”

Paddy cupped Frosts’ cheek, brushing his thumb over the warm skin. Frost flinched away but Paddy chased him, keeping his palm against the man’s face. Frost was pushing him away, rejecting his comfort but apparently Paddy wasn’t about to allow that.

“Listen to me,” Paddy began, pausing a moment to take a deep breath. “You are not at fault, Frost. You were a child and then you were gone. But when you came back...you did all you could to protect her.”

They were just words and would not absolve Frost of the guilt he felt but spoken by Paddy they meant something. They lay silently for a time, Paddy’s fingers reaching into Frosts thick locks, gently tangling his digits amongst the soft, tresses. He eased forward until his lips found Paddy—his nose, he thought. He pressed a gentle kiss and then pulled back.

“Thank you for telling me,” Paddy whispered.

“Never told anyone before.” Frosts voice was lax with looming sleep. Frost turned so Paddy’s front was now to his back. Paddy’s arm wrapped gently about Frost just as he’d done to him a short while ago, though not getting anywhere near as far around Frosts big body as he’d

gotten around Paddy. He let Paddy hold him tight, listening to his breaths until they softened into sleep.

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PADDY

“Paddy?”

“Huh?” Paddy startled in his hammock. They’d been lying quietly in their hammock’s hour after hour. The death of yet another man to scurvy depressing all around him. Even Benjamin was quiet with despair today.

On days like these—and there were far too many of them—Paddy wondered if any of them would make it to Van Diemen’s Land with their sanity intact. The boredom they endured was oppressive. Sometimes Paddy even wished for a storm just to think about something other than being trapped on a tiny boat with nothing to do.

“I hate lying still,” Benjamin said. “At least when we’re movin’ about I can’t feel them damn lice scampering over every inch of me.”

“At least when we’re movin’ we got somethin’ to do,” Paddy answered. He was hot and bored and tired of this bloody ship. Even Jimmy’s monsters weren’t looking so bad to Paddy. He thought he might take his chances with them rather than staying on this godforsaken ship. At least Moxey had finally allowed him back out for exercise and meals in the mess.

“We got the race later today, Paddy,” Jimmy called from his spot on the floor where he sat with Frost who was giving him another lesson about sailing. Paddy had listened for a while, but the subject held little interest for him, even if Frosts voice did.

“If you can find Mr Albert,” Benjamin replied.

“He always comes when we come back from mess.”

Benjamin laughed. “Cause he knows you got a crumb of bread for ‘im.”

“I got ‘im two today.” Jimmy smirked. “One for before the race and the other for when ‘e wins.”

In these moments, when Jimmy delightedly spoke of his pet rat and the race he’d entered him into with Morgan Walsh’s rat, Paddy remembered what a young child Jimmy still was. Paddy himself had been in the workhouses at Jimmy’s age, his father dead, his mother in the grip of her descent into madness. But he hadn’t been a prisoner being sent across the world. The unfairness of Jimmy’s plight always burned a hole of anger in Paddy.

“You haven’t made a bet ‘ave you?” Paddy asked. Moxey had made it perfectly clear to everyone on board he would not tolerate the convicts gambling for the exchange of clothes—and they had nothing else to offer each other.

“Mr Walsh is gonna do me mess chores for a day if my rat wins.”

Would that be okay with Moxey? Would he even know? The mess captains oversaw which men were cleaning up after the meals each day. There was no reason for Moxey to know, provided Tibbins kept his trap shut.

“And you’re gonna do his if Mr Albert loses?” Frost asked, his voice sending a shiver up Paddy’s spine—a good kind of shiver.

“Mr Albert ain’t gonna lose. I ‘ad words with ‘im.” Jimmy smiled, giving Paddy another glimpse of the child still lurking inside the body living a man’s terrible life. “Told ‘im if he didn’t win there’d be no more crumbs for ‘im.”

Frost chuckled beside him, a fond expression on his face as he looked at the boy. He’d have made a great father if fate had of been kinder to him. Paddy’s body was still tingling from the sensation of being pressed alongside Frost during the night. They’d laid wrapped together for hours, Frost sneaking back into his own hammock just before the warders came to call for first mess. Frost didn’t join him every night—too much risk of being caught out—but every few nights Paddy would wake up to Frost climbing into his hammock.

Paddy missed the comfort and strength of Frosts body on those nights he slept alone.

“What’d he say to that?” Benjamin asked with a smile to his voice.

“Told me ‘e was gonna win,” Jimmy proudly replied.

After so long at sea Paddy was used to the gentle sway of his hammock, even when the winds picked up and tossed the ship about as if it was a child’s toy, he was able to keep his stomach settled. He sometimes wondered if he’d be able to sleep without the rocking now. The weather, while still warm had cooled somewhat the further south they moved making the days more bearable.

“Let’s go,” Tibbins shouted, spurring the men of Paddy’s mess into motion.

Despite the promise of tasteless, foul food, being called for mess at least broke the monotony of the day. They were permitted to talk while they

ate and any time that they were able to leave the prison deck was a blessing.

“You all right, little mouse?” Frost asked as he sidled up beside him.

“Yeah.”

“You have been surprisingly quiet.”

“Doesn’t it get to you?”

“What?”

“The boredom. Hours and hours cooped up down ‘ere.”

Frost walked silently beside him as they approached the ladder. Paddy waited for a response from him. Frost had spoken to him about his father, but there were still missing pages. Paddy knew only so much about him, and he wanted to know more.

“Frost?”

“How could I be bored when I have you to entertain me.”

Paddy wasn’t certain how to reply. He didn’t know if Frost was being truthful or mocking him.

“The truth, Paddy, is I hate every moment trapped down here. Every second, because all I do is think about...things I do not wish to think about.”

“Like your father?”

“Yes. And Daniel,” Frost whispered.

Here was his opportunity to learn more about this man who had turned Paddy’s life upside down. “Daniel was your...friend?”

“Paddy,” Frost began as he stopped and turned to him. “I will tell you everything you wish to know about Daniel...when we are alone.”

“Move it, scum,” the guard called from the bottom of the hatch.

Frost turned back and walked to the ladder. He stopped at the bottom though, ushering Paddy to go ahead of him with a smug grin on his face Paddy did not understand.

Dinner was an unpleasant affair, as usual. The gruel this evening was particularly ghastly, or maybe, like everything these days, it tasted foul because of his situation. Maybe the palaces best goose would taste sour upon his tongue.

“You never get accustomed to it,” Benjamin said.

“What?”

“How gross cooks’ food is. I can’t think of anything I’ve tasted worse.”

“Not even the wash water?” Paddy replied, a smirk pulling at his lips.

“Penny Jenkins dared me to eat a rotten tomato once,” Jimmy began, “Weren’t so bad.” He shrugged.

“What about you, Frost?” Benjamin asked. “What’s the worst thing you’ve eaten?”

“Catfish.”

“Catfish?” Jimmy asked. “What’s a catfish?”

“Fish. Awful, awful tasting fish.”

Paddy spooned some more of cooks' foul gruel into his mouth, content to sit back and listen. Since his father died Paddy hadn't had much of a family. His mother all but abandoned him and his sister and then Molly had left to live with Aunt Jane. He wasn't sure he could call these men—and child—family but they felt like one.

“What're you smirking at, Paddy?” Benjamin asked.

“Nothin’”

“You ate worse than catfish?”

“No, Jimmy, I haven't.”

“You ever ate turkey, Mr Frost?”

Frost laughed. One of his loud and hearty laughs Paddy had come to love hearing. There were so few moments of joy on this boat, in this life. Paddy wanted to snatch each one and tie them to his heart, so he'd never lose them. Maybe he'd be able to take one from his memory on days when living was too hard and use these moments of joy to stay sane—to stay Paddy.

“Yes, Jim, I've eaten turkey.”

“Mr Collins said you was a rich man. He must be right if you eaten turkey.”

“My father was wealthy—there's a difference,” Frost gently replied.

“Don't see how—”

“Hurry it up. Captain wants you rats back below and locked up tight for the night,” guard Potter shouted over the noise of the mess.

“Why so early?” somebody—maybe Harvey—replied.

Potter was a decent enough man for a guard. Most would have struck Harvey for speaking out of turn. Paddy had long suspected most of the guards were more criminal than the convicts he was locked away with night after night. The only difference was the guard's crimes had validity. No one cared if a convict was mistreated.

"Miss Flintlock's birthday and the captain's having a do for her on deck. We all got invited," Potter answered with a huge grin.

There wasn't a chance Moxey was leaving the convicts entirely unguarded for the night so whichever guards they wound up with would likely be angry about missing the party. Paddy wondered how they'd take their frustration out on the prisoners.

There was no more talk of turkey or wash water as the convicts scoffed down what little food they'd been given, fearful they'd be hurried back to the prison deck before finishing their meagre rations.

The bitter taste of disappointment coated Paddy's tongue as he was marched back below. They had so little freedom so losing even a minute of the precious time stung.

"There's Mr Albert," Jimmy cried as they stepped back into their cell. Sure enough, the rat was scurrying along the far wall, nose sniffing, whiskers twitching. The boy ran past him towards the rat. Jimmy squatted; a small crumb of Christ knew what from the meal they'd just forced down their gullets in his outstretched hand.

Mr Albert wasted no time scurrying toward Jimmy. Humans held no fear for the rodents, now so used to living amongst the filth with them. Paddy was long since used to the stench on board from sweaty, dirty men

but he couldn't get used to the rats. If there was a hell on earth surely this ship must be it.

"You ready, lad?" Walsh called from the door of the cell. They'd be locked in earlier to night, Paddy was certain, but there was enough time for the race to go on as one last group of convicts had yet to eat.

"Sure am," Jimmy called, clutching his rat to his chest as though the rodent were a puppy or kitten.

"Got the track set up. Let's get this race done so you can clean my mess for a week."

"A day," Jimmy corrected. "You coming, Paddy?" he asked when Paddy remained in the cell.

"I'll listen from here," Paddy answered. Jimmy would have all the support he needed from Benjamin and Frost. He wanted to be there for the boy, but he needed a moment of privacy more. He coveted time alone more than most, he suspected.

Frost stopped at the cell door, looking back at Paddy with a smile before following the crowd at Paddy's nod.

Once they were gone Paddy walked around his cell. Though three of its walls were nothing but iron bars, being locked in there still felt oppressive. The bars allowed him to see the length and breadth of the prison deck—and it was small. Far too tiny to hold so many men. Sometimes when he caught a glimpse of the other prisoners all crammed into the deck Paddy's breath grew heavy and he felt as though he could not get enough air.

The number of times he'd laid in his hammock, sweat beading his skin, fighting for enough air was innumerable. He hated every single second on this damn ship. Even the times he'd managed a smile while on board he'd trade for another hour of freedom.

"Not at the race," a voice slithered through his bones sending a chill up his spine. "Little Mouse," it mocked.

Paddy swung around, sick that the name Frost had given him was uttered by those lips, even if he did hate when Frost called him Little Mouse.

"Get away from me," Paddy spat. He wasn't about to show Mander and his giant that he was afraid.

"Hold him," Mander ordered. His giant took an easy step forward, wrapping Paddy in his arms too tightly. He wondered if they meant to kill him.

"Fr—" An enormous paw of a hand slapped over his mouth. Maybe the giant would simply cut off his air and Paddy would sink quietly into oblivion.

"We don't need Frost for this," Mander hissed as he stepped closer.

Perhaps the months at sea, surrounded by death had changed him, but Paddy felt little fear as Mander's rancid breath ghosted over his face. He'd been ready to die after his sentence and losing Zeke, but now he wanted to live. Rather than being afraid of Mander and what he might do, Paddy was angry.

"No, we don't," Paddy's muffled reply loosened the giant's hand on his mouth enough for Paddy to thrust his head forward, so the solid plane of

his forehead connected with the considerably softer tissue of Mander's nose. The movement was so sudden the giant offered no reaction. Mander yelped, clutching his nose and stepped back.

The giant tightened his hold. Paddy twisted in his grip, desperate to be loose. Behind the paw, his mouth worked, teeth searching for purchase on the big hand until he finally had one finger between them. Paddy bit down—hard. The giant snarled but didn't let him go. Instead he twisted Paddy, so they were face to face.

The giant held him by his neck, his other hand pulled back ready to land a punch Paddy knew would send him to the floor. Paddy tensed, bracing for what was coming.

When the blow came it was far worse than he expected. He heard a crack, thunderous in his ears, as the giant's fist connected with his cheekbone. Paddy's vision blurred, his head rocked backwards, his knees buckled. Pain exploded behind his right eye and he wondered if his eyeball might pop out. Bile surged up his gullet as the agony throbbed through his head.

If not for the hand around his throat, Paddy would be laid out on the ground. Paddy tried to focus but his vision was blurry, the dim light of the prison deck doing nothing to help him. He shook his head, but that only made things worse. He wanted to vomit. He wanted to lie down and go to sleep. He wanted to run in the rich green countryside again.

Suddenly, the hand around his throat released him but before Paddy even thought of his next move, that giant fist struck him again, this time in his gut. All the air in his lungs exploded from his body in a whoosh as he folded in half to absorb the blow. Vomit surged out of him with the force of

the strike. For a horrible moment as he fought for breath, he thought he might die.

In the background, over the noise of the rat race, he heard chuckling and knew Mander was having the time of his life. Paddy realised he wouldn't have much time before the giant struck again so he did the only thing he could think of. He struck out with his right fist, hitting the giant right in the bollocks. It was a solid hit, but not his best given he was still recovering from the two thumps he'd taken.

The giant grunted and wheezed and doubled over, clutching his groin.

"You little shit," Mander yelled as he lunged for Paddy from the shadows. Paddy dodged left, but he was woozy from the blow to his head and his movements were slow. Instead of racing for the door, he ended up sprawled on the floor with Mander standing over him, nothing but fury across his features.

He'd lost sight of the giant but had no doubt he'd be back as soon as he shook off the blow to his bollocks. Mander reached down, maybe to pull Paddy to his feet, maybe to hit him, but he didn't get close.

Benjamin came from behind, grabbing Mander around the waist and dragging him aside. Paddy had enough time to get into a sitting position. He'd need to get on his feet if he was going to help Benjamin against both Mander and the giant.

"Paddy? You hurt?" Benjamin shouted as he struggled with Mander.

He wanted to shout to Benjamin to run and get help, but he realised help was already here. Frost was standing in the doorway looming even

bigger than usual, but maybe that was because Paddy was still on the floor and looking up at him. Frost wore a livid expression as he took in the scene.

Frost took three steps, not stopping before he struck the giant a hard blow to his head. Paddy heard the crack from where lay still sprawled on the floor. The giant toppled, crashing into the hull before losing his feet and landing on the floor along with Paddy. The giant didn't move.

Paddy was so dizzy, his cheek aching so badly he wanted to vomit again. He reached for a hammock, clinging to it and using it to help him to his feet.

"Paddy," Frost murmured as he gripped his elbow and hauled him the rest of the way. Frost's fingers were warm and gentle as he traced over the bruised flesh of his cheek.

"It ain't so bad," Paddy whispered, lying because he didn't want Mander to know he'd been hurt. He couldn't help but flinch, though, when Frost's fingers retraced their steps. Frost pulled his hand away and turned to Mander.

"I warned you," Frost snarled.

"Your little mouse warned me too. Threatened to take me eye out with a spoon. He's as much hot air as you, Frost." Mander sneered. Blood was seeping from his nose and the skin around his eyes already looked darkened.

Frost stepped close, Mander trying to back away as he did, but Benjamin held him tight. Frost hit him hard enough for Mander's eyes to roll back as he fell limp at Benjamin's feet. Frost stepped over him and squatted on his haunches beside the giant who had just begun stirring. Paddy couldn't hear what Frost whispered in the giant's ear, but he saw the

man flick his wobbly gaze between Paddy and Mander and then he gave a slight nod. Benjamin was laughing as he hovered near the two men.

Frost stood and returned to Paddy, ushering him out of the cell and toward one of the lanterns providing the precious little light they had.

“Let me see,” Frost murmured as he turned Paddy’s right cheek toward the light. “Mm, not broken, I don’t think.”

“Ouch,” Paddy winced when Frost pushed along his cheekbone. “That’s me damn sore cheek, Frost.”

Frost looked hurriedly about and then bent to brush his lips quickly against Paddy’s injured cheek.

“That better?” he asked, a grin playing on his lips.

Paddy slapped his hand away, but he couldn’t stop his own smile as he glanced at Frost. “What’d you say to giant anyway?”

“I told him if he laid a finger on you again, I’d scoop out both eyeballs and feed them to him.”

Paddy harrumphed. “I s’pose he’ll listen to you.”

“I think they’ll both listen to you now. Mander’s nose was broken before I even got near him.”

“Did that with me head,” Paddy proudly explained. “Mr Botham used to tell me the hardest part of your head was your forehead. Told me if I ever get in trouble, crack someone with me head and I’d be right. He used to get in a bit of a barney nearly every night.”

“Is there anyone in London you didn’t know?” Frost asked, smiling fondly at him.

“Didn’t ever meet His Majesty,” Paddy replied, attempting a wink as he did so.

Frosts’ smile dried up; his handsome face pulled back into serious lines as he watched Paddy. “Do not let them get you alone again.”

“Thank you,” Paddy whispered, “For saving me from them.”

“Do not.” Frost shook his head, the look on his face as close to heartbreaking as Paddy had ever seen. “Benjamin saved you. He was the one who wanted to check on you.”

“And I’ll thank him too, but you did your part.”

In the background two hundred men were cheering for a couple of rats racing around a makeshift track, oblivious to Frost and Paddy standing too close, staring too long. The ship rocked heavily; a storm was coming. The scents from Miss Flintlocks party wafted as far down as the prison deck. But all Paddy heard, saw and felt was Frost’s heartbeat, his strong body and handsome face, and the gentle pull of his soul toward Frosts.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

PADDY

Miss Flintlocks party was a short-lived affair, rudely interrupted by southern gales and torrential rain. For three days a squall stalked the *George III*, as though determined to see her at the bottom of the ocean. For three days the convicts never ate and were provided with less water than usual. If he hadn't felt so sick from the tossing waves Paddy might've worried about dying.

Jimmy had long ago slipped into Benjamin's hammock. Paddy heard him now begging for the storm to stop over and over, pleading with Benjamin to somehow make the squall end. For a time, Jimmy had been curled up on the floor of the prison deck, his head in Frosts lap because at least there he didn't have the swaying of the hammocks to contend with as well as the tumbling of the ship. But as much as Jimmy admired Frost, he idolised Benjamin and with him was where he felt safest.

"You'll feel better down here, Paddy," Frost called again over the roar of the gale.

"I can't get down there," Paddy replied. The very idea of trying to leave his hammock filled him with horror. But the thought of being down with Frost, where he had to admit things didn't look so rough, was appealing.

He gripped the edge of his hammock and carefully threw his legs over, his feet searching for solid ground. The bow of the ship tilted forward as she crested yet another wave, tossing Paddy's hammock sharply forward. He held on, fighting not to land on his arse. Too quickly the ship tilted back

the opposite way sending Paddy scuttling backwards. Any moment he expected one end of the ship to flip right over the other, sending them all to a watery death.

Paddy dropped to his knees, crawling his way to Frost. The ship pitched on, oblivious to its helpless and terrified occupants. He grabbed Frosts' thigh once he was close enough, his fingers digging in too tight, but he didn't care. Frost grabbed him by the back of his shirt and hauled him closer. He hunched into Frost's side, his fingers curling in the cotton of Frost's pants as he clung on.

"All right now," Frost mumbled, his lips pressed to the top of Paddy's head.

"How do you bear it?"

"Used to it. Seems unlikely, but I have been through worse than this."

"But for so long?" They'd had storms on this voyage before but never one lasting three—coming up to four—days.

Frost only nodded. Paddy kept his head down. The sound of the wind beating on the hull was terrifyingly loud but at least it obscured the moans of the tormented men.

"For weeks all I wanted was to see the green countryside again," Paddy spoke loud enough to be heard over the squall. "Now, I don't care what sort of land we make it to so long as we make it."

"She's a sturdy ship, Paddy. It would take more than this to sink her."

"Such as?" Did he really want to know? He couldn't help asking.

“Bigger waves, cannonballs, a reef.”

“Ugh. Shouldna asked.”

They endured a particularly large wave, Frost holding him tightly as the ship rolled before righting itself. “Do you miss this?” Paddy asked.

“This?”

“Sailing.”

“Paddy, we’ve been sailing for months now,” Frost replied.

“I mean being a sailor. Being in the navy.”

Frost’s reply was a clipped, “No.”

“What happened?” Paddy waited, wondering if he’d finally here about Daniel and why Frost had fled the navy after the battle at Navarino. Maybe this wasn’t the best time to ask, but this was about as alone as they’d manage aboard their transport.

“I met Daniel Eyre two years before Navarino. He was the surgeon’s mate aboard the *Asia* when I was assigned to her. We were friends, and then one day we were more.”

“More?” Paddy whispered.

“I loved Daniel. I would have died for him, but it was he who died for me.” Frost’s voice was strong, though quiet, but Paddy heard the threads of misery running through his tone.

“I told you of the battle at Navarino. Early in the fighting I had been injured, not badly, but Daniel found out and he came to me, to tend my wound. He’d just left me to return to the hospital for more equipment when the cannonball struck. My only comfort is he did not suffer.”

“He must have loved you too,” Paddy replied, knowing nothing else to say that might offer comfort.

“Yes.”

“You never went back?”

“I could not. After I lost him, everything reminded me of him. Of what I had lost.”

Though he was tucked into Frost's side, Paddy knew if he could see his face there'd be nothing but a wistful, sad expression over his features.

“Then I went home,” Frost continued.

He needn't say more. Paddy knew what happened once Frost returned to his family. Outside the storm raged ever on, maybe it'd never let them out of its grip, at present it sure didn't seem like it would. On the prison deck of the *George III*, Paddy sat quietly, his stomach rolling to match the pitch of the ship, his head pounding, likely from lack of sleep, his heart aching—the cause of this pain less easy to understand.

Did he hurt for Frost's loss? Or was the pain in his heart from the knowledge Frost loved another? From the second they'd met Frost had spun Paddy around, twisting and turning him inside out, his feelings all over the place—incomprehensible, unexplainable. Over the months Paddy had come to accept he cared for Frost, yet he still never expected the hurt—the jealousy—he felt when he learned Frost had loved a dead man.

He was ashamed of his thoughts. Daniel was long dead, beyond hurting Paddy, beyond being any more than a fond memory to Frost and yet Paddy envied him. *Foolish*.

“What are you thinking about, little mouse?”

“Don’t call me that no more...please.”

“Why?”

“Mander called me that and now I hate it.” He’d never liked the nickname as such, but he’d liked Frost giving him one.

Frost tightened his grip, his lips at Paddy’s ear as he said, “I’m sorry. I should have been there sooner.”

“Ain’t your fault, Frost. I started it with Mander.”

“I believe you finished it too.”

“No. You did.” Frost and Benjamin had been the ones to come to his rescue. Without them the giant would have given him more than a blinker. The skin around his right eye was almost black, Benjamin had said, and swollen so his vision out of the eye was hampered. He’d gotten off lightly.

“You broke Mander’s nose, Paddy, and you’d held up well against Parrish. They know you are no walk over. You will not see them again.” Frost squeezed him again and then continued, “Now, tell me what you were thinking about before.”

Paddy’s skin heated from the shame of what he was about to confess.
“Daniel.”

“What about Daniel?” Frost tensed but pressed on.

“Nothin”

“Paddy. Do not lie to me.”

“I was jealous.”

“Of Daniel?” Frost sounded truly confused.

“Yes.”

“Why?”

Was he ready to admit this? Confessing to Frost might change everything. “Because you loved him,” he whispered, glad for the racket of the storm masking their words.

“I did.”

He wasn't sure what he'd been hoping for, but disappointment rippled through Paddy. Did he think Frost loved him too? Was he expecting a declaration of love from Frost? He should know life didn't work that way. Even if Frost did love him, what could they do? But he'd loved Daniel. Did that mean—

“What's going on in there now?” Frost asked, gently tapping the side of Paddy's head.

Paddy considered telling him nothing again, but Frost had told him not to lie. “How did...I mean with you and Daniel...how...did you—”

“He was my family. My greatest friend and my lover.”

Paddy tensed. He'd suspected, but to have Frost confirm they'd been lovers was shocking, nonetheless. “Lover,” he murmured.

“It's illegal and considered a sin, Paddy. But we loved each other, same as a husband loves his wife.”

“I understand.”

“Do you?”

Paddy did. Maybe not everything about Frost's relationship with Daniel, but he understood them loving each other and to him, it was as

simple as that.

“Hey,” Paddy gasped as his present situation clambered for his attention. “I think the storm’s mostly done.”

The ship gently rocked on calmer waters, the thunderous boom of the storm now only far-off background noise. Around them, men cautiously crept from their hammocks, quietly muttering as they discussed amongst themselves whether they were safe now.

Above them, Paddy heard the creak and crack of the sailors as they scuttled about trying to right whatever misfortunes the storm had wreaked on their vessel.

“Wonder if we’ll get fed soon,” he mused as he pulled away from the comfort of Frosts side. No reason for him to be all over the man now the weather had eased.

“Not soon enough,” Benjamin said from the hammock above them. “I’d give anythin’ just for some bum-charter.”

Paddy laughed and then wondered if Ben had overheard any of what he and Frost had spoken of. “I’m starvin’ too. I’m thinkin’ somethin’ grander. A great feast such as they give the King.”

“What’re reckon’s in that feast, Paddy?” Jimmy’s small voice asked from somewhere behind Benjamin.

“Turkey,” Frost called.

“Potatoes roasted with rosemary,” Hawkins added.

“Chelsea buns,” called another.

“Shortbread.”

“Eccles cake.”

Paddy hadn't tasted most of these, but his mouth watered none the same. Even Mr Albert was starting to look appetising to Paddy's starving stomach, and that thought disgusted him.

“What about you, Paddy?” Benjamin asked.

“I'm like you. Even cook's gruel'd delight my stomach 'bout now.”

Nobody came for them. Not that night and not until late the next day when they were finally taken up to the deck, bypassing the mess and the food that their stomachs were screaming for. A work group of convicts, most of whom were regular troublemakers, were given the task of cleaning out the prison deck. All the hammocks were taken down, each man carrying his up to the deck to be aired out.

Paddy wasn't able to see any noticeable damage, but he wondered if Frost's experienced eyes could. He unrolled his hammock, hanging it over the pen as instructed so the sea breeze might at least give the illusion of freshness.

“How long do ya think?” he asked Frost who worked beside him with his own hammock.

“Can't be more than a few weeks now. We must be close to the coastline.”

“I reckon MaGill won't make it.” Stuart MaGill was the latest convict to present with scurvy. There must be fifty or sixty of them by now. Far more than Wyse could manage. The surgeon's disappointment was

evident, but Paddy wasn't certain if he was thinking of his lost coin or the men's lives.

Frost glanced up, his gaze resting on Paddy for a moment before he murmured, "Unlikely."

To Paddy's horror, Frost still came to him with occasional extra scraps of food. His flogging hadn't dissuaded him at all. Each time Paddy mentioned the subject, Frost abruptly found something of great importance to attend to.

"Moxey might put in for some fresh water for the rest of the trip if he finds some place suitable."

"Land." Paddy's tone was wistful. "I miss dirt," he blurted.

"Are you *nickey*? There's plenty a dirt onboard. I've got layers of the stuff all over."

Paddy favoured Benjamin with a withering gaze. "I meant the ground. I miss solid ground under me feet."

"I miss runnin'," Jimmy added, a faraway expression on his face. "Me sister and me used to run everywhere. Nothin' upset the toffs more than the two of us scamperin' through their legs. Shoulda heard them ladies shrieking. You'd a thought we were rats not children."

"Reckon I'm about ready to kill whoever I have ta so as I can get clean." Benjamin scratched at his lousy arms as he spoke. Just the remembrance of lice was enough to make Paddy itch all over. "Maybe Moxey'll let us take a swim if we pull in somewhere."

"What about them monsters?"

“Reckon they’ll pass on by a skinny little meal like you, Jim. Far more likely to take a chunk outta Frost here.”

“I suppose they would spit me right back out, tasting so bitter and all,” Frost added with a wink to the small boy.

Jimmy laughed. Like the child he was, he tipped his head back and let loose a big chuckle right from his belly. For a moment Paddy wondered if Zeke would have sounded similar one day. He guessed most children found something to laugh about at some point in their sad lives. He only wished Zeke had of lived long enough.

But Zeke and Molly, England and the cold. They were all his past. Paddy was only a few short weeks away from his future. Thinking of the unknown land they were heading for terrified him, but he had friends—family—amongst these people who’d shared this brutal voyage with him. Perhaps that would be enough.

Moxey found a suitable spot to put the ship in a few days later. Or rather one of his lookouts did. The call came clear and early one morning as Paddy lay in his hammock trying not to think about yet another long day ahead with nothing whatsoever to do.

“Land! Land!”

Every man onboard, even the ship itself, brightened with those two shouted words. The prison deck came alive as convicts chatted amongst themselves, hushed whispers wondering where they were, what land had been sighted. Others speculated on the possibility of the captain putting to

shore to replenish water, maybe even find some fresh meat. Who knew what wonders could be found in this strange land?

The convicts crammed on the prison deck had no window to peer out to see the land for themselves. Even the tiniest joys and liberties were stripped from them. Paddy had never in his life felt like a gentleman but since his first step inside Newgate, he'd hadn't even felt like a man. The crown was destroying their humanity scrap by scrap. Regardless of their circumstances, though, just knowing the land was there improved the mood onboard considerably.

“Where'd ya reckon we are?” Benjamin looked to Frost.

“Hard to tell. My guess is somewhere near the Swan River colony.”

“How'd you know?”

“I was always quite fascinated by cartography. I made a habit of studying any maps I came across. Australia, as a recent territory, was of particular interest.”

“D'ya think Moxey'll let us out?”

“I think it likely Moxey will want us cleaned up before our arrival in Hobart town.”

“Ain't never swum before.”

“Stay where you can stand, Jim,” Frost said while gently ruffling the boy's hair. “And you will be fine.”

“Me Ma used to say the fine folk went to the sea for their con...constitution, and me Da always answered, it was a pity the sharks never got more of 'em.”

“Your folks sound like wise people, Jimmy.”

Paddy watched the boy beam with pride at Frosts praise. How different the voyage may have been for the boy if Frost and Benjamin weren't here. How different it may have been for him. Paddy had come to rely on the friendship of both men and the comfort it gave him.

Over the chatter of the convicts, Paddy heard shouted orders and the thumping of footsteps as sailors ran about to obey them. He hoped all the activity meant Moxey had decided to put to shore. After months at sea, Paddy was about ready to offer his right leg just for the chance to touch land again, to feel open space around him for more than the miserly two hours a day he was given on deck.

“I pray Moxey lets us out,” Paddy murmured aloud. “I need to get off this bloody ship. Even for a moment.”

“You about had it, Paddy?”

“I've more than had it, Ben. Don't reckon I can bear much more. I feel like I can't breathe down 'ere no more.”

“Hobart town will not be much further,” Frost answered.

Benjamin watched him carefully, his gaze searching for something Paddy wasn't sure of as he added, “We got ya, Paddy. You gonna make it.”

“Ain't you sick of it?” Did nobody else feel as deathly weary of this boat as he did? Was no one else ready to jump overboard just to escape. “Don't ya feel like down 'ere is getting smaller and smaller? The air getting less and less.”

“You all right?” Benjamin stepped a little closer, his face a mask of concern.

Paddy shook his head no, but answered, “Yeah, I’m all right.”

He suspected Benjamin didn’t believe him for a second, but what could be done? There was no choice but to bear the remainder of the voyage.

“I am about done,” Benjamin said after a time. “Ain’t nothin’ I can do though. Just have to hang on.”

Paddy inched closer to his friend. “We got you too, Ben.”

“Hey,” Nathaniel called, “they’re takin’ ‘em out down the end.”

Suddenly the ship shuddered, and they heard the chink, chink, chink of the anchor lowering. “Looks like Moxey’s putting in,” Frost said. He stood stoically at the head of Paddy’s hammock, but Paddy heard the excitement in Frost’s tone. Perhaps the sailor was as eager as all of them to get on dry land if only for an hour.

Frost leant against the hull, putting his ear to the wood as though that’d help him hear through it to whatever was happening on the other side. The convicts quietened, instinctively leaning toward Frost as if doing so would help him in his task.

“Cutters are down. At least one party will be going ashore,” Frost spoke after minutes of silence. “My guess is Moxey will take us in small groups under heavy guard. I would say we’ll be getting that swim.”

Paddy tried not to count his chickens. Moxey was as likely to deny the convicts the simple joy of cleaning themselves in the ocean as he was of

allowing it. But he couldn't help the bubble of anticipation from growing inside him. He imagined the warm sun beating down on him while the cool waters of the ocean stripped months of filth from his body. They bathed most days with the tubs but wiping themselves with wet cloths was hardly sufficient. Even the filth onboard was covered in filth.

A short time later another group of convicts was taken on deck and the first group returned to the prison deck. "We went in the ocean, lads," one of them called as he made his way down the ladder.

"What was it like?" shouted another.

"Twas beautiful. I ain't never felt so clean."

"What's the land look like?"

"Sand's fine and white. Ain't seen a shore like it back in England. Brightest blue sea, waves higher than the cutters. It was a wondrous thing to see."

"I feel like a proper gent for damn sure. Ain't never been so clean. My Mary wouldn't recognise me," Another man giddily added.

"Your Mary has already found a new man, Crawford, ain't nothin' surer."

"At least I had me a Mary, Stu, can't say as any of the ladies'd be chasing after you."

Paddy smiled as the returning convicts carried on, answering questions and joking amongst themselves. He'd never seen any of them so happy during this voyage. Seemed Jimmy's mother was right about swimming in the sea being good for one's constitution.

“They ain’t seen no monsters,” Jimmy said after the fifth group returned. “Somebody woulda mentioned ‘em.”

“Yes, somebody would have,” Frost answered.

“P’raps it’s too hot for sharks ‘ere.”

Jimmy was right about it being hot. No hotter than the time of the fire when Frost had told them they were near the equator, but still, the weather was much warmer than they were used to.

“I remember the night I got nicked,” Paddy mused, “Ain’t ever been so cold. Thought maybe the Arctic was moving down to swallow us up. Stood there, freezing my bits and wishing for warmer weather.”

“Guess you got your wish.” Benjamin smiled.

“Guess I did.” Paddy laughed, because he had to. He’d go mad if he let his situation get the better of him and laughter felt good.

“Remember what I said, Jim. Stay where you can stand, and you won’t get in trouble. The waves will try to pull you out to sea, but then they’ll push you back to shore.” Frost’s voice rumbled with authority. “You get in trouble, call out for me and I’ll come get you.”

“You lot, get moving,” Steele bellowed, “And hurry up about it. I want my turn in the ocean too.”

Paddy followed Benjamin up the ladder. Jimmy was ahead of Ben, chattering excitedly. Frost, as usual, was behind him. The sky was the brightest blue he ever recalled. The sun a fierce orange orb lowering toward the horizon. Night would fall soon but the heat wasn’t abating. The coast was decorated with trees of differing heights, but they looked nothing like

the trees of England. The green of the leaves was duller, greyer than the brightness of home, the ground a shade closer to red than brown.

If the months at sea hadn't confirmed he was far from home, this alien land would have.

“Over the side,” Moxey shouted. “We will have rifles on you at all times so do not think of doing something foolish. Any attempt at escape will be severely punished.” The captain was resplendent in his full attire today. Perhaps he had expected a welcoming committee. His breeches were whiter than Paddy thought possible amongst the filth of this ship, his navy coat perfectly pressed.

Paddy stopped listening to the captain's bluster as he hooked a leg over the side of the boat and began making his way down to the cutter. He tasted salt in the air, a clean freshness he'd been denied for too long.

The small cutter rocked as he stepped into it and took a seat alongside Benjamin. Jimmy sat at the side, his arm hanging over the edge as though trying to reach the water. Once Frost and a few others were seated they began rowing toward shore. Two armed guards sat at either end while the convicts manned the oars. Paddy saw more armed men lining the shore, their rifles already pointing at the approaching cutter.

They'd have no trouble from him. All Paddy wanted was to swim and feel clean.

A couple of men toward the bow leapt over the sides as the small boat approached shore. They held it steady as the others climbed out. They'd left their shoes onboard, their bare feet hitting the cool water as they left the cutter.

Paddy laughed, unbridled. He hadn't felt anything so good in too long. He curled his toes in the sand, dug them in. The feeling of earth between his toes was the grandest he'd ever felt.

"Up 'ere," Lieutenant Adams called to them as soon as they hit the sand. "You'll have one half of an hour to clean yourselves in the ocean. My men are watching you at all times and they will shoot."

The convicts in Paddy's group were already stripping before Adams' had even finished speaking. Paddy joined them, hurriedly shucking his pants and undergarments. They were almost rags by now and no amount of scrubbing would ever clean them, but they were everything he owned—even if the king could still claim ownership.

"Come on," Benjamin called as he headed toward the water, the pale skin of his arse and legs practically glowing in the sunlight.

Jimmy and Paddy ran after him, whooping and splashing as they reached the waves. Paddy turned to find Frost and almost immediately wished he hadn't. Frost walked calmly to the water's edge. His thickly muscled legs were mesmerising to watch, but then Paddy's gaze drifted to his prick, his breath catching as he did.

By the time he'd dragged his gaze back up to the mans' face, Frost was openly laughing at him.

"Stop it," Paddy grouched as Frost drew near.

"Then stop looking at me in that manner." Frost smirked.

"I can't...what manner?" Paddy murmured. This was a conversation he did not want others to overhear.

“As though you wish to devour me.”

Before he was able to formulate a reply, Frost dived under the waves leaving Paddy to gape after him. The man’s form was captivating. Paddy had never seen such perfection in a human form before, though his experience with desire for others was limited. Paddy shook thoughts of such attraction from his head and threw himself under the waves.

He surfaced with a cough and splutter, but he was invigorated. He let the waves lift him as they raced toward shore. To his left Jimmy stood, his face a mixture of concentration and excitement.

“All right, Jim?” he asked.

“Yeah. I’m just keepn’ an eye out for me Da’s monsters.”

“I’m watching for you. Enjoy the water, Jimmy.” Benjamin came to stand at Jimmy’s side, the boy noticeably relaxing as he did so. Benjamin had told him once he’d wanted to be a father one day—that day seemed to have arrived.

Suddenly, Paddy’s legs went from under him, the saltwater swirling over his head as he was pulled under. He attempted a scream, but his mouth filled with the ocean. Almost immediately he was righted, Frost coming up beside him laughing like a maniac, while he coughed up the gallons of sea he’d swallowed.

“What the bloody hell you doin’?” Paddy tried to put anger in his tone, but Frost’s laughter blunted his ire. He found himself smiling at him instead.

“Trying to drown you, of course.”

“There’s your bloody monsters, Jimmy,” Paddy cried, pointing at Frost who was swimming away from them. He cut smoothly through the water as though he’d been born to the ocean rather than the land.

Paddy chased him, foolish though his attempt was. He had no idea how to swim as Frost was, so tried to run instead. The waves buffeted him to and fro, so he hardly made any ground at all. His body delightfully assaulted by the smells, sounds and sensations of the ocean. He was so alive. The last few months of boredom and misery blotted out by this one miraculous day.

Ahead of him, Frost suddenly changed direction, his large body cutting through the water too fast for Paddy to outrun. At the last second Frost submerged, his big hands grabbing Paddy’s legs once more to drag him under. This time Frost did not let go of him. Instead he wrapped his arms around Paddy’s waist holding him close as they spun in the choppy water.

Even as they came up for air, Frosts’ hands stayed on his sides, their faces so close they were almost touching. Paddy grabbed Frosts’ upper arms, revelling in the feel of his muscles bunching under his touch.

Too soon, Frost released him, and they drifted apart, though neither looked away. The memory of the one simple kiss they’d shared weeks ago flared brightly in Paddy’s mind, his body reacting in such a way it was impossible for him to step out of the water any time soon without embarrassment.

“It has been far too long since I have been in the sea,” Frost began, perhaps trying for normal conversation to assuage the increasingly awkward

situation. “There is nothing more benefiting to mind and body,” he concluded, winking as he did so.

Paddy tossed his head back, rolling his eyes in frustration. “Why do you have to be so bleedin’ difficult?”

“I am?” Frosts’ voice was too close and, too late, Paddy realised he was about to get another dunking. If Frost didn’t stop touching him this way, he’d never be able to walk out of the water with his dignity intact.

Frost was behind him this time, his hands cinched on Paddy’s hips as he rolled them under the waves. His face pushed into Paddy’s neck as they tumbled together in the ocean. He wondered if Frost was kissing him or if it was only the force of the ocean pressing him into such a position. Just as they surfaced, he felt Frosts lips pull away from his skin.

“Frost...”

“Easy, Paddy. I’ll leave you alone now.”

Paddy wanted to demand he do no such thing. He wanted to beg him to hold him close always, never let him go, but such a request was foolish. They’d both be hanged if Moxey even suspected anything of the sort between them, but the feel of Frosts body against his, the warmth in his heart blooming whenever Frost touched him almost made it seem worthwhile.

Frost swam away, Paddy doing nothing to stop him, though there was little he could do. Instead he drifted toward Benjamin who, despite his promise to Jimmy was watching Paddy rather than the ocean. His expression was of confusion morphing to understanding. He smiled as Paddy approached.

“Thought Frost had drowned ya for a minute there.”

“Me too. He knows what he is doing in the water.” Paddy attempted to sound nonchalant, but he heard the quake in his voice.

“I think our Mr Frost is competent at all he does.” Benjamin turned back to Jimmy, the grin on his face widening.

“So it would seem.” Paddy acknowledged. “How bad do ya reckon it’ll be? When we get to Hobart town.”

Benjamin didn’t turn away from watching Jimmy as he answered, “I don’t think we’ve seen the worst of things yet. They say the governors a fair man, but there’s a few under him who’ve got a cruel streak.”

The sun was almost to the horizon by now, the bright oranges and pinks bleeding into the blues of the ocean. The sunset was the most beautiful Paddy had ever seen. If only he were free to enjoy it.

“I ain’t gonna cause trouble, Ben. Seven years is already a lifetime. I ain’t given the king any more than that.”

“I been thinkin’ about what Nathaniel said. Getting some land when me time’s up. Reckon two smart young lads such as we are could make a real fortune out this way. Like startin’ over. London done us no good, but Hobart town might treat us a bit kinder. Maybe we could join our land and become one of ‘em posh landowner types. They say farmin’ land is real good.”

The idea of joining in an endeavour with Benjamin was appealing. He knew little about farming and he suspected Benjamin knew no more than he did, but they were smart, so perhaps they could make something of themselves out here. Maybe he’d even be able to send for Molly.

“I reckon I’d like that,” he murmured.

“P’raps we could even request Frost for one of our convict labourers?”

The reminder of Frost still being a prisoner when he’d be free wasn’t an easy blow to bear. But Benjamin was right. They could ask for him and at least Paddy would have some comfort knowing he wasn’t under the whip of a brutal taskmaster.

“P’raps we could.”

“Maybe we could get a little place by the ocean, so Jimmy’ll be able to swim,” Ben continued, now fully invested in his dreams of the future. “I’ll find meself a young lady to keep house for us. Have some young uns’ of my own. We’ll have a merry old time of it.”

“That we would, Ben.”

Benjamin spoke so emphatically that Paddy saw the house, he pictured the dwelling sitting on the bluff behind him now. Just a small cottage, nice veranda out front for them to sit on in the evenings and watch the sunset. Jimmy’d be playing in the sand, maybe joined by Benjamin’s lady and their little ones, their bellies full after the evening meal, their faces lit up with smiles. He and Benjamin would share an ale as they watch them. They’d talk about the farm: what needed to be done, how they could make even more money.

Somewhere in the picture he’d fit Frost. He owed the man a slice of that happy future after all he’d done for him on this voyage.

“Right now, out ya get!” Lieutenant Adam’s called.

Their swim hadn't been long enough, not by a long shot, but men like them had to take whatever tiny little joys they were granted and be grateful for them. They trudged out of the ocean slowly, doing their best to draw out the time they had away from the boat. How were they supposed to go back into the dark filth of the prison deck after being out on this glorious day in this beautiful place?

"That was bloody amazing," Jimmy shouted as he dressed himself, his excitement making his voice too loud. "Did ya enjoy it, Paddy?"

"I did."

"And no monsters. Maybe it is too hot 'ere for 'em."

"Maybe," Benjamin replied, smiling and patting the boys head.

"I could live 'ere. Reckon it'd be real good."

"P'raps one day, Jim."

"Yeah. Yeah I reckon."

Paddy recalled Benjamin's words from only moments ago. He could see the remote chance that they could have Benjamin's dream. All of them. All they had to do was survive the next seven years in hell.

Despite the weeks that had passed since his flogging, there were many nights where comfort eluded Frost. His healing back burned or itched or many times simply ached.

Those nights he spent tossing and turning, shuffling about in his hammock in a futile search for a comfortable position which might allow him to find some rest. He tried to be as silent as possible so as not to awaken his companions or invite questions from Paddy's incessant curiosity.

Frost was well aware Paddy felt guilt over what had occurred despite having no cause for blame. Paddy had never asked or even hinted at Frost stealing food for him—the thought would likely never have even occurred to the young man. Paddy had little in the way of self-preservation skills. A fault of character Frost would need to help him with if Paddy expected to survive his seven years of imprisonment.

“What the bleedin’ hell’s wrong, Frost?” Paddy whispered. His voice was close, too close for Paddy to still be in his own hammock. He must have slid out unnoticed by Frost and now stood at his side.

“I cannot sleep,” he replied softly.

“I know that,” Paddy huffed with that tone of frustration Frost had grown to love. “But why?”

Frost considered lying, but even in the pitch-dark Paddy was likely to sense his dishonesty. “My back is paining me.”

A soft puff of breath escaped Paddy, gently stirring the hairs around Frost's forehead. Paddy stood so near, and yet Frost could not even see his outline.

“How often are you in pain?”

“Not very,” Frost replied, a small lie. His back did not bother him every moment, but certainly more than not very often.

“Liar,” Paddy whispered.

Frost smiled in the darkness, wishing he could see Paddy’s face. Was he smiling too? Or was his expression pulled into the scowl he wore when displeased with something or someone?

“Will it help to sit on the floor?”

“It hurts to lean upon the hull. That is the problem with the hammock. Regardless of position the canvas pulls around me, rubbing against my skin.” On a rare occasion he’d found comfort lying on his stomach, but breathing was not easy in that position. Frost doubted even a feathered mattress of the highest quality and softness would help him.

“Come on.” In the darkness Paddy’s small hand somehow found his own and tugged gently. “I’ve got an idea.”

Frost was very tempted to tease Paddy in the way that had become natural between them, but he was far more interested in seeing if his idea would help. He carefully disentangled himself from the hammock and stood quietly awaiting further instruction.

Paddy led him by the hand in the direction of the hull. “Sit here”—Paddy began sliding to the floor and Frost followed him—“Wait a minute.”

Frost remained on his knees, listening as Paddy moved about in the blackness, until Paddy’s hands once more found him in the dark. He allowed himself to be pushed and manoeuvred until he understood Paddy’s actions. He laid gently on his side, facing away from Paddy who leaned against the hull, and rested his head in Paddy’s lap. The position offered him respite from any pressure on his back with the added pleasure of being so familiarly close to Paddy.

“Better?” Paddy asked.

“Much,” he whispered. As comfortable as he was, Frost was certain he did not want to sleep thus. He wanted to remain awake to enjoy every moment of this intimacy with Paddy. Memories of holding Paddy’s naked body while in the ocean earlier assaulted him. The want roared through his muscles.

“Talk to me, Paddy.”

“About what?”

“Some more of your mythology.”

One of Paddy’s hands rested on Frost’s shoulder, the other gently tangled in his hair as he sifted his fingers through the long locks. He’d be lucky if he wasn’t asleep within minutes. How was he to fight the comfort Paddy offered?

“I think you know the myths as well as I,” Paddy replied.

True, Frost’s education had been robust and included many hours reading of Greek and Roman mythology. But his readings had been dry, dull affairs that had not piqued much interest. When Paddy spoke about anything which he found interesting he became a natural storyteller.

“Do you know about Ganymede?”

Frost knew a little of the tale. Myths such as Ganymede were not taught in school—the subject too taboo, but Frost had known men willing to learn of such things regardless. He wasn’t about to pass on the chance to hear the story from Paddy, though.

“Very little. I have heard the name, that is all.”

“Ganymede was the third son of the king and queen of Troy. He was said to be the most beautiful creature to ever walk the earth. Women wept and fainted at the sight of him and men...well they desired him also.”

Frost smiled as he imagined the blush that would be creeping up Paddy’s throat to pinken his cheeks. “He must have been very handsome indeed.”

“He was. But not just on the outside. It was said that he was as beautiful on the inside: kind and caring, always welcoming with a genuine smile. I guess he was about as close to perfect as a man can get.

“One day Zeus spied him and wanted him for himself. So, he became an eagle and flew down to steal him. He took him back to Mount Olympus where they became lovers. But it wasn’t just physical desire. Zeus loved Ganymede for his company and the person he was.” Paddy’s fingers toyed with his hair as his voice turned wistful. “Zeus turned Ganymede immortal and made him his cup-bearer until, eventually, he turned him into the constellation Aquarius.”

After a protracted silence and stilling of Paddy’s fingers, Frost asked, “Are you well, Paddy?”

“Imagine such a love that you’d want ta spend all eternity with that person?”

At one time Frost had imagined he’d have been content with Daniel for eternity and had events not happened as they did, he might have been. But if Daniel had lived and Frost not gone home to kill his father, he would never have met Paddy. Did one make up for the other? Should he be glad Daniel was dead because his death had led him to Paddy? No. He would

never be glad of losing Daniel. Nor would he consider Paddy merely the silver-lining to Daniel's death.

Life had happened and Frost had adjusted. He'd lost and he'd gained. His path was set regardless of his choices. Immortality was for myths. Frost must enjoy the limited time he'd been fortunate enough to be given with two men he'd come to love.

"I do not wish for immortality," Frost responded after a time.

"Why not?"

"Firstly, because I would not wish to watch all those who I love die," he began. He'd lost Daniel and it had nearly killed him. "And secondly, I do not wish to take life for granted."

"'Spose if you could never die, you'd have nothin' to really live for."

They remained silent for a time before Paddy spoke again, "His parents were proud, ya know, though they got all the finest horses too, so that musta helped."

"Forgive me, Paddy, but whose parents?"

"Ganymede's. Zeus gave them horses to make up for stealing their son, but they were proud he was cupbearer to Zeus. Reckon they'd 'a been as proud if he'd 'ave run off with some poor bugger from down the road?"

Frost laughed, as softly as he could manage. "I believe the ancient Greeks thought quite differently about such things as we do now. Homosexuality was not a crime, nor frowned upon as it is in today's society."

"Reckon we oughta be more like them Greeks."

“Indeed,” Frost murmured as he tried to imagine such a world where he would be free to walk down Bond Street with Paddy on his arm. “Perhaps one day, Paddy.”

Frost would never know those days, but he’d be content with stolen moments alone with Paddy. Certainly, he enjoyed the physical pleasure of being with a man but Frost craved intimacy. He missed the long hours he and Daniel had spent engaged in conversation. At least he’d at one point had the freedom for that. What was left of his life would be different. There would be no freedom to simply sit down and talk with Paddy, perhaps over a meal or as they strolled about.

At most, all he had to look forward to were stolen seconds to share with Paddy.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Great Australian Bight late March 1835

PADDY

For two days Moxey kept *George III* in the little bay before sailing onwards. The convicts hadn't been allowed back in the ocean after the first day. Instead they'd had to endure listening as the crew and free men and women aboard had splashed and played all day. Paddy and his fellow prisoners had been locked in their cells so not even a guard was needed on the prison deck.

The second day in the bay, as they'd laid in their hammocks listening to the revelry, had been a tough one. After the pleasure of their ocean swim, getting back to the normalcy of their grim existence in the prison deck was hard. The deck was hot and dark, there was no breeze to even move the air around.

Once they'd set sail again, the boredom returned.

"Good Christ I'm about ready to tear through that bloody wood to get outta here," Benjamin groaned from his hammock.

"Four bells has just gone, Goodall. Shut yer head so we can get some shuteye. They'll be callin' us for first meal any minute."

"Why don't you shut your head, Farmer. Stop bein' an old rusty gut," Benjamin shouted back.

There'd naturally been a few harmless scuffles amongst the men over the duration of the voyage. They were packed in so tightly together there

couldn't not be fights. Benjamin had never been in one though. He was generally calm and happy, most of the convicts seemed to like him.

Paddy heard Rufus Farmer leap from his hammock, his feet hitting the deck with a dull thud. He listened as another man moved seconds later. Farmer was a bit of a loner, so he guessed it was Benjamin he heard. Nathaniel wouldn't bother to get involved, Jimmy was likely asleep so that left himself and Frost in the immediate vicinity.

As he looked around his cell, all he was able to make out were shadows of men moving in the dark.

"Come on, now," he called as he lowered himself out of his hammock. "Ain't gonna help nothin' by gettin' in a row."

"Gonna make me feel better," Farmer sneered.

Paddy moved, but not quickly enough. He heard fists strike flesh and a whoosh of air as someone absorbed the blow. This was quickly answered with another hit and then another and another. The thuds interspersed with grunts and harsh curses.

He carefully stepped closer, wary of being struck by a wayward blow. "Ben? Benjamin? You all right?"

"I'm all plummy, Pad," Benjamin replied. "Can't say the same for Farmer."

The complete darkness made it difficult for Paddy to see what had occurred. He felt a figure stirring to his left and another moving slower to his right. The space around them all felt too small, so he suspected there was someone else lurking on the edges of this confrontation.

“Think me damn *boko* is broken,” Farmer moaned. He sounded funny, as though he couldn’t get breath through his nose. Paddy smelt the bitter tang of blood. Seemed Benjamin had landed a fine hit.

“Yeah. Well I ain’t gonna see too good outta me left eye for a time,” Benjamin replied with a smile in his voice.

“You pair of barmy louts,” Paddy exclaimed, “I thought you were gonna kill each other.”

Benjamin had the gall to laugh. If Paddy could have seen him, he might have been tempted to give him a thump of his own.

“They are all right now,” Frost said from somewhere in the cursed shadows of the deck. “Sometimes a good row calms a man down.”

“A good bloody row.” Paddy rolled his eyes though it was wasted in the dark. “I’m goin’ to sleep and I ain’t gonna hear no more outta any of you coves.”

The lingering fear for Benjamin made him angry. He’d worried Farmer was really going to hurt his friend, and then for them to turn around and laugh about it. That burned right through his guts. He’d give anything to be alone, if only for a moment. His head was so full of noise and there was no escape. No second of time existed for him when nobody else was around for him to clear his head.

“Paddy?”

“I can’t stand much more, Frost.” He was as close to weeping as he’d been since little Zeke had been lost to him. For months he’d tried to be stoic and bear his fate, but he was hanging by a thread. He’d be lucky if he didn’t find himself shipped right back to Bedlam. “I feel like I’m goin’ mad.”

“Come on,” Frost took his hand, somehow finding it easily in the dark and tugged him forward. “Sit here,” he murmured as he slid to the deck, easing Paddy down with him.

This voyage had stolen so much from them all, not least of which was their weight, but Frost still felt big as Paddy curled into his side, resting his head on Frost’s bare chest.

“You will be okay, Paddy,” Frost murmured, his breath blowing through the long wisps of Paddy’s hair.

“I ain’t never had my hair so long.”

Frost gave a little chuckle and then smoothed the wayward hair back out of Paddy’s eyes. “Sometimes I cannot stand the dark,” Frost began, “Other times I prefer it because at least I cannot see the real horror down here.”

Paddy pulled back, looking where he thought Frost’s eyes were. “Ain’t never heard you complain before.”

“I’m not complaining now. Just telling you how I feel.”

“Why do you hate the dark?”

Frost tightened his grip on Paddy’s waist, pulling him closer. “Because I cannot see the world around me. I cannot see you.”

Paddy allowed silence to settle between them for a moment before he said, “Reckon that might be a good thing most days. I don’t look so good without my valet and fine attire.”

They laughed quietly, conscious of the stillness around them. The other convicts had finally succumbed to sleep, judging by the soft, and not

so soft snoring he heard. Paddy was happy to take this moment of comfort while the men slept on.

‘How are you going to manage, Frost?’ he asked, ‘You've got a lifetime of this.’ Paddy winced because maybe he shouldn't be reminding Frost of the awful life stretching out before him. If there were any fairness, it should be Frost's father living in this purgatory. Not Frost who had only wanted to save his mother from her tormentor.

“One day at a time. Perhaps the good lord will see fit to grant me freedom.”

Paddy had little faith in the good lord and even less in luck. The chances were high Frost would die in chains. “Ain't fair, Frost.”

“No. No nothing about any of this is fair, but it is what we have got.”

Heat flamed through Paddy as anger took hold of him. Paddy wished he was as lackadaisical as Frost about their lives, but he was too mad. Too angry that he, Benjamin, Jimmy and so many others were so poor they had to steal to survive. Too furious that Frost's life was over because he'd had the courage to stop a monster. “Damn that, Frost. Damn that we must bear it shite. Ain't you mad?”

“Anger led me here, Paddy, but I will not let it keep me here.”

“Yeah, well, I'm so mad I just want to lam some poor sod.”

“Do you need Farmer to start a row with you too?”

“Stop laughing at me.”

“I am not laughing, Paddy. If I could get you out of here I would.”

Ridiculously, Frosts words only angered him further. Didn't Frost want to get himself out of here?

"You're shaking, Paddy."

"I'm mad."

Frosts fingers traced a line down his chin, stopping to cup his chin and tilt his face up. Paddy felt his breath on his lips a second before the warm gentle press of Frosts mouth on his. This was a different kiss to the scant others they'd shared. Frost didn't pull away almost immediately as he'd done before, instead he pressed harder, demanding Paddy move with him. A tender push and pull of their lips, and then he felt Frosts tongue gently push into his mouth, the sensation so foreign yet so wonderful that Paddy jumped.

Frost immediately released him, pushing away from Paddy, the pant of his breath too loud in the quiet. "Don't stop," Paddy urgently whispered. "It aches right into my bones."

"What does?" Frost asked.

"Wanting you," he murmured, embarrassed by his need.

Frost groaned softly and dragged him close again, his lips finding Paddy's easily. They were so close, yet they didn't seem anywhere near close enough.

As Frost resumed their kiss, Paddy twisted his body, turning so he was able to straddle Frost's lap, the evidence of their desires hot and hard between them. His hips moved of their own volition, so he was grinding his pelvis into Frost's body. If he had any sense left, he ought to be ashamed of

his wanton behaviour, but he wasn't. Never had he felt something as pleasurable and so right.

He twisted his fingers into Frosts curls, greedily tugging him in closer, though there was already only a sliver of space between them. Frosts hands swept up his back, and then back down so his large palms cupped Paddy's arse. He was held so tightly he wondered if Frost had any intention of ever letting him go. He had no intention of going anywhere.

And then Frosts lips left his, trailing instead down the column of Paddy's throat sending an involuntary shiver up his spine. He was close to jumping out of his skin.

"Paddy." His name fell like a moan from Frosts lips.

"Mm."

"We should stop."

"No."

A chuckle rumbled through Frost, yet he still pushed Paddy away. "We must."

He wished he was able to see Frost clearer, rather than only the dark shadowy outline of the man. He wanted to see into his eyes to try to read whatever was going on behind them. "Frost?"

He sensed the man moving closer again and then felt the gentle press of Frosts lips on his forehead. "If we don't stop now, then I am afraid I will not be able to."

"I don't wanna stop." Paddy traced his fingers over the hard plains of Frosts chest, exploring every inch of the smooth, warm skin. Frosts hands

move gently all over his body as though he too wished to touch every inch of Paddy at once.

“Do you wish to be found naked in my arms, Paddy? Because that’s where you’ll be in another second if you touch me again.” Frost said as he grabbed Paddy’s hands, holding them away from his body. “This isn’t the place for me to touch you the way I want to.”

Sitting on Frosts lap clothed would be difficult enough to justify if they were caught, but to be found naked? As appealing as the idea was, they faced hanging if they were discovered.

“All right,” he whispered, slowly disentangling his body from Frosts and resuming the seat beside him.

His breath heaved out of him as his desire cooled and sense returned. “How do you wanna touch me?” he asked once he’d settled.

Frost pressed closer, his lips once more at Paddy’s ear. “In every way,” Frost growled, sending that increasingly familiar shiver up Paddy’s spine. He allowed himself a moment to enjoy the sensation and then banished thoughts of being naked with Frost—at least for now.

“Frost?”

“Mm?”

“What’s yer name? Yer real one?”

“Jacob Armstrong.”

“Jacob.” Paddy tried the name on his tongue. He liked it. “Why’d they call you Frost?”

“It took you long enough to ask.” Frost sighed, and then resumed, “Captain Curzon gave it to me, after Navarino.”

“Why?”

“He said I must have ice in my blood because I was so cool under fire.” Frost huffed. “He didn’t realise Daniel was dead by then and I no longer cared if I lived or died.”

Paddy searched in the dark for Frost’s hand, finally finding it and twining their fingers together. Frost had suffered terribly with the loss of Daniel and then his mother’s misfortune coming so soon on the heels of that tragedy. Paddy wondered at Frost still being here amongst the living.

“The judge who sentenced me called me Frost, but this time it wasn’t for perceived courage. He thought me a heartless monster for killing a man as great as my father. Wealth and power are excellent costumes for true evil to hide behind. The name stuck and I never corrected anybody.”

“Would you prefer to be Jacob Armstrong?”

“No. My father was Jacob Armstrong and I have no wish to wear his name.”

“What was Daniel like?” Paddy hesitated to ask, and yet he wanted to know the kind of man capable of winning the affections of someone like Frost.

“He was the gentlest man I’ve ever known. Kind-hearted, he loved to laugh, but he was often fierce in his defence of those unable to defend themselves. The notion of battle was abhorrent to him and yet he wanted to be in the midst of it to help those who were wounded. He was an

honourable man who did not deserve his fate and I was truly blessed to have his love.”

“He sounds...perfect, just like Ganymede.”

“He was not. He was the best of men, but he could also be selfish with his time and jealous.”

“Jealous?”

“Yes. Not in a possessive manner. He never believed he was good enough for me, when in fact the opposite was true. He had me on a pedestal so that he thought all who saw me must want me for themselves.”

“He’d have been proud of you, Frost. Of how you saved your mother.”

“Maybe.”

“What’re we gonna do?” The question burst out of him—unstoppable. How was Paddy expected to carry on if Frost was not around? Perhaps it would be easy for Frost. Maybe Paddy was a distraction to him and nothing more, but for Paddy, Frost meant everything to him.

“Will you yell at me again if I say we will bear it?” Frost asked, humour in his tone.

“You can be such a bloody pain, Frost.”

Frost pulled him close again, pressing a kiss onto the top of his head. For right now, they were safe and together. Paddy would just have to hold onto that for as long as it lasted. Everything else he’d face when the time came.

“Paddy, can I speak to ya?” Benjamin asked as he moved to his side while Paddy stood on the deck following the far-off coastline with his eyes. Somehow, he found it comforting knowing land was so near even though he’d have no chance of making it there if the ship did suddenly sink.

“Sure, you can, Ben.”

Benjamin stepped closer so the length of their arms touched. “I, ah. I wanted to warn you. To be careful of Frost.”

Paddy stiffened at Benjamin’s words. Could he know of what happened two nights ago? The possibility that Benjamin had seen them was impossible through the pitch dark of the prison deck, but perhaps he’d heard.

“Whattya mean?”

“I seen how he looks at you...and how you look back, Paddy. Don’t bother me none, but plenty round here will have you swinging if they find out.”

For an ungenerous second he wondered if Benjamin was attempting to trick him into a confession. But he’d seen nothing but kindness in his friend, so he could not believe anything less of him now.

“Knew a few lads, back home,” Benjamin continued, “They made some brass by letting the rich toffs...well you know. A few of ‘em enjoyed it too so I ain’t gonna judge. I just don’t wanna see you hanged. Frost’d have a chance, him being a rich man’s son and all, but you, Paddy? *You* don’t mean nothin’ to those in charge.”

Should he say something? What was there to say. No matter how they felt, neither he nor Frost had the freedom to do anything about it. Not for the first time he wondered how things had worked between Frost and Daniel. Had they found a way to safely be together? Or had they done little more than share a handful of kisses?

“I ain’t gonna say nothing. Swear it, Paddy.”

He turned to look at his friend. He read nothing but sympathy and concern on Benjamin’s face. “I know you won’t.”

They walked together along the edge of the pen. Not much of a breeze blew today, but enough to keep the sails full and the ship moving. “Jimmy getting another lesson from Frost?” Paddy asked as they turned to head back in the direction they’d come from. Paddy was sick of walking in a rectangle. He’d give anything to walk and just keep walking in one straight line for as long as his feet would keep moving.

“Yeah. Something about the rigging today. Jimmy loves learning stuff. Pity he’ll never get an education. Boy coulda run the country one day.”

“Still might. He keeps outta trouble he might get his ticket of leave in four years. Still young enough to do something important.” Maybe Paddy would get an early ticket of leave too, but poor Frost—he was a prisoner for life.

“Maybe. Or maybe he’ll come work on our land. We could have a nice good life one day, Paddy. That’s what I’m holdin’ on to.”

Paddy would hold on to that too. There was nothing else to look forward to, but no matter which way he turned the future over in his mind,

he wasn't able to make Frost fit in anywhere. One way or another, in time, they would be separated.

FROST

“Frost,” Steele shouted through the bars, “Captain wants to see you.”

Beside him Paddy tensed. They were sitting, as usual, on the floor, their backs pressed against the hull as they endured yet another day of boredom, desperately waiting for this one to end too so they could enjoy the brief reprieve of slumber. Frost was used to long days of hard physical work and mental tasks from his days in the navy. He fancied it had taken every ounce of mental fortitude he possessed to remain sane over the long months of this voyage. Physical inactivity and mental boredom were a curse all convicts endured.

In all honesty he must likewise credit Paddy's presence with his continued stability of mind. The young man enjoyed sharing what he could recall of the many books he'd read, often amusing the men of their cell with hours of retellings. Though naturally of a silent nature, Frost sometimes added to Paddy's tales with memories of his own from books he had also read.

“Now,” yelled Steele when Frost did not immediately jump to his feet.

Frost stood, acutely aware of all eyes upon him, not least of which were Paddy's concerned ones. Try as he might, Frost could not imagine what the captain wanted with him—unless he'd been caught stealing scraps for Paddy once more. His back throbbed at the memory of his whipping.

Steele jangled the chains, so Frost stretched his arms out, allowing him to manacle his hands together. Fetters were placed about his ankles. This was not to be a social call, then.

Frost hobbled best he could toward the ladder, not daring to look back at Paddy. The barrel of Steeles musket pressed into his back as he reached the ladder, a subtle reminder of his precarious situation, though after so long it was no longer needed. More than any, Frost knew there was no escape from his fate.

He climbed up a deck, turning right as he ascended, toward the captain's quarters. "Do you know what the captain wishes from me, Steele?"

"Can't imagine what a fine man such as Captain Moxey wants from the likes of you," Steele hissed in reply. Steele was of a good sort of character, fair and not prone to cruelty, but even he was succumbing to the rigours of their journey. Only last week he'd struck a convict for speaking out of turn—an action he had not previously undertaken.

Frost remained silent. He'd be with the captain soon enough anyhow. The door to captains' quarters was within sight. A few more steps and Frost stopped before the closed door.

Steele leaned around him and wrapped his knuckles against the sturdy wooden door.

"Enter," a voice called from within.

Steele jiggled the handle and pushed the door open, his musket quickly returning to Frost's spine once his chore was complete. Frost stepped over the threshold—curious more so than concerned.

“Ah, Armstrong, come in,” Moxey greeted him. “You may wait outside, Steele.”

Frost felt the loss of Steele’s musket but quickly turned his focus to the room in which he now stood. He’d seen many such Captain’s quarters over the years. Each was fundamentally the same, yet each captain brought a piece of himself to the décor also. For Moxey, golden trinkets adorned with precious jewels seemed to be to his taste. A greedy man, as Frost had already suspected.

Only one other man was present along with Moxey and himself— Surgeon Wyse. Had Moxey discovered Frost’s thefts, he felt certain this little encounter would take place upon the deck with all the convicts assembled and either the noose-man or the flogger waiting eagerly for their sacrifice.

“You are no doubt wondering what this little tête-à-tête was about, Armstrong?” Moxey began as soon as Steele closed the heavy door.

He’d give anything for Moxey to call him Frost but he knew it to be unlikely. Moxey was not a man for nicknames and if he suspected Frost did not enjoy being addressed by his father’s name, he’d be more likely to do just that. Pettiness was another easily discernible trait in their captain.

“Yes, Sir.”

“If you recall, Armstrong, I asked you months ago about mutiny aboard this vessel. At the time you gave me your assurances you would play no part in such a plot.” Moxey stilled, his gaze travelling over Frost as though he were searching for something.

“Yes, Sir,” Frost said as the silence stretched on.

“You have been surprisingly true to your word. Men such as yourself can rarely be trusted. With little time left before our arrival in Hobart town I feel easier about our circumstances. As a gentleman to a former gentleman —” Disgust crept over Moxey’s features at the mention of Frost’s apparent fall from gentlemanly graces. “—I wished to thank you.”

Frost bristled at the suggestion he was no longer a gentleman—true as that may be to society—he still considered himself to be one.

“There is nothing to thank me for.”

“Perhaps, but I know about men such as you. A few words from you could stir others to action. Granted any action taken would have been quickly quashed given the weakened state of the convicts.” Moxey smirked, an evil, vile twist of his lips that told Frost all he needed to know of this man.

He held contact with the captain’s eyes as he spoke, “So, this is why you did not stop to resupply. Weakened men are easier to control. You have the deaths of many men upon your head, Moxey, but I suspect a man such as you shall lose no sleep over it.”

“Indeed, the deaths of convicts causes me no concern. I did what I must to ensure a safe passage.”

“A true man can lead and foster loyalty by his reasonable actions—he does not need to starve others into submission.” Frost stood his ground, even knowing Moxey would likely punish him for his words. Wyse remained where he stood, his gaze flicking between the captain and Frost.

“You dare speak to me of a true man? You, who killed his own father—a man of stature and respect—”

“A man who whipped and beat his wife. Do not speak to me of my father, you have no understanding of the monster he was.”

“Who is the monster, Armstrong—a noble man who died at the hands of his own flesh and blood, or you, a lowly convict who means nothing to anybody?”

Frost smiled at Moxey’s words. The captain was so very wrong. He might be a lowly convict, but Frost meant something to Paddy, and that was the greatest achievement he could attain.

“I think you’d best head back, Frost,” Wyse said.

Frost turned to leave but thought better of it. He had more to say. “I am glad there was no mutiny, Moxey, for the sake of the convicts and soldiers who might have died. But I walk out of here knowing you to be a coward and a brute, but worst of all, a man with no honour. You allowed men, even your own sailors, to die so you could sleep soundly at night. Your actions are a disgrace to the King.”

He watched Moxey’s eyes widen as he drew in a breath. He expected at any moment for the captain to call for Steele and order another lashing, but he did not. Instead Captain Moxey simply hissed, “get out,” between gritted teeth.

Frost turned and knocked for Steele to open the door. He did not wait for further words before stepping out of the room, the familiar press of Steele’s musket against his back. Perhaps once the shock of Frost’s words had worn off the captain would call for his punishment. Frost did not worry about that, now. Instead, he was basking in the satisfaction of telling Moxey exactly the kind of man he was.

The trip back to the prison deck passed in silence. If Steele had heard anything said in the captain's room, he said nothing. Frost didn't volunteer the information either.

As expected, the men of his cell were eagerly awaiting his return. Paddy's eyes glowed with piqued curiosity. Frost waited patiently while Steele removed his bindings, and then moved back to the spot he'd been seated in before being summoned before Moxey.

He sat quietly, knowing any moment Paddy would burst. It came quicker than he expected.

"Well?"

"Well what?" he answered, turning to catch Paddy's gaze. The lanterns were still lit, providing them with dim lighting. In the flickering glow, Paddy looked so very thin and tiny, the sight enough to kindle Frost's anger at Moxey once more. He might have lost Paddy. This tender-hearted young man may have left this earth because of Moxey's dishonourable behaviour. Frost's fists clenched where they rested against his thighs.

"What did Moxey want?" Paddy asked, frustration rife in his tone.

"He wanted to thank me."

"Fer what?" Benjamin asked.

"For not organising or participating in a mutiny."

"What?"

Frost smiled, deciding it was time to stop playing. "Months ago, Moxey asked me not to become embroiled in a mutiny. I agreed and he was merely thanking me for keeping my word."

Relief bled from Paddy's gaze as he watched Frost. He tuned out the muttering of those around him and focused only on Paddy. He knew the reception he was likely to get from Paddy if he divulged all that occurred in the captain's room.

"What else?" Paddy asked softly.

Frost turned so his bigger body was blocking Paddy from the other occupants of the cell. His hands twitched distractedly as he fought not to reach out to stroke a finger along Paddy's jawline. He yearned to kiss him there.

"I might have told Moxey he was a coward and a dishonourable fellow," Frost replied sheepishly.

"You did what?" Paddy leapt to his feet, and Frost's hopes for keeping this part of the meeting only between he and Paddy were dashed. "What the bleedin' hell's wrong with you? Did you enjoy the lash so much last time that you want another taste?"

"Paddy, hush."

"I will not bloody well hush. Captain could've had you flogged again, you daft bastard."

Despite himself, Frost smiled as Paddy proved how much he cared, even knowing that was not the young man's intention. He reached a hand toward Paddy, who slapped it away.

"You always gotta be so damn honest. Why didn't ya just tell Moxey he was the greatest damn captain to ever live and be done with it." Even in the low light, Frost saw the colour rising in Paddy's cheeks. He was

beautiful when his passions were stirred—even if it was only anger directed toward Frost.

“Padd—”

“Shut yer damn mouth, Frost.” Paddy began pacing, his anger more explosive than Frost had anticipated. “Argh! I could just—”

Frost reached out and pulled Paddy down, so he was kneeling at his side. Paddy’s thin body shook, his eyes were large and angry. “Forgive me,” Frost whispered.

Paddy sucked in a breath and bowed his head. “Moxey coulda killed ya.”

“I am sorry.”

Paddy glanced up at him, eyes gleaming, and shook his head. “Don’t ‘cha get it? I can’t do this without you.” His words were hushed, little more than a breath to conceal them from the watching crowd of men, but they struck Frost like a hammer blow—because they were reciprocated in Frost’s very soul. All the promises he’d made to himself after Daniel’s death had been for naught.

Somewhere between the green shores of England and the unknown of Hobart town, he’d fallen in love with Patrick Maybrick. What new pain that was sure to bring to him he couldn’t be certain, but he’d do what he’d always done. Endure.

And give everything of himself to ensure Paddy lived.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

E'Entrecasteaux Channel, Van Diemen's Land, April 12, 1835.

PADDY

“Can’t be too much longer, can it?” Jimmy asked for the umpteenth time. The cry of land had come hours ago and talk amongst sailors on deck had told the eavesdropping convicts that the land they’d spotted had been Van Diemen’s Land. By morning, according to Frost, they should be in Hobart town.

“Several more hours, Jim. Captain had the topsail double reefed, and the leadsman on constant watch. He doesn’t want us to get caught on any unchartered reefs.”

“Whattya reckon the barracks’ll be like?”

“Only a little better than here, Jimmy,” Nathaniel answered. “Your *kife’ll* be wooden bunks so rickety you’ll wonder they don’t fall apart every time you get in ‘em. But there’ll be a mattress and two blankets. Foods a damn sight better too.”

“You was in Hyde barracks, Nate. Maybe things here’ll be different.”

“Maybe. But they waint be better.”

“I don’t care,” Jimmy added. “So long as we can get of this bleeding ship, right Ben?”

“Right, Jim.”

“Damn right,” Paddy added.

The convicts in Paddy's cell were lined up, sitting on the floor of the prison deck, their backs against the hull. They were doing what they'd done for the last four months—waiting. Eight bells on the dog watch had sounded a while ago, meaning they were coming up to nine o'clock at night. Perhaps they should try to sleep, but Paddy, for one, was too excited.

The impending end to their nightmarish voyage was in sight and it seemed nobody would sleep this night. Through the small gaps in the timber, the sound of sailors singing floated down to the prisoners. He couldn't make out the words, but Paddy recognised the tune as Rule, Britannia! Mercifully, they weren't singing God Save the King. Paddy couldn't bear the idea of singing to save a man who'd sent them all to their doom on the other side of the world.

“Whatdaya reckon our first meal in Hobart town will be?”

“Why do we always come back to food?” Benjamin asked.

“Because it's all I can think about. We're starving and all I can think about is food.” Nathaniel's voice was as bland as it usually was, as though the man was devoid of any real emotion. Or maybe he'd mastered his feelings and didn't let them show.

“They got sheep 'ere? Maybe some mutton. I ain't had meat in too long.”

The ship rocked and swayed, dancing with the squall they'd watched coming on when they'd been on deck earlier. Water trickled through the prison deck as it did whenever rain was about. Paddy had felt nothing but damp this entire voyage.

“Forget the food,” Paddy said. “I want the fresh air and a clean smell. I’m sick of the stench of sweat and shit. Give me some sweet-smelling flowers or bushes and keep your food.”

“What you on about, lad? I smell like a lady’s cologne.”

“I ain’t never smelt no lady reeking like you,” Hawkins replied. Their mess captain didn’t always chat with them but apparently the knowledge their trip was almost over was enough to make even the gloomier of men cheerful.

“Heave quick!” The muted shout of Captain Moxey seeped through to the men on the prison deck, shushing them all.

Another shout came, this one harder to decipher. “What’d he say?” Paddy asked.

“I think he said hard-a-port,” Frost answered. “He sounds panicked.”

The ship turned sharply, the empty hammocks swinging as she pitched left. The convicts remained quiet, hoping perhaps to hear more commands. Waiting for Frost to tell them all was well and calm once more.

Paddy pushed his thigh alongside Frosts, searching for reassuring comfort. In answer, Frost squeezed his leg. Paddy was beginning to relax when suddenly the ship jolted forward, the men on the prison deck were thrown about while the ship settled and then she shuddered to a complete stop.

“What the bleeding hell was that?” Benjamin’s voice was close to a scream.

“We hit something,” Frost replied, tension but no real panic in his tone just yet.

“A reef?”

“No. Something more.” Frost was on his feet in seconds, his body rigid as he strained to hear anything. “Get up. Get up now!” he shouted.

Water was streaming into the prison deck, faster and more voluminous than on previous occasions when storms had drenched the ship. She was tilting too. Too far on the left for any doubt the ship—and the men aboard—were in serious peril.

Above the men trapped in the prison deck, feet scurried over the deck, panicked and feverish in their movements. Screams came from above, though the words were lost in the squall, the terror in them was plain enough to make out.

“Steele!” Frost shouted. “Steele!”

A muttered response floated down from the darkness of the hatchway.

“What’s happening?” Frost called.

“Hit a rock! She’s goin’ down!”

Paddy’s body chilled at the words. Their boat was sinking, and they were trapped. Surely Moxey would have them released and not left to drown.

“Then for Christ sake unlock the cells,” Frost demanded, his voice still calm amongst the growing panic.

“Can’t. Captain hasn’t ordered it yet.”

“We’ll die down here, Steele.” Frost spoke coolly, ice in his tone.

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be a fool, Steele. You’ll have all these deaths upon your head.” Frost was bartering for their lives and though Steele had always treated them decently, Paddy wasn’t assured enough to believe he’d disobey his captain to save them.

“I have to go,” Steele replied, his voice further away.

“Steele!”

There was no answer. They were alone. Outside of the prison deck chaos clearly reigned. The noise of the storm drowned out much of the screaming and carry on of the ship’s passengers, but the convicts heard enough to know things weren’t going well up there. How long did they have before she went down?

Suddenly, a great tear rent through the air followed by a colossal boom. The ship shuddered and lurched, tipping further on her side, throwing her passengers about as though they were nothing.

“The mizzen mast,” Frost grunted as they strained to right themselves once the ship settled again. “Must have snapped.”

“How’d ya know it weren’t the mainmast?” Jimmy asked, his voice surprisingly calm.

“She’d have torn the ship in two if the mainmast had of come down.”

“We don’t need no account, Frost,” Tibbins cried, “We need ta get outta ‘ere.”

The end hatch screeched open and Paddy heard convicts calling out to the surgeon who'd entered and was trying to calm them.

“Silence! Silence, I say,” Wyse bellowed. “The ship is sinking, men. I will stay with you until the captain returns with the cutters to see you all to safety.” Wyse walked along the passageway between the cells that ran the length of the ship. He held a gas lantern and Paddy was pleased to note his hand was steady.

“What’s Moxey’s plan?” Frost asked as the surgeon neared.

“He’s taken the ladies and most of the freemen to shore already. We lost one of the cutters when the mizzen mast fell, but he’ll be back for you all.” Wyse held Frost’s gaze as he spoke. Paddy discerned no deceit in the man’s eyes—he, at least, believed his words to be true.

How far was shore? How long would it take for them to return? Would the ship still be afloat by then? None of the answers bore thinking about. Paddy stood close to Frost, needing his strength now more than ever. Ben stood at his other side with Jimmy squeezed in between them.

The water lapped above their ankles now and continued to rise steadily. Many of the convicts were becoming increasingly agitated, some screaming to be freed, others weeping. Frost was all action, untying their hammocks and unknitting the ropes that held the heavy canvas to the wooden beams.

“What’re you doing?” Paddy whispered as he knelt alongside him.

“Getting us some rope,” Frost distractedly answered, his eyes never leaving his task of unknitting ever more rope. He thrust a handful to Paddy. “Hold this.”

“Why?” Paddy asked even as he did as instructed.

“Ben. Jimmy. Here.” Frost tossed rope to Benjamin. The light from Wyse’s lantern all they had to work with.

“Jimmy,” Frost spoke calmly to the shaken boy. “Tie it around your waist. A bowline. Do the same with this rope around Ben. Then tie the ends together—a figure eight, in case.”

“Yes, Sir,” Jimmy answered, starting to work at once.

“Paddy, come here,” Frost called as Paddy watched the young boys’ nimble fingers secure the rope about his waist. He stepped closer to Frost.

“Arms up,” Frost instructed, and then looped the rope he held about Paddy’s waist. Frost pulled the ends tight—almost too tight—and then released them a little. He tied a knot surely and quickly about Paddy and then another around his own waist. Then he tied the ends together so they were linked by a length of rope, short enough they could not go too far from the other, but long enough for them to move freely about.

“Paddy, watch me,” Frost ordered. “If anything happens to me, pull the rope like so”—Frost pulled one section of rope and the knot that joined them came apart—“Then do what you can to save yourself.”

Paddy nodded, a flurry of thoughts rampaging through his mind. What might possibly happen to Frost that Paddy would wish to be free of him? And then the answer came to him as a frigid chill in his veins. Frost meant if he were to die or become trapped, Paddy must free himself of the burden of Frost’s body. The thought was deplorable.

“Frost—”

“No. You must promise me, Paddy. You must promise me you will not die. Promise me you will not die, Patrick Maybrick,” Frost pleaded, sounding more desperate than Paddy had ever heard him.

“You must promise me the same,” Paddy murmured as he nodded.

“I will stay alive for you, Paddy.” Frost pulled him into his arms. Paddy wanted him to kiss him, he wanted to taste Frost again—perhaps for the last time—but he knew even now, in the middle of all this, they could not.

I love you. He wished he had the courage to speak the words because he knew them to be true.

Frost held him tighter, his breath heaving out of him. Was it panic and fear, or was Frost as affected by Paddy as he was by Frost? “Little mouse...” Frost choked out, his voice hitching on the moniker.

Paddy allowed the name one last time because it felt right. Frost felt right. The way he felt about Frost felt right—and no person or no book would convince him otherwise. “I love you,” he whispered, the words carried away on the storm. Had Frost heard him? He didn’t know, but time was running out. One day, when they were safe, he’d say the words again, as loudly as he could. He’d make sure Frost knew he was loved in return.

“Guess we’re really in it together now,” Benjamin said as Paddy and Frost broke apart and moved to stand with them. Jimmy was clutching Ben’s hand, his eyes large and frightened in the lamp light.

“We gonna be all right, Mr Frost?”

“We will be, Jimmy.”

The boy nodded, and then leaned in toward Benjamin who wrapped his arms around the small body.

An eternity passed as the convicts remained trapped below. Most had ceased screaming, as their cries had gone unanswered. Wyse had gone onto the deck a couple of times and returned to report the situation. Water was flowing into the ship at a steady pace, but Wyse assured them they had time yet. The ship belched loud and constant creaks as she shifted and broke apart a little at a time.

Paddy held tight to Frosts forearm, refusing to deny himself this one comfort regardless of how the gesture might be taken. They may all be dead soon and the devil take anyone who might care more about Paddy's interest in Frost than the possibility of death at a time such as this.

"Wyse! Wyse, come up now. It is time to go," Lieutenant Adams called down.

Surgeon Wyse looked about as though uncertain what action to take. Unsurprisingly though, he eventually moved toward the hatch leading to the upper decks. As he walked by convicts grabbed at him through the grating and seized him by his hands.

"You promised to stay," men called as Wyse shrugged off their grip and began to ascend the ladder. The noise of the convicts screaming in equal parts terror and anger, far more frightening than the sound of the storm outside as it tore their ship apart.

Waves battered the ship, tossing it about and sending the convicts tumbling and scattering in all directions. As Wyse departed, he took with him their last vestige of hope. They were to be abandoned to the fates of the ocean.

Frost strode to the cell bars, taking Paddy with him via their connected rope. His large hands twisted about the bars and he shook them violently. With no other ideas or obligations to occupy his time, Paddy joined him. The bars lacked their usual sturdiness, the battering the ship was taking loosening them from their mooring.

“Altogether, men!” Frost shouted. Convicts lined up alongside them, each taking hold of the bars and shaking, testing the barrier, hoping to save themselves.

On the opposite side, toward the very stern of the ship an almighty crack tore through the air and the bars pulled away from the hull, allowing a narrow space for men to push through. Their liberation gave others hope and the men shook the bars harder.

The freed convicts made for the hatchways. Remaining prisoners calling for them to help, many commanding them to find the keys and unlock them, some asking them to avenge their deaths. Paddy tuned out the noise and concentrated on the bars.

But then the most terrifying sound of all echoed throughout the prison deck.

A musket shot.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

“They’re shooting us!”

“Get back! Get back from the hatch!” Frost shouted.

“They’re shooting us!” Nathaniel screamed again.

“Only if we near the hatch,” Frost stated. “Moxey does not want us up there hampering the chances of his men surviving.” Frost’s face was twisted with disgust as he spoke. The dishonour of the captain's actions obviously abhorrent to such an honourable man.

“What do we do?”

“Keep working on the bars,” Frost ordered.

More fleeing men ran to the hatch, their terror of drowning overriding their fear of the muskets. Shots rang out and more men slumped to the floor. The tang of blood filled the air, the screams of the dying louder and more awful than anything Paddy had ever heard.

His body shook, whether from fear or the chill of being wet, Paddy couldn’t be sure. His blood pounded through his body, heart beating loudly in his chest. Death was a constant shadow following in the footsteps of the poor, and not that long-ago Paddy would have welcomed it. But here he stood at its doorstep and Paddy wanted nothing more than to live.

Death was not an end to the agony of his nephew’s loss anymore. Dying now was the end of everything he held dear. Death would mean the loss of Frost, and he wasn’t strong enough to bear that.

The bars shook easily now. Soon they would come away from the hull and they would be free—but only to face the soldier’s muskets.

“How do we get out, Frost? They gonna shoot us.”

“We wait until they’ve gone.” Frost’s voice was strained. The effort of loosening the bars or fear? Paddy couldn’t tell which—perhaps both.

“Then what?” Nathaniel asked, sounding as panicked as so many of the men trapped on the sinking ship.

“Then we do what we must to survive.”

The prison deck was in almost complete darkness, the lanterns blown out by the wind coursing through the breaking apart ship. Regardless, Paddy felt Frost’s gaze bore into him, ordering him to live.

George III settled into a kind of permanency of position against the rock. She shook and rattled but remained in her place. The howling winds continued to buffet against her, but she stood her ground. The terrible rocking and shuddering eased so the convicts were no longer tossed about like rag dolls.

“Again!” Frost roared.

Paddy gripped the bars, cantering his movements to match the others and pushed and pulled with every ounce of strength he possessed. He would not drown down here, trapped like a rat. He’d committed a crime, yes, but he was a good man. This fate was not one of his deserving.

The bars swayed loosely in their mooring. One more burst should have them freed. Paddy took a deep breath and when the order came, he

heaved with all his might. The bars popped loose at the end, tearing free of their restraints and sending men scuttling.

The urge to run pulsed through his body. He wanted to be free, though he knew he'd still be in mortal danger once he made it to the deck. He tried not to think about what must come next: swirling seas, and a long, perilous swim for shore. The possibility of Moxey's men ready with their rifles at any point along the way, kept the icy chill in his veins.

"Ben? You still there?" Paddy called into the darkness. Only the occasional flash of lightning and hints of moonlight through the widening gaps in the hull offered the trapped men glimpses of light in the dark.

"Yeah," Ben replied. Paddy felt a gentle tap to his shoulder. Ben was right at his side.

Desperate men continued to run to the hatches, most either succumbing to the muskets of the guards or driven back by fear when the guards began shooting.

"We gonna swim for it, Mr Frost?" Jimmy's boyish voice was barely a murmur, fear gripping every syllable he spoke now.

"Of a fashion, Jim."

"Whatdaya mean?"

"We are going to fashion a floating device of sorts."

"How?" Benjamin asked.

"I won't know until we get on deck, Benjamin. I suspect from the damage she's taken there'll be plenty of debris we can use to float us to shore."

“Moxey should swing for leavin’ us here,” Nathaniel shouted, his voice rising with panic.

“He ought,” Frost spat. “But I am afraid he will not.”

“How much longer?” Paddy asked, wondering how long Moxey would leave his men on a sinking ship in order to prevent the escape of the prisoners.

“They will not stay much longer, and we must be ready to move.” Frost’s breath ghosted across Paddy’s cheek as he spoke, the man stood so close to him. Paddy ached to hold him and be held in return. Here, now, at possibly the end of all things, Paddy wanted nothing more than Frost’s arms around him.

“Come. We will make our way toward the hatchway, but keep clear of the opening,” Frost continued.

Paddy felt the tug around his waist as Frost moved. Stretching his hands to feel his way in the dark, he slowly followed after Frost, using the pull of the rope to guide his direction. Thunder pounded outside and a blaze of lightning scarred the night, giving him a glimpse of Frost’s back in front of him. He had time enough to register the healed flesh from Frost’s flogging before he was plunged once more into darkness.

Benjamin, he thought, walked behind him, with Jimmy similarly attached to his waist via rope. He felt more than saw others move around him. They’d lived in the darkness of the prison deck so long that the lack of light for their escape was hardly a burden to them, though Paddy would not have complained had the night been suddenly lit up with a thousand torches.

His bare foot caught on something beneath the ever-rising water and Paddy pitched forward, slamming into Frost. The man was an unmoving rock, standing steadfast as Paddy's body careened into him. Strong hands gripped his arms, steadying him in the darkness.

"Take care, Paddy."

"It's bleeding dark," he grumbled. "And I ain't yet developed the talent to see in the dark."

"No. I am certain your talents lie elsewhere."

Paddy flushed to his roots, at once grateful for the lack of light he'd cursed not five moments ago.

A thunderous creak rent through the air; Paddy's entire body trembled with the sound. He thought for certain the gates of hell were opening to swallow the *George III* and her unfortunate prisoner's whole. What remained of her shook violently and a swath opened up on the starboard side.

Men cried out in terror; an ear-piercing shriek Paddy would not soon forget.

"What the bleedin' hell were that?" Jimmy cried.

"Not sure, Jim. Likely the jiggermast."

"Jesus. We'll be sunk any time."

"We have a chance. There will more than enough debris floating about us now. We can stay afloat, long enough to get ourselves to shore." Frost grunted and stopped suddenly. "Careful, there's a body here."

Frost spoke with no inflection in his tone. No fear, no panic, only stoic calm. Paddy wished for the same calmness to envelop him as his leg brushed against a still warm body once Frost began moving once more. He wondered for a moment who of his fellow convicts it may be but then thoughts of survival pushed foremost into his mind and he forgot all about the poor fellow.

As a group, they crept further along the narrow walkway running down the midline of the prison deck. The closer they got to the hatchway, the harder Paddy's heart thumped in his chest. Everywhere around him lay certain death, but his fear was not for himself alone. Young Jimmy, still a boy, deserved a better chance at life than this. Benjamin, whose heart was large enough to engulf the entirety of the world in its warm beat, should not die in such a fashion. And Frost. Jacob Armstrong. Master at Arms Armstrong. Loving and protective son to a dead mother. Honourable in the midst of a den of thieves and cutthroats. Frost should live a long life surrounded by loved ones and the decency he so cherished.

None of these men deserved to suffer and die in the way which seemed more and more likely. Even Mander and his giant Parrish didn't deserve this fate.

"Frost," he whispered.

"Yes?"

"How're we gonna know if the guards are still there?" he asked as the moonlight filtered through the open hatchway, a beam of light illuminating either their escape or their demise. The water was approaching the top of Paddy's thighs and he knew time was running out. If Moxey's men were still here, they'd either drown or must take their chances against the rifles.

“If they shoot me, we will know they remain.”

Before Paddy had the chance to utter a disbelieving ‘what’, Frost stepped into the light. His face was turned upwards, his expression fierce as he stared down his would-be murderers. Paddy surged forward. Determined their fates would be shared.

Frost’s body tensed as Paddy’s brushed alongside to stand with him, but he made no move to thrust him away. Paddy glanced up, saw the clench of Frost’s jaw and knew he’d likely receive a tongue lashing at some time in the future for his actions. He didn’t care. If he were alive to hear it, and Frost alive to give it, he’d be at peace.

“It seems we are indeed alone,” Frost pronounced, his declaration enough to stir the others into violent motion.

In the dark, Jimmy screamed as a great commotion of men and movement surged toward the opening.

“Jimmy!” Benjamin shouted.

Paddy turned to the sound but was easily bypassed by Frost as he ran into the fray. Paddy found himself pulled along behind him, though he was also doing his best to get to the boy quickly.

“He’s here,” Nathaniel yelled, “he’s gone under. Get off ‘im.”

“Benjamin, follow the rope,” Frost added.

“It’s pullin’ me down. I think they’re tramplin’ im.”

Though the ink black of night remained, the picture was clear in Paddy’s mind. Fleeing men had knocked Jimmy under the rising water and

were running over the top of his small body in their desperation to escape the sinking ship.

“I got ‘im. I got—” Benjamin’s voice cut off in a gurgle and Paddy knew he’d gone under also.

“Here! Here!” Nathaniel shouted, almost in Paddy’s ear. They must be right atop the unfolding drama.

He felt the wrench of the rope as Frost dropped to the ground, heard the splash as his arms sifted through the water in search of their fallen friends. Paddy wasted no time joining him.

The water may have been cold—Paddy didn’t think to wonder. His focus was on Benjamin and Jimmy. Coughing and spluttering sounded from his left.

“He’s down ‘ere,” Benjamin gasped once breath returned.

Paddy’s hands tore through the water, desperately searching for the lost boy. How long had he been under?

Suddenly he felt soft flesh on flesh. An arm? Leg? Didn’t matter. He gripped it tight and pulled. He must get the boy to the surface. “I got ‘im!” he yelled, “Help me.”

Frost was soon at his side, his big hands joining his as they pulled the small body from under the black sea. Jimmy came up screaming, his limbs—apart from the one Paddy and Frost held—flailing.

“Help!” Jimmy screamed. “Help!” Terror clouding his mind so that he didn’t realise he’d been saved.

Paddy pulled him into his arms, cradled the small head as he rocked the child in comfort.

“Ben! Ben!” Jimmy cried.

“Here, lad,” Benjamin replied, crawling over to them. He wrapped Jimmy in his arms also, so they were in an awkward, yet comforting, three-person hug. Frost stood behind Paddy, one big hand resting consolingly on Paddy’s shoulder, the other sifting through Paddy’s damp hair.

Paddy released the boy to Benjamin’s gentle care and stood to face Frost. The big man was little more than a shadow in the night, but Paddy *saw* him. He wrapped his arms about Frost’s waist, no longer caring who might see. Frost held him tight, pressing a fierce kiss to the top of his head. The simple gesture offering more reassurance to Paddy than mere words might.

“Come now,” Frost began, an uncharacteristic hitch in his voice, “Let’s move.”

“Benjamin?”

“Aye, Paddy. We’re ready to get of this bleedin’ ship.”

“Good now, Jim?” Frost asked softly.

“Good, Mr Frost.”

“That’s the way, lad,” Frost replied.

They were quickly back at the hatchway. The bulk of the fleeing convicts having already passed through it, they had no trouble ascending the ladder. Paddy wished he was able to block his ears against the screaming of the men still trapped in their cells below. If he lived to be a

hundred, he doubted he'd ever forget the awful sound. The ship tilted heavily now, the bow sitting considerable higher than the stern, which must be close to being submerged. If they hadn't managed to free themselves, Paddy and his friends, his family, would have drowned by now.

Once they reached the deck, their perilous circumstances becoming clearer in the mixture of moonlight and flashing lightning. *George III* had suffered a mortal wound. She was unrecognisable as one of His Majesty's transportation ships, instead she looked nothing more than a jumble of jagged wooden beams and flotsam. Though the rock she rested against may prevent the cruel sea from taking her to the bottom, she'd never sail again. Paddy did not mourn the loss, only the timing.

“Tibbins? What the hell you doin’?”

Alfred Tibbins had lashed himself to the remnants of the mizzenmast still attached to the decking. His eyes were wide with fear, his body shook violently. “I cain't swim,” he mumbled, voice rife with misery.

“Come, Tibbins,” Frost began. “We are going to use the debris to float ashore.”

“In that raging sea?” Tibbins nodded toward the ocean and for the first time Paddy took note.

Tibbins was right. The ocean swirled and raged about them. Waves thundering against the wreckage, sucking debris away only to return it moments later to be smashed against the hull. How were they meant to escape such carnage?

Frost stood firm, showing no sign of worry. Perhaps he should have sought a career upon the stage. “We will make it, Tibbins.”

Their mess captain was already shaking his head, unmoved by Frost's words. "No. No, I am staying right 'ere."

"Very well," Frost replied. "We wish you the best of luck, Mr Tibbins."

"Aye. And you."

Paddy turned away, wondering if he'd taken his last look upon the jolly and fair-minded Mr Tibbins.

"What now?" he asked quietly.

Frost turned to Paddy, but his gaze was restless, his eyes searching the wreckage. Seven convicts stood with Frost and Paddy, each of them watching Frost, looking to him for leadership. "Look about. We need something large enough to hold our weight. Anything that will float. And rope, as much rope as you can find."

"Which way is the shore?" Paddy asked as he glanced about searching for some sign of the coastline. If he was able to see land, he might feel more confident. He trusted Frost to do his best to get them all safely to land, but even Frost could only do so much.

"There," Frost said, pointing to his left. "I can see the white of breaking waves."

Paddy squinted, trying his best to see what Frost described but all he saw was darkness, the occasional glimpse of moonlight and a soft glow too far away for him to be sure it was the lantern of a cutter carrying Moxey's men.

"Mr Frost, 'ere," Jimmy called, "What about this?"

Frost and Paddy walked the short distance to where Jimmy and Benjamin stood, hands on hips and staring down to their feet in a mirrored image of each other. They stood over a square of wood hammered together and looking exactly like a raft Paddy might have imagined.

“Perfect. It’s part of the hatch covering of the forecastle—”

“What of this?” Nathaniel called.

Paddy turned to see him and two other men dragging over a part of one of the masts that looked as though it had been torn apart as if it was nothing but a toothpick.

“Good. Bring it,” Frost replied.

Wind howled around them, and the ship felt unsteady beneath their feet. She was caught on a large rock protruding from the sea, snagged to the monolith as she waited to be torn apart. Paddy dropped to his knees and reached for a coil of rope just beginning to unfurl in the dire conditions.

“Here.” He grabbed it and tossed the rope to Frost. Attached as he was to Frost, he was unable to go too far from the big man, but he was determined to do his part.

“Turn it about,” Frost instructed as men approached with the broken section of mast. “Lash—”

Suddenly the entire ship—what remained of her—dipped violently, sending those on her deck sprawling. The waters of the sea surged over her deck covering the scrambling men, washing several overboard.

The force of the water twisted Paddy’s body, tumbling him about until he wasn’t certain which way was up. His hands scratched for purchase on

any surface he could find but nothing was in reach. As abruptly as the water had come, it receded, leaving further destruction in its wake.

Frost stood to his left, tugging at the rope about his waist to try to drag Paddy to him. Paddy stumbled on his knees but eventually found himself once more at Frost's side. A frantic look about showed him Benjamin, one arm twisted about what was left of the poop deck railing, the other firmly about Jimmy's midsection. Several others were scampering to their feet, fearful eyes watching the waters in case a second wave came.

"We are out of time," Frost shouted over the roar of the increasing squall. "Grab anything that floats and make for shore."

Nathaniel, Wardley and Muir threw themselves over the mast and pushed off into the waters without hesitation. Benjamin pushed Jimmy down onto the hatch covering so he was lying flat on his stomach, and then pushed the planks of wood off into the waters. Paddy watched as Benjamin threw himself down beside Jimmy, their feet overhanging the planks, so they were able to kick away from the dying vessel.

"Paddy, here," Frost's voice was loud in his ear, pulling him back to reality. He turned to see Frost wrestling with a smaller piece of the mast, long enough for the two of them and hopefully large enough to stay afloat with their body weight.

Frost pushed it toward the edge of the deck, now level with the sea. Paddy squatted beside him to help and together they pushed away from the wreck. No screams followed them. The men still trapped below had long since left this world. Paddy sent a quick prayer to a god he hadn't believed in since Zeke's death, but he did not know what else to do.

“Kick, Paddy,” Frost instructed as their makeshift vessel was launched into rough waters. “Remember the rope,” Frost added.

Paddy had no intention of untying them. If fate brought them to that moment he would stay with Frost and die trying to save him if he must. He kicked.

Months of deprivation had made his body weak, but his spirit was alive and fighting for survival. His legs thrashed in the water, helping to propel them forward and away from the remnants of the once proud *George III*. How far to shore? How long must they exert themselves to reach the safety of land?

The clouds moved fast in the night sky, allowing peeks of moonlight to illuminate their way. Ahead of them, Paddy could make out Benjamin and Jimmy on their raft. The gentle splash from their feet kicking into the air. They seemed to be moving smoothly and at a good pace. Further beyond them, hardly visible, was Nathaniel and his mates.

He was yet to spot land but convinced himself it was only due to the dark of night. Land was not too distant on the horizon, he was certain. He envied Moxey and the others who had a much easier journey to safety. Maybe if he'd have been born in a different time or place..., but there was little point to such thoughts. Though he'd always been somewhat of a dreamer, Patrick Maybrick was also a realist. And his reality was his life was teetering on a knife edge of being extinguished.

“Are you all right, Paddy?” Frost yelled beside him.

The cacophony of sounds was deafening: the thundering of the storm, the roar of the swirling ocean. He was hardly able to hear himself think. “Yeah,” he replied.

“Once we are clear of the debris, we can ease up.”

Paddy nodded, uncertain if Frost would see in the dark, but his exhaustion made the simple act of speaking difficult. The ocean appeared to hold a vendetta against the men who sailed her. The force of the water pushed and pulled at Paddy as he fought to move through the sea.

Occasionally the water worked with them, propelling them forward, though more often it felt as if the ocean was dragging them back to where they should have perished on the *George III*. Paddy fought with all his might, kicking for all he was worth and doing his best to shove debris out of their way as they slowly moved through the water.

On a downward kick his foot snared on something. He didn't know what held him, but it was not releasing him. The power of whatever had him dragged him backwards, his grip on the mast loosening. He was being pulled under.

He kicked his leg violently, desperately trying to free himself. His fingertips dug into the wooden mast as he tried to latch on tightly.

“Paddy!” Frost screamed and grabbed his arm in a vice like grip.

Frost held him tightly, but whatever had his leg held him every bit as fast. He feared between the two he might be torn apart. The thing in the water was stronger and it was winning. His fingers slipped on the mast so only Frost's grip prevented him from sinking. If Frost didn't let go, he'd be pulled under as well.

Paddy reached for the knot at his waist. He would not allow Frost to die with him.

“Do not dare!” Frost roared when he realised what Paddy was doing.

Paddy didn't answer—couldn't answer because water was splashing over his face, filling his mouth. The thing on his leg held on, pulling and tugging, determined to have Paddy. He released the knot tethering him to Frost.

“Paddy, I can't—you're slipping. Please.”

Paddy heard Frost call his name one last time and then his hold was gone, and Paddy was hurtling toward the ocean floor.

FROST

“Paddy! Paddy!” he screamed. *No. No, this cannot be happening.*

“Paddy!” *Oh God.* He'd lost him. He'd lost his grip on Paddy's frail arms and now he was gone.

Frost pushed away from the mast and dove under the inky black water. He saw nothing in the pitch black. The moonlight was unable to pierce the dark ocean. He felt around blindly, desperately hoping to feel that beloved body. He felt nothing.

He surged up for air, took a deep breath and submerged once more to the same darkness. He flailed about, his fingers brushing bits and pieces of their ship, flotsam and jetsam, but nothing soft, nothing human. He opened his mouth to scream Paddy's name, terror addling his brain, so he did not know what he was doing. The sea water poured in.

Frost kicked for the surface again, coughing and spluttering as he breached. “Paddy!” He swivelled left and right, and then turned fully around. There was no sign of Paddy anywhere. He stilled for a moment

judging the current, but with the storm he could not tell if the raging seas would have dragged Paddy back to the ship or onwards to the shore.

He dove again, and again, each time willing fate to return Paddy safely to him. He swam back toward the wreckage. Flashes of lightning in the distance his only light. He saw nothing to give him hope. Heard no screaming. He felt as though he were the last man on earth, and he did not want to be here a moment longer. His chest ached—from exertion or the loss of Paddy he didn't know, nor did it matter.

“Paddy!” he screamed again. “Paddy.” This time barely more than a whisper.

Oh God, Oh God. He could not endure this again. Images of Daniel's ruined body scrapped through his mind. The pain of that loss still raw, though blunted by the happiness he'd found with Paddy. But now...? Now he had nothing.

As the current dragged the water from the wreckage, he caught a glimpse of Tibbins body still lashed to the mast. For the first time in his life, Frost wondered if it was time for him to stop fighting. He'd lost Paddy. How easy it would be for him to lie back and let the sea have her vicious way with him? Perhaps only then his pain would end.

He bobbed in the water, allowing it to push and pull him as it pleased. He pictured Daniel standing on the deck of the *Asia* looking resplendent in his uniform. He remembered his shy smiles and hungry eyes. He recalled the way Daniel had comforted the injured and ill, speaking quietly to them of their loved ones and home. Daniel's heart had always been so big and so full. Frost had never met another with the capacity to care as Daniel had. He'd loved so much about Daniel and thought he'd never love another.

But then a little mouse had barged into his life. Paddy was nothing like Daniel in appearance or manner, though they had shared an innocence and capacity for love that Frost had found intoxicating. He remembered the feel of Paddy's squirming body as he'd sat on his lap and they'd kissed. He saw the awe in Paddy's face as he'd discovered the pleasure such intimacy could bring. He'd wanted so much more with Paddy but now he'd never have the chance.

Amongst the pain of loss, Frost was angry. Paddy had untied himself. He'd left Frost alone, sacrificing himself so Frost might have a chance. Sacrificing himself for Frost. How could Frost squander the chance Paddy had given him? If they were to meet in whatever afterlife there was Paddy would yell blue murder at him if he gave up now.

Blinking away the tears, he swallowed the ache and searched for something to grab on to. Chunks of broken up ship and other debris pinched and struck him in the churning waters. He soon found a large plank of wood that looked as if it may have been part of a desk in its previous life. Now it was to be a makeshift raft.

Frost reached across it, dragging his body halfway up, leaving his legs free to kick in the water. He allowed himself a final glance at what remained of the *George III* and then kicked.

He had to work hard to clear the wreckage and the pull of the water as it sought to drag him back to her. Every sound, every flash of movement, he hoped to find Paddy. He did not know if he was doing the right thing. What if he was leaving Paddy out here to face a miserable death? But he'd seen no sign of him and too many minutes had passed for him to be alive if he were still in the depths of the roiling sea. If Paddy had managed to surface, he would surely have found him by now, unless the current had dragged

him some place too far off. One part of him screamed to stay and search for Paddy, but Paddy's own voice roared at him to save himself, to not allow his sacrifice to be for naught.

Frost's movements were mechanical now, his legs kicking without thought, the instinct to survive driving him forward when behind him lay his heart. Far off in the distance a flare of light illuminated the dark. Probably Moxey and the other survivors had lit a fire or some lanterns on shore. Frost had no intention of heading for them. He owed the crown nothing, not after one of the King's servants had allowed Paddy and so many others to die.

He swivelled his legs, turning his raft to the left and into total darkness. He hoped Ben and the others had done the same. Better to die a free man than live in bondage for the rest of what might be a very long life.

While he kicked, his mind wandered to memories—good and bad. He recalled the fear on Paddy's face when he'd first seen him at Newgate, his confusion over having to pay the garnish. From what Frost knew of Paddy's life, the young man had known little besides sorrow, and Frost had wanted to change that. For a short time, he thought perhaps he had.

The first true, wide smile he'd seen on Paddy had been the day of the fire. When he'd pointed out the dolphins to Paddy. The young man had been mesmerised by the creatures playing in the ocean. Frost would have happily stood and watched him for hours.

Had he known their time together would be so tragically short he'd have...What? Thanks to fear and ignorance he was not, and never would be, free to show the world how much he loved Paddy. It had been the same with Daniel. They had loved one another but always had to hide their love.

The unfairness had always grated on Daniel more so than him, but he understood. Daniel had always been a dreamer, but Frost was a realist. He wondered if Paddy would ever have been able to keep their secret. Everything the young man felt had always shown so plainly on his face.

The flashes of lightning were waning, the roar of thunder sounding further and further in the distance. Around him the water was calming. A large part of him wanted to return and search for Paddy, even though common sense told him Paddy was long gone.

Despite everything, Paddy had always seemed so alive. So much so that Frost could not imagine him otherwise. He never wanted to forget Paddy's smile, or the scowl he wore whenever Frost had called him little mouse, or the sound of his too rare laughter. But he knew time would take these memories from him as surely as Daniel's image had begun fading.

In the waters off the coast of Van Diemen's land, Frost raged against the unfairness of having loved and lost two men. He knew there would be many who claimed it was God's wrath coming down upon him for his unnatural desires. But he didn't believe that for a second. His mother had always taught him of a loving and accepting God. He grabbed onto that faith now, praying Paddy had made his way into such a God's tender care.

The pain in his soul grew and thrived, unmatched even by the aches in his weary body. His limbs throbbed with his exertion, his breath heaving in his chest as he struggled through the water. Time ceased to exist as he began to wonder if he was even close to land. Surely, he should have reached it by now.

There was nothing for him to do but move ever onwards.

As the clouds from the squall moved ahead, stars began to prick through the black of the night sky. On the far horizon he saw total black, the outline of the coast. He was still some distance away but knowing how close he was to land invigorated him. His legs kicked harder, stronger, propelling him onwards toward an unknown and dreaded future unrecognisable from the one he'd dreamed of with Paddy only this morning.

He had no idea when his tears had started to fall, but he let them trail down his face unchallenged—a final testament to how much he cared for Paddy. He had not cried for his father, but he wept openly for Paddy, as he had for Daniel and his mother. His heart was blown apart, as shattered as Daniel's body had been by the cannonball. He thought it unlikely he'd ever be put together again.

Yet, still he kicked. The human spirit of survival—a remarkable thing—guiding him onwards and on, pressing his legs to work harder, move faster.

“Hoy!” A shout broke through the cacophony of splashes, heavy breaths and swirling wind. “Hoy there!”

Frost glanced up. The shore was close, closer than he'd expected, and a figure was outlined on it, waving madly as Frost approached. He thought he was able to make out a handful of other figures along the shoreline but couldn't be certain in the dull light.

His weary body pressed onwards, heartsore and spent. Approaching the safety of the shore weighed heavily upon him, as though his last tie to Paddy was about to be irrevocably severed.

“Frost?” Benjamin called softly. “Where's Paddy?”

How did he answer Paddy's friend? How could he speak the words aloud? Behind Benjamin, Jimmy stood still as a statue, head bowed. He might be in shock. Others were there, but Frost could not be bothered looking to see if he recognised any of them. He didn't care who had made it to safety, because the one he wanted most to live had not.

"I lost him," he whispered.

"No," Benjamin muttered, his gaze on the waters behind Frost, searching frantically as though Paddy might magically appear.

"I'm sorry." Frost dragged himself ashore. He lay on the dirt, drained of energy, uncaring of what came next.

"Mr Frost?"

"Yeah, Jim?"

"I'm sorry about Paddy." The boy's voice hitched on the name. Frost swallowed around the lump in his throat, unable to bear the grief of others when his own was so raw.

"Paddy wanted us all to live. So, let's do just that," he replied with far more bravado than he felt. Paddy had loved Benjamin and Jimmy; they'd been like brothers. Frost would do everything he could to ensure their survival.

Frost rose to his knees, Benjamin offered his hand and Frost took it, hauling himself to his feet. His legs were weak, wobbly. His body tired to the point of exhaustion. He turned to his right. In the distance, the dim light of the survivor's fire flickered. A surge of anger welled in his guts, rising within him like lava flow in a volcano.

If he ever set eyes upon Moxey again, the man would wind up dead by his hands. Though he shared in the blame for Paddy's death, had Moxey acted with morality and honour, Paddy might still live.

"Let's move." Frost walked away from Moxey and his men into unknown land. He knew little of the environment of Van Diemen's land other than the weather could be extraordinarily hot, and fierce, unusual creatures roamed and natives lived wild and free.

He was ready to face it all to save Paddy's friends—his brothers—because this would be the last thing he could do for Paddy.

"Where're we goin'?"

"Away. As far from Moxey and his crew as we can get."

"We ain't goin' back, Mr Frost?"

Frost considered Jimmy for a moment. With luck the boy would be free from his sentence in a few short years to return to England and his mother. Perhaps he'd be better off returning to Moxey, but then Jimmy had witnessed Moxey's men shooting at the convicts. Given his recent showing of a lack of morals, Frost wasn't willing to trust Moxey with the boy.

"No, Jimmy. There's nothing for us to go back for." Frost did not turn around. Did not look back. His shattered heart ached in his chest, throbbing with the loss of Paddy, but he would have time to grieve later. For now, he had work to do.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

PADDY

All around him was black, an absolute darkness. His eyes were open, he knew that because he felt the sting of the saltwater, but he saw nothing. His body twisted and pulled as the ocean desired. His limbs ached; his body felt far heavier than it should. Whatever had him, let him go as suddenly as it had grabbed hold. He wasn't certain which way was up and which way down. He kicked for what he hoped was the surface, but he may be sending himself further beneath the waves.

His chest ached, begging for breath. His gaze darted around in the dark, unable to see anything. Panic rose within him, threatening to overwhelm him and drag him further into the abyss.

“Be calm, Paddy,” a voice spoke in the dark. He recognised Frost's soothing tone, though knew it was impossible for him to be here with him. He'd set Frost free, given him a chance for survival.

“Paddy, listen to me,” Frost's voice continued. “Stay calm. Kick gently, you are almost there.”

Paddy listened. He kicked, using what little strength remained in his limbs to propel himself upwards. Above him he saw a flash of light. The surface must be near. He had to be seeing a lightning strike. He kicked a little harder, using his arms to break the water in front of him until he surged through the surface.

He opened his mouth and greedily took a breath and then another. He coughed, choking on the air he so desperately needed. Around him the sea

roared its dominance, the wind battering against her, stirring up waves which crashed about Paddy.

“Frost!” he yelled, though his voice was lost in the squall. Frost might have been right beside him and still he was unlikely to hear Paddy. He frantically glanced about, searching for Frost somewhere in the ruin of their vessel. Planks of wood and broken items from the once proud *George III* toppled about in the rough waters, hitting Paddy without remorse.

He was so tired, his body exhausted beyond reason. He reached for a large plank, hooking his hands desperately over the edge and hauling his body as far up the plank as he could manage. He lay still for a moment, allowing the plank to bob and twist in the water as it pleased.

“Frost,” he whispered, desperate for the solid and comforting presence of the man. He closed his eyes, needing to rest for just a moment before his battle for survival continued.

Unbelievably, he had fallen asleep. As soon as his eyes reopened, he knew he'd lost time. Everything had changed. The water was calmer, the wind had died, thunder no longer pealed throughout the night sky. He heard no one call his name and as he shouted for Frost, he received no reply.

How many hours had he lost? How far had he drifted? He imagined he saw light in the distance. Dawn breaking over this terrible day? Or perhaps the fires lit by survivors? Either way he intended to move away from it. He wasn't going back to Moxey, only to be locked in chains once more and left to the whims of a man who'd ordered helpless convicts fired upon for trying to live.

Paddy swivelled the plank and kicked toward what he hoped would be a kinder shore.

He heard nothing save his own splashing feet as he moved through the water. Even the far-off rumble of the storm which had sunk his ship was dying out. If not for his own heavy breath in his ear and the splashing kicks of his legs, he'd be in a world of silence.

Surely the others had made it to shore by now. *Benjamin and Jimmy*. He prayed they were safe. He hoped they had swum away from Moxey and his men. He knew Frost would have—if he'd survived.

Frost *had* survived. Paddy wouldn't allow himself to believe otherwise. Frost was alive and well, fierce and strong, and ready to lead them all to safety. To a life away from all they had known.

Paddy tried to imagine what that life would look like. They'd be living wild. No buildings, no conveniences, though Paddy'd had few of them anyway. What manner of food would they be able to grow? What animals roamed the land for them to hunt?

He was getting way ahead of himself. He hadn't even made it to dry land yet, and who knew what awaited him when he did.

Fear of the unknown itched in his mind, yet excitement at his freedom warred with uneasiness. All Paddy had ever wanted was freedom and here it was for him to take hold of and enjoy. But how would he manage alone?

He kicked ever onwards; the coastline shadowed in the distance still. His legs ached from kicking, his hands cramping where they curled around the plank of wood. Months of minimal rations had weakened his body until he had little strength left. The likelihood of him making shore seemed remote as exhaustion wore away at his spent body.

“Frost,” he murmured, desperately wishing for his presence. He recalled Frost speaking to him of the day he’d lost Daniel. How he’d fought on even though a piece of his soul had died alongside his lover. Where had he found the strength? In vengeance? Perhaps Daniel had spoken to Frost through the cannonballs and musket shots, encouraging him to live just as Frost had spoken to Paddy when the ocean had clung to him, like a creeping vine, threatening to drown him.

Since the untimely death of his father, Paddy’s life had been one hard fight after another for survival, sometimes to the point of collapse where he’d just wanted to lie down and join his father in the afterlife.

He’d felt little human warmth or comfort since the terrible day his father had died, but then miraculously Frost had barged into his life, and offered him something he hadn’t known he’d needed. He owed it to Frost to survive.

Despite the constant and endless hot shards of pain throughout his body, Paddy kicked ever onwards, determined to make land. Above him the sky was lightening, the fresh morning sun poking up from below the horizon, colouring the sky in a patchwork of purples and pinks. The outline of the shore, more visible now, was the most beautiful thing Paddy had laid eyes on.

The sea did not gradually subside into land, there was no beach of soft sand for Paddy to land upon. Instead the coast was lined with rocky outcrops and steep, though not high, cliffs. Paddy made for a cluster of rocks which seemed the easiest for him to manage. He pushed away from his plank and swam closer.

Rocks sat low in the shallow water making hard work for Paddy to navigate in the dim morning light. He stretched his arms before him, searching with his fingers for anything blocking his way. Moss covering most of the rocks further hampered his efforts as he slipped and slid over them.

He winced as the sharper rocks cut tiny wounds into his skin, but he ignored the pain and drove ever onward.

By the time he reached the grassy shore, his entire body ached in places he never imagined he had muscles. His limbs shook as his breath heaved from his chest. He lay sprawled on the grass, face to the sky, eyes closed as he recovered from his flight from dangerous waters.

For a moment he thought about sleeping, but Frost's face haunted him behind closed eyes. He had to get up, get moving. If Frost was alive—and he had to believe he was—then Paddy could waste no time searching for him. He sat up and glanced to his right. From the lights he'd spotted, he suspected Moxey and his men were somewhere in that direction.

He knew in his heart Frost would not be there. If Frost had made it to shore, he'd head the opposite direction to Moxey.

Paddy stood on weak and shaky legs. He doubted he'd make it far today, his body too weary from the sinking and too empty from hunger. But he'd try to make it as far as possible from Moxey.

The green of the landscape was a different shade to the rich tones of England, duller, greyer. The tree trunks and limbs were more of a pale grey than brown, but they were tall. Each tree towered over Paddy until he felt like Gulliver in Lilliput. At least, once the sun stood high and bright in the sky, the trees would offer him shade as he travelled.

Birds sang and squawked all about him, the only noise aside from his treacherously growling belly. He'd need to seriously consider food and water at some stage.

Sunlight brightened the sky, revealing more of the unusual scenery. Paddy watched a small creature scurry away from his footsteps. The small grey animal reminded him of the squirrels living in innumerable numbers in Hyde Park, though its tail had been distinctly different. He wondered if he was the first human to lay eyes on such a creature.

Beneath his bare feet the ground felt dry, the grass stiff and scratchy, not soft and lush like he was used to. The hot, dry environment entirely different from what he was used to. No buildings stacked together, barely an inch between them. No infestations of mice, lice or people. The air was clean and clear as opposed to the grit and grime of a thick London fog.

Were it not for the fact he was entirely alone and without food or water, Paddy would have loved being here. Even with the loss of company and sustenance, he felt freer than he ever had at home. The weight of his wretched life lifted from his shoulders—replaced with new concerns certainly, but better ones, at least as far as he was concerned.

After a few hours the sun blazed down upon his bare back, sweat dripped freely down his torso, his muscles stiffened under the strain of his exertions. His dry tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth, even his eyeballs felt gritty. His skin, though more accustomed to the heat, burned, nonetheless.

He needed to find water urgently. The brush he'd been walking through grew thicker and longer as he approached a denser cluster of trees. He desperately prayed that meant water. Through the constant twitter of

birds, he strained to hear the flow of water, just a trickle would do. He licked his lips and then smacked them together in anticipation, the tender skin sticking with the last trace of spittle.

There was no way of telling with certainty the time, but he felt midday must be drawing upon him. He'd need to rest soon too, hopefully with a full belly of fresh water. Thoughts of Frost loomed in his mind. Had he had better luck finding water? And what of Jimmy and Benjamin? He'd pay any price to lay eyes on them once more.

Fighting the fatigue of his body, he pressed onwards, his eyes frantically tracking the land around him in search of food, but more urgently water. A swishing to his right drew his attention and he watched, immobile, as a large brown snake swept through the brittle grass, crunching it under its' body as it went.

Paddy had never seen a snake before. He'd heard about them and read about them in Mr Heller's bookshop, but this was his first sighting and he'd be happy if it were his last. He hadn't caught sight of the creature's head, but the body alone had given Paddy a sinister feeling Mrs Heller would have said was preposterous—that being her favourite word when he'd last seen her. The few times he'd seen her not baking, she'd been seated before the hearth with a dictionary in her lap.

Long after the snake vanished, Paddy stood frozen to his spot, in fear of its return. He knew some snakes could kill, but here he was in a land few knew much about and he had no clue whether to be afraid or try to catch and eat it. In the end he hadn't been given the choice as his body refused to cooperate with him until the serpent was long gone.

At least for the brief time he'd been terrified of the snake, he'd been able to forget his dreadful thirst. Now the danger had passed, his parched throat, and gritty dry eyeballs returned to his focus. His guts cramped, worse than hunger had ever caused him, and his head throbbed as though one of the peelers was laying into him with his bludgeon. The landscape around him didn't seem so clear around the edges anymore, either, as though the trees and grass were melting under the stifling heat of the sun.

Move, Paddy, Frost's voice spoke to him from the beyond once more. Encouraging him—ordering him—to keep going onward. He took a step and then another, slowly, laboriously, as if each leg weighed more than Mr Joyce's great pigs. He was so damn tired. His foot went from under him on the third step and he tumbled forward, throwing his skinny arms out in a vain effort to arrest his fall.

He hit the ground hard, his head bouncing off the dry dirt, his hands doing too little to help him. Every part of him ached, but worse than any other pain was the gnawing agony of thirst. How long since he'd anything to drink? In this heat, too long.

Unable to find the strength to move, he lay there in the grass. He thought of the snake but had no energy to care. He closed his eyes—better to not see it coming. The birds continued their song, oblivious to Paddy's plight. Another sound, almost buried beneath the squawks, tickled his ears. Was it the snake? No, this was a different sound and one he'd heard before.

Water was close by.

Not much.

A stream at most, more likely just a trickle, but it would suffice.

He kept his eyes closed and pulled his body closer to the sound, moving much like the snake from minutes ago. The delicious noise grew closer, louder. Definitely water. Paddy opened his eyes. Somewhere close by was his salvation.

He pushed his head through a thicket of grass, and there it was. The smallest stream he'd ever seen flowed by him, no thicker than his leg. But it was enough. Paddy cupped his hands and drank greedily. The cool water quenching the ache of thirst and cooling the burn of the hot day.

After taking his fill he felt so good that he almost laughed. But then he remembered where he was and what had happened. Had Frost found water to drink? Were Benjamin and Jimmy doing all right? Were any of them still alive?

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

FROST

Eleven men. Eleven other men were all to make it to shore with Frost. So few. More must have survived but who knew where they washed ashore, or in what condition they'd made it.

Of the eleven men, most had a variety of wounds and injuries. Peter Baskell was using a tree limb to aid him as he hobbled along with likely a broken foot. Simon Newton's arm hung uselessly at an odd angle. Isaac Fairley's face and torso bore the appearance of having recently encountered a large and fierce big cat who'd used him as a scratch post.

As far as he could tell Jimmy's only wounds were of the mind and Benjamin bore only a handful of gashes, only one deep and troubling. For himself, Frost felt physically fine, but his heart was a broken clutter of agony.

"I'd give me left bollock for some water," Nathaniel grunted as they ascended yet another small hill.

Frost found the land both barren and yet teeming with life. A strange combination. He'd seen several species of animals and insects already that he had no name for. The flora too, was wholly unique to anything he'd seen before.

Another time, and under different circumstances, he might have enjoyed sketching the plant life and fauna. Several of his old school masters would enjoy studying them.

“Whatdaya think we’re doin’, ya daft fozler? Ya shoulda had ya bo peeps open for water the whole time we been walkin’”

“Aye, and I ‘ave been, Baskell. Don’t stop me none from wantin’ some.”

The men had been bickering for much of the time since they’d left the shore. Fear and anger shortening their tempers. Frost ignored them, as he had been. His mind too consumed with the loss of Paddy to allow any room for concern over petty squabbles.

“We all want water,” Benjamin grumbled beside him. Jimmy was walking on Ben’s other side and the boy had remained silent for much of the time.

“There’s bound to be water about somewhere,” Frost mused aloud. The variety and number of wildlife suggested a water source nearby. All they needed to do was find it. Frost had them walking abreast on the chance they’d stumble across a stream to tide them over until they reached a river or something more substantial.

“Frost?”

“Mm,” he idly replied to Benjamin.

“Are you all right?”

“Mm.” He wasn’t but talking to Benjamin about Paddy would do no good, and his loss was the worst of his ailments.

“I know what Paddy...I cared ‘bout ‘im too.”

Frost squeezed his eyes shut and nodded. He wondered if Benjamin knew he’d been blown apart by Paddy’s loss. Could he see the hurt in his

features? Maybe the whole world saw it.

The friendship between Paddy and Benjamin had been a close one, borne out of shared experiences. Frost had always been glad Paddy had Benjamin; he was grateful for their friendship because he knew having Benjamin helped ease Paddy's burdens.

"He were tougher than he looked. Reckon 'is bones were made of steel."

"I reckon they were, Ben."

Benjamin edged closer, lowering his voice so he wouldn't be overheard. "Yer made 'im happy. A rare thing in this life fer the likes of Paddy."

Ben's words, as kind as they were meant, were like a knife plunged in his chest. He'd wanted so much more time to make Paddy happier. He'd wanted to see him free from the king's punishment. In his dreams at night, he'd imagined giving Paddy aide so he might make something resembling a good and happy life for himself once his sentence was complete. Never had he allowed himself to imagine Paddy leaving this mortal coil.

"He made me happy, too," he whispered.

"I'd hear youse. Talkin' all the damn time. Whisperin' amongst yerselves." Benjamin's voice was wistful, and full of the same pain assaulting Frost. "Got real jealous—not that I—Well, ya know what I mean."

"I do."

They walked in silence for a time. Frost's thoughts of Paddy mixed with his more calculating side as his brain fought for a way to save them all, to find a path to safety. His mother often told him he was a mixture of his father's logical brain and her more creative one. She'd sworn he was the perfect combination and one day it'd save his life. He'd thought perhaps that time had come at Navarino, but maybe his mother had foreseen these days.

As he trudged through the hostile land, he wrapped his arms about his waist, holding himself together as the tally of his losses stacked up. Like a child, he wished for his mother's arms about him, her soft lips on the top of his head as she comforted him. He'd witnessed many men suffer and die after injuries inflicted in battle, and most had called out for their mothers.

Had Paddy cried out for his? He couldn't let himself think upon it too long.

"Water! There's fucking water," Newton cried.

Frost turned to the man and followed the trajectory of his gaze until he spotted it. A small stream. Not very wide from the looks, but enough for them to bathe in. More than sufficient for them to soothe their parched throats.

For the first time since the sinking Jimmy turned wide, hopeful eyes to him. "Will it be safe, Mr Frost?"

"I should think so, Jim. Let's have us a look." His strides lengthened as he approached the stream, his thirst driving him forward. The water was clear enough to see bottom and if he strained, he was able to hear a close by trickle. They'd be able to drink the water as it flowed over nearby rocks and bathe in the pool of water here.

Jimmy followed him as he walked upstream in search of the flowing water. He found it not too far away and quickly dropped to his knees. Cupping his hands, he allowed himself several large gulps of the cool liquid. He'd tasted far worse, not that he particularly cared in this moment. All he thought about was how the water eased his dry throat.

“Come on, Jim,” he called around a mouthful of water.

Jimmy dropped beside him, grinning madly as he took his first sips. The rest of their small group soon joined them, slurping noisily as they quenched their thirst. Frost splashed his face to rid his eyes of the grit and then flopped back on his arse. He watched fondly as Jimmy drank his fill. The boy was a good lad who certainly deserved better than fate had afforded him thus far.

“Never tasted nothin’ so good.” Benjamin smiled as he joined Frost.

“It’s going to feel good too when we bathe,” Frost replied. His entire body was uncomfortably covered in sweat and dirt. Try as he might he could not remember the feeling of being clean—truly, thoroughly clean.

“I’m goin’ in, Mr Frost,” Jimmy called as he stood and ran back to the wider, deeper section of the stream. Frost watched him with a smile. He couldn’t stop himself from imagining how Paddy would have enjoyed splashing about in the water with the boy.

He stood on weary, heartsick legs and trudged behind the boy. He hadn’t saved Daniel, and he’d let Paddy slip from his grip, but he was determined to keep Jimmy alive. For what fate he wasn’t yet certain, but he’d spare the boy the finality of death if he could.

“Step carefully, Jim,” he called when Jimmy ran headlong into the pool of water. A slip on the rocks might send him to bottom with a blow to the head.

“Ah, Mr Frost, it’s already cooling me bones,” Jimmy smirked as he stood waist deep in the clear water.

Frost shucked his pants and followed Jimmy into the water in nothing but his threadbare underclothes. At least the climate was warm enough here they didn’t need to concern themselves with freezing to death thanks to a lack of clothing—at least not yet. He had no real idea how this strange land worked. Did it ever get cold? And if so, how cold?

He found a large rock he could rest upon, yet the water still covered him almost to his chest. He sat quietly as the men splashed and frolicked around him with the exception of Peter Baskell who stood to the side of the creek, jealously watching the others. Frost would help him into the water after the frivolity had died down and there was less chance of further injury. The man had to be in a great deal of pain from his injuries and yet had made admirably little complaint.

“What’re our chances?” Nathaniel asked as he slinked up to Frosts side. He’d always reminded Frost of a snake, somewhat slimy and sinister, with the potential to be either entirely harmless or incredibly dangerous. He’d yet to accurately assess the man.

“I could not say. This land is like no other I’ve encountered. I have no notion of the dangers here and that alone makes for a deadly situation. We must keep our wits about us and stay together.”

“Quite right, Frost. I don’t know much of these parts, looks to be alike to Sydney in some ways. Lotsa deadly creatures about, I’d wager.”

“None more so than our fellow man,” Frost replied, steel in his tone and gaze. He’d seen men commit the vilest of acts upon another—he’d done the worst himself to his own father. He’d take animals over men any day.

“Right you are, Frost. Right you are.”

Frost listened to Jimmy and Benjamin for a time as the lad spoke keenly about his enjoyment of being in water where he did not need to worry about his fathers’ sharks. Frost did not mention other dangers which might lurk and nor did Benjamin. Jimmy was going to grow up ruggedly out here in the wilds of Van Diemen’s land but there was no need to terrify him just yet.

“What’s the plan?” Another of the men—Isaac Fairley with the scratched to hell body—shouted.

Frost thought a moment. He’d been planning all day, considering their best and safest moves. In truth he cared not if the men followed him or stayed with him, so long as Jimmy and Benjamin remained at his side.

“We follow the stream. It is bound to emerge into a river, or some such larger body of water and we must keep to the water. We keep walking a few more hours and then we hunt for food—bird, animal, fish. Whatever we can manage. We rest for the night and tomorrow we discuss our options.”

“Our options?”

“Yes.”

Several of the men glanced at each other, having obviously not considered they had options. “We have choices to make and we must

discuss and consider them seriously. If we misjudge things out here, we are dead.” No point sugar coating their situation. His fellow survivors must acknowledge they were still in a fight for their survival.

Frost stood and approached Baskell. “Can I help you in?”

“Aye. That’d be right helpful, sir.”

Frost hooked Baskell’s arm over his shoulder and held him about the waist. He slowly walked him into the stream and over to the rock he’d perched on only minutes ago. “Sit here,” he commanded and aided the man down.

“Thank you, sir.”

“I am not a sir, Mr Baskell.”

“You were to me. I recall you from *the Asia*. A right fine and fair officer. None better.”

“Forgive me. I do not recall you.”

“Aye. Cause I gave the Master-at-arms no cause to know me.” Baskell smirked and Frost thought he caught a flash of familiarity in the grin.

“Good man,” he replied.

“Aye.” Baskell nodded and closed his eyes. “A real shame what happened at Navarino. That Mr Eyre were a real decent fellow.”

Frost tensed at the mention of Daniel’s name. He knew toward the end there had been rumours about the two of them, whispered allegations. Had Daniel lived, the day may have soon come when they would have found themselves before a court of some type and then the end of a rope.

He had no confidence in Daniel being able to hide his affection for him should he have been questioned. The notion brought a soft smile to his lips because Paddy was—had been—much the same.

“I didn’t say nothin’ before,” Baskell said quietly, “cause once a man finds ‘isself in Newgate he don’t want to talk none ‘bout ‘is past.”

“What do you want, Mr Baskell?” Frost asked through gritted teeth. Was the man going to attempt blackmail now? To what end? Frost would fight every man here if necessary before he gave in to blackmail.

Baskell looked at him, eyes full of shock. “Nothin’ sir. I only meant to say I knew you were a good man too, and I’m glad to ‘ave you with us.”

“My apologies, Mr Baskell. I thought...It is good to have a fellow man of *the Asia* with me.”

“Aye, Sir.” Baskell leaned back and groaned.

“Your foot is paining you?”

“Ain’t so bad. Water feels good on it.”

“Try to keep it raised if you can. I recall Daniel—Mr Eyre—saying raising an injured foot did it well.”

“Aye, Sir,” Baskell replied and lifted his leg toward the surface of the stream, allowing the buoyancy of the water to keep it afloat.

Frost moved slightly apart from the injured man and dunked under the water. He scrubbed at his face before surfacing. If nothing else, the stream had at least cooled them all down before they continued their march.

When he opened his eyes, he found Jimmy staring at him, grin on his young face seconds before a splash of water hit Frosts' surprised face. Though he kept his eyes closed while the splashing continued, he heard Jimmy's boyish laughter in the background. Smiling despite himself, Frost ducked under the water and moved closer to where he knew Jimmy stood. He leapt out of the water, pushing his hands through the surface to send a spray of his own toward the boy.

He laughed and played with Jimmy until they both fell, quite exhausted, onto the nearby bank.

“Thought ya mighta been too old ta play, Mr Frost.”

“I am not an old man, Jimmy,” Frost playfully grouched. “I am not yet two and thirty.”

“Paddy told me Alexander the Great had conq...conq...conquered the known world by the time he were your age.”

Frost smiled as he imagined Paddy regaling the boy with tales of the great Alexander. He had no doubt Paddy had mocked him before Jimmy for not achieving as much as the ancient Macedonian Prince.

“Not all of us have a desire to rule the world, Jim. And there are different measures to a man's success.”

Jimmy looked at him questioningly. “Don't know whatcha mean, but I do know you ain't ruling the world.” He smiled. “And you don't have no horse like...I can't think of 'is name now.” Jimmy frowned. “And poor Paddy ain't here to ask.”

“No, he is not.” Frost choked out; the reminder of his loss hard to bear. “The horses name was Bucephalus.”

They sat quietly for a time before Jimmy asked, “How do you measure success, Mr Frost?”

“By those I’ve loved and who have loved me in return.” He stood and scuffed Jimmy’s drying hair. “Come now, it is time to move on.”

PADDY

The light was fading fast and Paddy had yet to come across another living soul, if one did not count the animals—those he’d seen plenty of: a strange dog-like beast who’d snapped and snarled as he hastily passed by, countless small furry squirrel like creatures, but fortunately only one snake.

His priority now was to find a place to bed down for the night. He’d followed the small stream until it branched into a larger one which he’d kept on his left as he walked. Running out of water was a great concern, so by keeping to the edges of the stream he assured himself of a constant supply.

The aches in his body were finally easing, though the pain stabbing his guts from hunger were not. He’d need to eat something soon. He imagined himself capturing one of the squirrel-like animals, but what then? He knew what to do but how would he do it? He had no knife and nothing to make a fire with. He wasn’t desperate enough yet to eat anything uncooked. He supposed that time would come soon enough.

Weary and heartsick, Paddy fought for each step he took. He swept his gaze over the landscape in the fading light searching for the right spot. This would not be the first night he spent out of doors, but at least on prior

occasions he'd been home in England, in a world he understood. He was a stranger here, in a very strange land.

The sun was low, almost kissing the land when he smelled it. Smoke. Indisputable. Somewhere close by was a fire. Had he stumbled upon other survivors? Or was this a forest fire? He looked about but saw no evidence of fire even though its stench gained strength with each step. He crept quietly, terrified he may have somehow circled back to Moxey and the main party.

Surely, though, so many would be making far too much noise for Paddy not to have heard them by now. For the first time he thought of the women and children who'd been aboard and said a silent prayer they had all safely made land. He wished no ill toward the soldiers and sailors either, though he desperately hoped Moxey had met his fate.

A thin line of smoke was visible now, as well as the sound of soft voices. Only a handful Paddy guessed. They had to be convict survivors, perhaps even Benjamin and Jimmy. He did not allow himself to think of Frost.

Paddy stayed quiet and low, not willing to spook whoever he approached, but also hoping for a glimpse of them before he made his presence known. He had no desire to run into Mander or one of his ilk.

“Step out, stranger,” a deep voice called. Paddy recognised the commanding tone immediately but dared not hope until he'd seen the man's face.

He stumbled forward into a small clearing where a handful of men stood centred around a small fire. He searched each face but had not

reached the third man before he was swept off his feet and pulled into a tight embrace.

Frosts' face pushed into his hair, his lips at Paddy's ear. "I thought I'd lost you," he whispered over and over.

"Paddy!" Jimmy cried happily somewhere in the distance, but in that moment only Frost mattered.

"Me too," he replied each time Frost murmured in his ear.

Frost pressed a kiss to his ear, his cheek and nose before, finally, his lips lightly grazed Paddy's own. Paddy didn't even care about the other men he knew to be standing around them. He gripped Frosts' cheeks and kissed him fiercely on the mouth. Then he pulled back and looked at this man he loved so dearly. He brushed Frost's tears away with the pads of his thumbs even as he held tight to his lover's face.

"Are you quite well?" Frost asked softly.

"Yes. And you?"

Frost nodded before shaking his head. "I cannot believe you are standing before me. I thought—"

Paddy watched Frost swallow the knot in his throat and gather himself together. "Something had me but let me go. When I came up, I couldn't see you."

"Doesn't matter now," Frost replied, gently stroking his hair. "You're here."

"Paddy, we thought you dead," Jimmy interjected with boyish excitement.

“I thought I was too, Jimmy,” he replied, turning to face the other survivors. “Benjamin!” he cried and ran to embrace both Benjamin and Jimmy who stood beside him.

For a moment he wondered if his friend would recoil from his touch but then dismissed it as an uncharitable thought. Benjamin had told him he did not care about such things and he trusted him.

Benjamin embraced him, almost as tightly as Frost had. By comparison Jimmy’s hug was light, though no less fervent.

“Is this all?” he asked when he was released and had an opportunity to glance around at the small group.

“All that we have found,” Frost replied. “I am certain others would have made it but where they have ended up is any man’s guess.”

Paddy looked at him, overwhelmed by both his beauty and the fact he was once again in his presence. “I can’t believe I found you.”

Frost stepped close again, his fingers trailing gently across Paddy’s cheek. “I ought to chastise you for untying yourself after you promised me —”

“Couldn’t let you die,” Paddy whispered.

“No, but you’d let yourself.” Frost squeezed his eyes shut and took a breath. “Have you eaten?”

“No.”

“Come then.” Frost took his hand and led him toward the fire. “Sit.”

“I ain’t no mutt, Frost,” Paddy smirked, but did as Frost asked.

Frost walked away but was back in moments with something in his hands that smelled remarkably good. “Eat,” he commanded and shoved a chunk of meat into Paddy’s hands.

Hunger fought a brief battle with Paddy’s manners and won. He bit into the food, tearing it greedily with his teeth. Perhaps it was only the starvation talking but he thought whatever this was to be the finest tasting thing to pass his lips.

“What is it?” he asked around a mouthful.

“A rather large bird of some kind,” Frost replied.

“Caught it ourselves,” Jimmy added. “Well mostly Mr Frost, but I ‘elped.”

Paddy licked his lips, wishing there was more, but at least there was a little something in his empty belly. “We might end up like Peter the wild boy,” he replied to Jimmy’s enthusiasm.

“Aye, here he goes with his tales,” Benjamin scoffed, a small smile on his face. “Go on, then. Tell us about this Peter the wild.”

“He was some unfortunate found living with the animals in Hanover. George the first brought him back to court. Some said he were raised by the animals, but no one ever knew—he never did speak.”

“What kinda animals?” Jimmy asked, his eyes filled with curiosity as usual.

“Don’t rightly know. Maybe bears.”

“P’raps there’s bears ‘ere,” Benjamin said, though his tone suggested he hoped not.

“Point is,” Paddy continued, “he were just a small boy all alone. He survived and so can we.”

“We could return—”

“No.” Paddy glared at Frost, shocked by his suggestion.

“Listen to me, Paddy,” Frost continued, ignoring Paddy’s hard stare. “You and Jimmy, and Ben, you only have a few years and you will be free. If we stay out here—”

“We’ll be free now. I ain’t goin’ back.” Paddy wanted to add he wasn’t going back without Frost and there was no way he was allowing that, only to lose Frost to his life sentence. Choosing to stay out here, on the run from Moxey’s soldiers, was the easiest decision he’d ever made.

“Paddy, will you walk with me?” Frost stood and held his hand down for Paddy to take.

“We ain’t goin’ back neither, Sir,” a man Paddy recognised as Peter Baskell said.

“No, we ain’t,” Nathaniel added, “so don’t you go tryin’ to change ‘is mind.”

Frost heaved a sigh and Paddy thought he caught him rolling his eyes. “Very well, but I would like a private word with him regardless.”

“Course you would,” Baskell snickered, but there was no anger or repulsion in his tone.

Paddy laughed when he caught Frost’s surprised expression. They walked away from the assembled men, the soft murmurs of the survivors chasing them. Frost led them a short distance to a copse of trees. He’d not

walked two steps into the coverage before Frost had him pressed against one of the larger tree trunks, his hands resting softly on Paddy's hips while his big body towered over him.

“Look at me, Paddy.”

Paddy raised his eyes and gasped. In the soft moonlight Frost appeared incredibly beautiful, like one of the Greek gods from his myths he'd once loved to read. His hand cupped Paddy's cheek a moment before he pulled him closer, cradling Paddy's face into his chest.

“I will not—cannot—lose you again.”

Any response Paddy made would be lost in the bulk of Frost's body, so he contented himself with just being held. He'd never realised how comforting a simple touch could be, how strengthening a hug, until he'd met Frost.

When Frost finally released him, Paddy curled his arms around Frost's neck and kissed him. This was not the soft, tentative kisses from before, there was no crowd to watch on, no risk of being caught, and Paddy revelled in the freedom. He clung fiercely to Frost, hooking his right leg around his lover as though he were trying to pull him into his own body.

Frost's mouth was soft and sweet, tasting of the meat they'd recently eaten. His arms were solid around his back, fingers biting into Paddy's flesh. Frost's hands slid down to cup his arse and lift him gently. He rolled his hips and pulled Paddy closer encouraging more friction between them.

Paddy kissed along Frost's jawline before burying his face into his neck. Frost continued to roll his hips and Paddy was mortified to realise he was about to spend from the delicious friction.

“Frost,” he whined. “Oh, God.”

“Give it to me, Paddy,” Frost whispered, lips brushing against his hair.

A few more rolls of Frost’s hips and Paddy’s release overtook him. He bit into Frost’s throat to prevent crying out loud enough the whole of Van Diemen’s land might have heard him.

“Christ,” Frost muttered and then pulled back to take Paddy’s lips once more. Frost kissed him through his completion, moaning decadently each time Paddy’s cock pulsed.

The storm passed, Paddy’s breath finally coming under his control and he lowered his legs to the ground. He wasn’t certain he’d be able to look at Frost after what had happened, but he wasn’t given the choice. Frost’s big hand gripped his chin and tilted his face up.

“You are so damn beautiful like that, Paddy.”

Paddy flushed to his roots. He couldn’t think of a single sensible thing to say so he bit his lip to prevent a foolish thought from escaping.

“Unless you want to be sprawled naked before me right this minute, you will stop biting your damn lip.” Frost’s voice was low but there was a threatening growl to it.

“Sorry,” he whispered.

“Do not apologise for being so tempting.”

Frost eased to the ground, resting his back against the tree and spreading his legs wide. He patted the space between. Paddy did not hesitate. He lowered himself into the spot, his back resting upon Frost’s

chest. He was warm and safe and surprisingly happy given his unhappy circumstances.

“What are we to do?” Paddy asked after a lingering silence.

“Are you set upon not returning to Moxey?”

“I ain’t goin’ back.” Paddy might have thumped the ground to emphasise his point, but Frost wrapped an arm about his waist and held him still.

“Very well. There is nothing for it, then. We must make a home here.”

EPILOGUE

FROST

All around him the air was perfectly still. Not even a blade of grass stirred. Sweat trickled down his forehead, a single droplet landing on his arm tucked under his chest to support him where he lay on the rough ground. Several yards away his quarry twitched.

Sharp, knowing eyes stared at the spot where Frost lay hidden. He hardly breathed, hoping he'd remain undetected. Paddy needed him to make this kill—they all did.

A month had passed since the sinking of their prison ship and Frost, Paddy and the rest of their small band of convict survivors had managed to eke out something like a life. Debris continued to wash up on shore as the ship slowly broke apart where it rested on the rocks further out in the channel. On a clear day, Frost fancied he could just spot the wreckage on the distant horizon.

The creature's gaze remained fixed on Frost. He'd thought he'd been so still as he approached, but perhaps he'd been wrong. Somehow, he'd alerted their meal to his presence. He didn't move a muscle, hardly dared a breath.

He thought of Paddy, safely back at their camp. He was still far too skinny for Frost's peace of mind, but they weren't doing too bad. Animal life was plentiful, and Jimmy and Benjamin had become proficient fishermen.

The others were proving their usefulness in other ways. A shelter, of unattractive appearance, but sound practicality was almost complete. The weather had held steady for them, little rain since the night of the sinking. Nothing had been seen or heard of Moxey and the remaining survivors. Frost was finally allowing himself to believe there was a slender chance of freedom for them here.

While his mind had been wondering, his quarry had returned to its foraging. Frost struck with a swift and deadly aim, putting the poor creature from its suffering before it had registered what was happening. The medium-dog sized creature would make a plentiful meal for them.

Frost swung its body over his shoulder, keen to return to their settlement. He'd become even more adept at finding his way, but the small trail of smoke guided him regardless. There'd been a hell of an altercation about lighting fires with many of them fearful their smoke would draw Moxey's gaze. One night of raw meat had settled the dispute and a fire had been lit the next day and the next, though they'd made an effort to find sheltered areas in the hopes of preventing their smoke from being noticed.

"What's that one, Mr Frost?" Jimmy asked as soon as he entered their settlement.

"It's rather like a small doglike tiger, Jim." Frost tossed the body on the ground, stretching the kink of his shoulder after he did so.

"Seems a shame," Paddy murmured at his side.

"We must eat, Paddy."

"I know."

"I'll take care of it," Muir said as he came to claim the body.

Whether by the design of a god Frost was reluctant to believe in or chance, each man of the group had fallen into a necessary occupation. Carpentry, cooking, hunter. Every man pulled his weight in their settlement.

Often, late into the night, Frost lay awake wondering how long the harmony amongst these men would last. While food and water were plentiful, he expected few problems, but should they run low...? He'd observed men drenched in fear attack another who they'd once called friend if they thought it might mean their survival. How long would the serenity last?

He strode to the far end of the creek to the spot where they deemed it best for them to wash and crouched to clean his hands of the stains from his kill. His gaze, as it often did, drifted to Paddy.

Though their relationship was an open secret amongst the survivors, he and Paddy remained circumspect about it. They were aware a few of the men did not fully accept them with the same equanimity as the others. He'd heard several conversations amongst themselves and to their god about the abomination. Though Frost cared nothing for their thoughts on the subject, he also saw no point in flaunting what Paddy and he meant to each other in front of them.

Stolen, private moments were all they had, yet he at least could offer Paddy casual touches without the fear of discovery he'd have experienced at home in England.

Frost cherished whatever time alone he managed with Paddy. Even if they only talked, he loved listening to Paddy's ideas and thoughts. Much like Daniel had been, Paddy was a dreamer and his optimism was a balm to Frost's more serious nature. But the times when they did more than talk

were a revelation to Frost. Paddy's reactions as he'd discovered the pleasures of being with another man were intoxicating. He was adventurous and curious, wanting Frost to touch him everywhere in every way.

The first time Paddy had tentatively put his mouth on his rod, Frost had thought he might burst apart from the pleasure his lovers unbridled enthusiasm had brought him. He'd known Daniel had other lovers before him, but Paddy had been a virgin in every sense—their first kiss had been Paddy's first kiss. Introducing Paddy to the pleasures of the flesh was a heady experience. But Paddy was loud in his appreciation of the pleasure Frost gave him, his cries echoing into the night sky unless Frost slapped a hand across his mouth. The slight body was strong also, pushing and pulling at Frost as Paddy sought release in an uninhibited and intoxicating fashion.

Just thinking about it as he washed his hands made him hard. His gaze turned desirous as he watched Paddy from across the stream. Whether Paddy sensed his growing desire, or he found it difficult not to watch Frost, he wasn't sure, but Paddy's gaze soon landed upon him.

Paddy's beautiful eyes widened as he took in Frost's lustful expression. The young man's tongue flicked out to lick his lips and Frost's restraint snapped. He stood and strode across the stream, carefully grabbing Paddy's arm and pulling him to his feet. A softly ordered, "come," was all he needed to say for Paddy to follow him, though Frost kept his grip on his arm.

They silently walked away from the small group. Most of the men were out hunting or scavenging for their shelter. They'd almost cleared the others when Frost heard shouting in the distance. He stilled as he tried to make out the words, fearful of what might have caused such a ruckus.

“Frost! Frost! They’re coming!”

An icy finger danced up his spine. *They’re coming*. There was little doubt who.

Those words could only mean one thing: Moxey’s men had found them.

Paddy’s hand gripped his, cinching tightly as Fairley ran towards them, still shouting. Fairley came to a stop before them, doubling over as his breath came in laboured gasps.

“The soldiers, Frost,” he spluttered. “They’re comin’”

“Tell me,” Frost ordered.

“We spotted their camp, still a ways off, but they’ll be ‘ere by the morrow.”

Moxey’s men searching for them had always been a certainty. Frost had long been formulating plans for this eventuality. Thankfully, the men had been willing to listen to him and each should know what to do.

“Fairley, you know what to do.”

Fairley nodded and ran toward the camp. Frost turned to Paddy, hating the fear he saw in those warm, green eyes staring back at him.

“Paddy,” he murmured and gently pressed his lips to Paddy’s. He tugged Paddy closer, feeling the length of his lover’s trembling body against his own. “We are going to make it,” he whispered against Paddy’s lips.

“I know,” Paddy softly replied.

Paddy's faith in him was both a burden and incentive. He would never let anything happen to his young lover. He hadn't been able to save Daniel, but he would not fail Paddy. "This is not how I planned to spend our evening, Paddy. But for now..., we run."

