

LOVE'S LANDSCAPES



Don't Read in the Closet 2014

THE SCENT OF HOPE

Summer Devon

Table of Contents

Love's Landscapes.....3
The Scent of Hope – Information5
The Scent of Hope6
Author Bio35

Love's Landscapes

An M/M Romance series

THE SCENT OF HOPE

By Summer Devon

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love's Landscapes* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

What Is Love's Landscapes?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love's Landscapes*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

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

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Photo Description

A man in his early twenties looks scruffy in a bloodstained shirt covered by a dusty leather coat. His handsome face wears a slight smirk, which is odd, considering the very large noose around his neck.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I am getting really tired of the waiting. No one told me that waiting to die would be quite this boring. So to pass the time, I wrote a letter to my sister, but somehow my letter got to the wrong person. Who do I end up writing? Did I really commit the murder I will hang for? Can whoever my mysterious pen pal is get me out of the mess?

Fantasy or pseudo-regency preferred, where same sex relationships are normal, no PWP,

HEA or HFN ending please.

Sincerely,

Xelly

Story Info

Genre: historical

Tags: condemned man, Victorian era, prison, rescue, businessman, prisoner, HFN

Word Count: 11,637

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“And do you regret your actions that have brought you so low?” The elderly gent wore a fixed smile as he examined Dez. “I do not speak of the crimes of which you are accused. I mean all the sad conditions of your life.”

Dez sat at the edge of the metal platform that functioned as a bed and wiggled his perpetually cold toes. *Hell, yes. I regret getting so drunk that I was caught almost at once.* “Yes, Father.”

The vicar leaned far back on the wooden chair he'd brought into the cell. Poor man probably wished he hadn't settled so close to the prisoner. Dez got a bucket of water every couple of days, and he didn't waste more than a few drops on cleaning his stinking self and he hadn't had a change of clothing for... too long.

But Dez had underestimated the old man who'd been shifting about on his chair for another purpose: to pull some crumpled blank pages and a pencil from inside his fusty black jacket. “Do you have someone to whom you can write, and beg forgiveness?” the vicar asked. “Can you write?”

Writing? Dez considered the notion.

Messing about with pencil and paper seemed more interesting than sitting and watching the rats chew on his dinner. His first week in prison, he'd tried to tame a rat—that seemed a standard way a convict might entertain himself. The creature bit him. After that, Dez decided to ignore his fellow “inmates”.

“Yes, Father. I'll write a letter. Good idea.”

If the vicar gave him paper, he'd figure out what to do with it later on. But then his plans to make salacious drawings were destroyed with the vicar's next words. “I shall carry these pages from this place and send them. No official eyes will see what you've written.”

A generous offer, although perhaps the man of God was lying like the devil. Dez considered writing to Bill and ask he bring some tobacco and the ten shillings he owed Dez, but he supposed his friend would ignore any pleas.

No one he knew had tried to come to his rescue... and wasn't that a lowering thought.

The vicar said, "Do you have a mother? Father? No? A sister? No one?"

"A sister," Dez said. "But she wouldn't want to hear from me."

"Write to her. Do you have anything better to do with your time?"

Dez laughed for the first time in days. He liked this old crow of a man. "I'll cancel my luncheon appointment with Her Majesty immediately." He took the papers and pencil and got to work.

He even wrote something as close to the heart as he could manage.

Carl gave up trying to read and handed the pages-long letter to his secretary. "Go on, take a look. It's from a man named Dez Moore. I understood enough to be interested."

Crimson gave a ladylike snort. "From a stranger—then it'll be another plea for funds, sir. That's why it was placed in the pile of correspondence to ignore."

"No need to protect me."

"I disagree. You were nearly hoodwinked by that scoundrel claiming to be an Austrian prince."

"No such thing. I wrote back to the pretender because I was fascinated by his scheme."

"You are always interested in evil idiots."

"Such as you?"

"Exactly." She paused. "Is this your hobby again?"

He shrugged. Carl occasionally allowed himself to be diverted from the course he'd set while a child beggar in London. His goals were simple: he wanted wealth and power. Yet every now and again, with no warning, his discipline slipped and he found himself expending effort on people or projects that didn't increase his wealth.

When he thought of himself haring off on one of those projects, he recalled a rat terrier he'd once seen scrambling up and out of a hole where it had been hard at work eliminating rats. It sped away into the sunshine without looking back. Its handler screamed after it and the dog didn't so much as look back. An animal bred for one purpose, a creature dedicated to its task, suddenly veered away from its path—and just as single-minded as always as it raced off.

Scowling down at the six pages, Crimson sank into the chair next to the desk. Like everyone who worked in Carl's office, she knew better than to use the chair facing the desk because it was built low and uncomfortable. Carl saved that chair for competitors or employees who required a stern lecture.

He watched her read the pages covered with a scrawling hand, hardly better than Carl's own attempts, and Carl pondered the few lines he'd figured out—and had memorised.

I know you and Mum tried to change me and tried with love. And some days (a fortnight ago, when I was dragged into this cosy little home) I almost wish you had succeeded. Most of the time I can't say that. Truth is, and truth is all I have left, I'd do what I did again, and more slow even. If you'd seen it, you would have done the same, Lucy, or wanted to. Don't bother praying for that change in me. If you get this, I hope you come, if not to help, at least to say I told you so. I sorely miss your face.

Carl was intrigued. Too intrigued. This letter seemed to call straight to that reckless part of himself. In the past, his interest had been triggered by an article in a paper of an injustice or the sight of a careworn face. As Crimson said, businessmen had their hobbies, and perhaps this was no stranger than golf, say, or a collection of some sort. Besides, last time he'd gained a valuable assistant.

"Want me to read the rest of the letter to you?" Crimson asked in a low voice. She knew how much he hated people to discover his weakness. He hardly cared that he had trouble with reading, and she didn't either, but if anyone else should find out. No.

Fellow businessmen made snide remarks because he had a female assistant—but he ignored them. He needed Crimson far more than she needed him. She could keep secrets.

Carl sat on the edge of his desk. "I understand this was to go to someone named Mrs Carl Rees, not Carl Reis. It appears that this town's postmistress is as bad at reading as I am. The man, Dez, is in prison, and he's writing to his sister. I got that as well." He didn't admit that it had taken him nearly ten minutes to figure out that much.

"This material strikes one as unoriginal." Crimson wrinkled her aristocratic nose. "One suspects he gets his basic plot from one of those melodramas in a

music hall. Perhaps he sent out identical letters to any number of people with similar names, hoping someone will send funds?" She read a page then said, "I'm not so far off. He apparently does want rescuing, the idiot."

"Rescuing from Her Majesty's care."

"Yes, although no matter. I expect it's a sham. Shall we get to the rest of this morning's post, sir?"

Before he could protest, she tucked the pages under his blotter and picked up a letter from a lawyer. Ah well, he should work.

She read that dull plea for money out loud. He walked around to his big leather desk chair and settled in, not listening to Crimson, instead thinking about the note from prison that had fallen into his hands.

Crimson finished reading then said, "Should I tell the solicitor we'd agree to take over that estate?"

He forced his mind back to work. "No, far too risky."

"You don't mind risk, sir," Crimson said.

"Never without reward. The costs to repair the building would outrun profits from the farmland."

"What shall I write to him?"

"Whatever you like." He tapped a finger on the desk.

If you get this, I hope you come.

"Crimson, never mind the other letters. Find out about Dez Moore. Huh, and what sort of a name is that? Desmond, I suppose."

She heaved the sigh of a long-suffering employee about to launch into a complaint.

"Now," he added. With anyone else, he might say please. Not Crimson. She had no respect for politeness.

She was also frighteningly competent.

Less than a day later, she came back with information. "Assuming the letter came from him, it is not a hoax, though it was sent more than a month ago. He's a murderer, as he admits himself. Something of a scandal in the lesser London papers. He claims he was protecting a female but she vanished into nothing."

"I recall that was in the letter." He'd read it through the night before, but he wouldn't admit that.

"Well this Moore is not long for the world. His trial's over and done with. He's guilty. He's to hang in ten days."

The fact, so casually stated, made Carl blink. He wiped a hand over his mouth to hide his dismay.

Crimson tucked the newspaper under her arm and gathered up Dez's letter that Carl had battled his way through. She flipped through the pages. "There are some rather overdone bits in the letter about how he only wants a chance to see his sister one last time. If I hadn't found those clippings, I would think it came straight from some penny dreadful or music hall production."

He felt annoyed that a man's pending death provided the source of Crimson's mockery. Usually her sarcastic manner didn't bother him—in fact, he found it refreshing.

He picked up the envelope that had contained the letter. "And he hangs in less than a fortnight. I'd better arrange to visit as soon as possible."

Time to scramble from his usual hole and dash off—and ignore his sterner self that would run after him shouting. Carl Reis, rat terrier. Perhaps he'd put it on a set of calling cards.

"What? A visit?" She didn't hide her dismay.

"I'll take a train, if possible, and perhaps a carriage from an inn. Even if there is such a thing as a train, I'm sure it won't run more than once or twice a day."

"Sir, what are you planning? What happened to never taking risk without reward? You said that only yesterday."

"This is hardly a risk. I lose a day's work, perhaps."

"It's lunatic."

"Probably," he agreed. "Find me a train in the Bradshaw's." He paused. The plans built in his mind, the way they usually did, although these thoughts made his heart speed the way business hadn't in a long time. "Wait. Wendell should track down his sister. She's in this town, I should imagine. We should arrange for her to visit him. We'll write a note to Moore, send it to the prison. I'll dictate that one in a minute. And perhaps... Yes, also we'll need lawyers. I have some questions about this case."

Crimson must have sensed his determination, because she stopped protesting. Stubborn as a wall, Wendell called him, and no one wanted to be crushed against rock.

With her usual efficiency, Crimson located the sister that day and arranged for her to come to the local and temporary offices of Reis and Company.

It wouldn't do for a man of Reis's stature to chase after some unknown widow, Crimson and Wendell argued.

Mrs Rees was thin and mousy in a black gown with grey ribbons. She refused the offer of refreshment and balanced on one of Carl's more comfortable armchairs. "Please, I haven't much time. I must return to my employer," she said in a shaking voice. "I understand this has to do with my brother?"

That fact seemed to be the source of her fear. Maybe she wasn't always such a timid creature.

"I believe this was intended for you." Carl handed the letter to her.

She took it with reluctance, and, as she read, she began to weep silently, hiccupping occasionally. When she was done, Reis offered her his handkerchief and watched her destroy the fabric with twisting and tears.

"I'm sorry to give you such bad news," he said.

"No. No. I knew. I've had other letters months ago. But I don't answer. Oh, you see, the dreadful situation hurts too much. I'm years older than Desmond, and I thought him such a sweet boy. I prefer to think of him that way still... He had a good job as a clerk and threw it away to drive a carriage and to drink and gamble." She wiped her streaming eyes. "Where did we go wrong?"

"If you're speaking of the crime, he claims he killed the man in the defence of a woman."

"I have read as much." She didn't seem convinced.

"I haven't had time to read all I can about the case—" or have Crimson read it to him "—but a solicitor has already assured me that his defence apparently didn't do a very good job. They didn't make enough of an effort to find the innocent he protected."

Mrs Rees pressed the handkerchief to her lips. "Innocent? From the descriptions I've read, she wasn't an innocent. She was... It was a lady with no shame."

Interesting to know she followed the case after all. Carl said, "A prostitute?" She flinched as he said the words, but managed a nod.

"So you think it's all right to murder one of them?"

She seemed confused by the question, and more tears came.

He cursed himself for the sarcasm he should leave to Crimson, who had a lighter hand.

"If you would allow me, I'd help you to visit your brother. Before..." He stopped himself before he said something blunt about hanging. No doubt about it, he was not used to dealing with genteel females with sensibilities.

"No. I am sorry, but I can't. I am a widow now, a companion to Lady Mannering, and she needs me. I can't risk losing my place."

He didn't point out that if she were so essential, she probably wouldn't lose her employment for an occasion such as this. Carl knew avoidance when he heard it.

She rose to her feet, so of course he had to as well.

Mrs Rees reached into a leather-and-needlepoint bag she carried, and pulled out two tin-backed daguerreotypes. "I hope you might know how to send these to him?" More avoidance. She had the prison's address.

She placed one picture on the desk. It was a portrait of an extremely pale, thin lady holding a lily—dear God, an extremely pale, thin, extremely *dead* lady. "A memento mori?" he asked.

"Yes." She nodded. "Our mama. Soon after she passed."

"Perhaps mother and son shall meet again soon," said Crimson, who was obviously unimpressed by their visitor.

Mrs Rees shook her head. "No. My mother was a good woman, and my brother..." The tears trickled again. "He shan't reside in heaven. I want him to have this. And another, a reminder of what he once was—what he's lost."

She managed to hand over the other picture. A young man in a tight-fitting, dark suit stood, hands resting on a chair, not quite smiling—those full lips were pulled into a smirk.

But there was something, perhaps the way his brown eyes looked past the photographer? Carl decided this man was mocking himself.

“Dez,” he said, and allowed himself a few seconds to examine the face, the slashing brows, the strong nose, the chin that might be petulant. This picture, that almost-smile, put the seal on his interest. Carl Reis was hooked.

He looked up at Mrs Rees, who actually met his gaze.

Her eyes, red-rimmed, were rather pretty—like Dez’s? She said, “If you’d be so kind as to make sure he gets these, please do mention that I forgive him. It would not have been possible to forgive if our mama had suffered because of him. If he’d given her sorrow... but she was sick for many years, and I managed to keep the truth from her before she died.”

She closed her bag and squeezed the leather handles. “In the last two years, I have lost my dear mother, my husband, and now this. I can’t. I simply cannot see him again.” She made excuses for her weakness, of course. Over her shoulder, Crimson rolled her eyes.

Carl might well be ruthless, but he had no need to make this guilt-ridden woman feel any worse. He picked up the pictures, and smiled at her. “I’ll tell him you’ve forgiven him, and I’ll see that he gets these pictures.”

Her brow furrowed. “You’ll write to him for me?”

“I’m going to go see him.” He had to now. He’d already sent a letter saying he’d bring along the sister, and that wasn’t going to happen.

His heart beat a little faster at the thought of seeing that cocky boy in person and witness how he’d grown into a man.

Absurd. Carl knew where his thoughts now strayed. He had little time or patience for such matters. He’d had sexual encounters before, once in a train station on a trip to York, another time in a private room in a pub. His hand and imagination suited him well enough.

To connect attraction to his... hobby. He wasn’t sure he approved. The parts of his life were tidied away in separate boxes.

But that smile. The letter. He gazed down at the picture again, at the near-smile, and startled when Mrs Rees grabbed his hand.

“You are a saint.” Mrs Rees gasped and began to cry. Behind her, Crimson broke into silent laughter. At his glare, she mouthed the word *saint*.

“Ever hear of this bloke? Carl Reis?” One of the few guards who passed the time of day with the prisoners shoved an envelope at Dez.

“Carl Rees was my sister’s husband. This must be from her.” Dez caught a whiff of glorious tobacco and fresh air. It came from the papers in his hand.

“Naw, this isn’t anyone’s sister.”

The envelope had been opened and the contents read, of course. The letter was from someone whose name was almost exactly the same as his dead brother-in-law’s. For a long moment, he puzzled over why this man would write to him. And then Dez realised his letter to Lucy had fallen into the wrong hands.

A bitter disappointment filled him. He’d hoped to see her one more time.

“Well. Go on and read,” the gaoler ordered. “Only, listen, if it’s the head of Reis and Company, he’s got fingers in all sorts of pies. If you knew him, why, you should have written him sooner.”

“I don’t know him,” Dez said and pulled the single sheet out. “God almighty,” he said and gave a snort of laughter.

“Well?” the gaoler demanded.

“He’s going to bring my sister here.” *Try to bring her*, the letter said, but he grabbed hold as if it was a fact. He wanted a few facts to go his way.

The guard laughed too. “He better hurry, then.”

So bleeding funny—the hanging was scheduled in two days, and the gaolers did love to remind him of that.

While he had light enough to see, Dez read the note again and again, particularly a line about *we hope to help in any way we can*. What could that mean? We? Help? Any way?

Dez wasn’t sure he liked this little squirm of hope, not at all. And what sort of a maniac would help a man he knew nothing about—well, nothing other than the fact that Dez, the man in question, was an admitted murderer.

He was looking a magical gift horse in the mouth. And since there was no such thing as magic, that was fine. But that night he lay awake, staring into darkness and listening to the scurry of the rodents. “Carl Reis,” he said. “Carl. Carl Reis.” Funny to hear his brother-in-law’s name with so much interest and possibility attached to it. Poor old, dead Carl had the same interest in men as Dez—he’d tried to sneak into Dez’s bed one night soon after the wedding. Dez had kneed him in the bollocks, and then promised never to speak of the matter to Lucy.

Dead Carl Rees was too conventional to ever admit such an attraction to the wide world.

“Carl Reis,” Dez said. If his sister married this man, she wouldn’t have to change her name much at all. And what a step up for her—from a clerk in a shipbuilding firm to some kind of wealthy pie-fingerer who used lovely paper. Dez held the letter to his nose again, and managed to fall asleep breathing its scent.

He dreamed about fucking his brother-in-law, who slipped a noose around his neck. He woke as he climaxed. He hadn’t had such a dream in years. His stupid body wasn’t giving up on life yet.

We hope to help any way we can.

The day of his execution, Dez begged for a change of clothes and a barber.

He got the barber and the clothes they’d caught him in, still unwashed. He eyed the splotches of blood from the man he’d slammed into a wall. Perhaps it was some kind of justice to die wearing the bastard’s blood. And maybe some of the blood belonged to the girl the man had been slashing about the face—the girl who’d vanished into the night and hadn’t reappeared even when Dez wheedled a newspaper reporter into begging for her to come forward.

The barber’s hand trembled—probably he didn’t shave many murderers—so he sliced Dez’s neck. Still, he made Dez look and feel more like a human than he had in weeks. He thanked the man.

“Will you sign this?” the barber asked. He placed a blank piece of paper on the platform of a bed and fished a pencil from his tunic.

Dez picked up the pencil. “Will the prison need it to pay you? Can’t the turnkey see my shiny face and short hair as proof enough?”

“No, no. It’s just that some folk pay a penny for a hanged man’s signature. Specially a man who’s attracted the attention that you have of late.”

“Ah.” Dez nearly threw the pencil at the barber, but why not? He signed the paper three times. “There’s three pence for you.”

After the barber left, Dez sat on the bed alone and waited in the chilly, damp cell. By some miracle, he’d managed to avoid contracting lice, but the fleas bit, and he had their welts on his skin to occupy himself. If only he had more

paper—he might write another letter. This time he might tell Bill he was sorry he hadn't tried harder to make their time together something more than a simple lark.

Carl Reis hadn't managed any miracle after all. Dez felt a moment's rage at the man. But he hadn't promised anything—and maybe Dez's sister waited for him outside.

Unlikely, but Dez didn't have much more time, and he wouldn't spend it in anger or in regretting a moment of his life. Too much drink might have led him to that dark street at the wrong time, but he'd already moved along from dwelling on that time.

Funny, it wasn't the drink he'd missed in prison—once the shivers and headaches had passed. He'd had plenty of hours to consider the other days and nights of his life. The list of what he missed was simple. The wind on his face as he drove, huddled in his greatcoat, the half-wild creatures hooked to the carriage, the bugle and call of the yards as he steered the animals in, knowing a good meal waited. Those were the parts of life he'd mourned losing. Oxtail soup. Hot tea. Waking in a bed with someone else and using that person's bulk as a shield against the world and cold. Warm beds. Oh yes, warm beds. The touch of another person, smiles, a good laugh.

It seemed a crime that he would leave this life without feeling warmth again. Although perhaps Hell would be warm enough.

“Nearly time.” The turnkey was at the bars. “We generally do this work at dawn. Sorry for the delay.” He grinned.

God, these people and their awful jokes. He forced himself to grin back, because screaming or ranting would be worse.

They'd offered him a portion of rum, but he'd turned it down. His new sobriety, the only gift prison gave him that he appreciated, wouldn't last long—though he would be sober the rest of his life, *oh ha ha*, and wasn't that a joke worthy of the gaolers.

He picked up the letter again. In the two days he'd had it, the paper had turned grimy and lost all pleasant scents. But as talismans went, it wasn't half bad. He tucked it into the side of his trousers. Someone had made an effort for him, even if it was to write a passel of lies. Someone had given him hope and a sense that he wasn't entirely alone

“Come on then, Moore. Hands forward, time for the shackles.”

Dez rose to his feet slowly, hoping his knees wouldn't give way in fear. He remembered an execution he'd witnessed—the man had fallen and wailed on the walk to the gallows. The crowd jeered and laughed.

He hadn't joined the mocking crowd, but that didn't lend him much comfort at the moment.

They manacled his hands in the front with heavy cold irons. Then the leg irons that made him shuffle.

Two men walked with him, one tall and stout, and the other taller and stouter. Every second seemed to take far too long, even as time moved too quickly. At the door to the yard, they were met by the clergyman who'd visited him. The old man looked anxious and pale, which didn't go well with his pure white hair.

"Hello, Father," Dez said, glad of a friendly face.

He tried to ignore the noisy crowd—so many people gathered to watch—and concentrated on the feel of sunlight on his face.

Good morning, Sun.

Good-bye, Sun.

"Fine morning for it," said one of the guards. Oh, they did love their stupid japes. Dez wanted to ram his foot down on the man's instep. Instead, he smiled too. Because he would not allow these people to recall him and think *coward*.

And why did he care at all what they thought? Why was he wasting his last precious moments on this absurdity?

"Are you making your peace with God, my son?"

Hardly. The rotter hadn't come through for Dez. "I'm still working on making peace with myself."

The men laughed. Even the vicar smiled.

"What'd he say?" voices shouted.

"Take down his last words. They'll sell well," one of the guards said to the vicar. "I'll sign off that they were true, too."

"That's not why I'm here. The newspapermen are here for that," snapped the old man. Wasn't he supposed to be concerned with Dez's soul and not his own dignity?

They climbed the wooden stairs to the platform slowly because of the irons on Dez's ankles. At the top, Dez looked around at the upturned faces.

"Has anyone seen my sister?" he asked.

Someone laughed, but then the cry went up, and all around, people turned and gazed at each other, and the mutters rippled through the crowd. *Sister? Where is the near-dead man's sister? He has a right to see his sister.* He watched the heads twist side to side.

Rather nice that they searched for her too. The final kindness in his life.

He hadn't really expected Lucy to come. She hadn't even sent word of their mother's death—he learned about that from a reporter.

But he would have liked to say farewell to her or Bill, or anyone he knew before That Night—the night he'd murdered a man.

Only now, he was being pulled into place in the middle of the trapdoor.

"Hood?" asked a man. Dez stared at him, unable to form words.

"No, then?" the man said.

Dez nodded, not sure if that meant he wanted a hood or not. He hardly cared. He was concentrating on the thump of his heart. His heartbeats could be counted out now, so few left, and he wondered if he'd reach fifty before the beating stopped. Counting. That was a reasonable occupation for his last moments. Better than weeping or begging.

"Any final words?"

He thought of the barber and the guard, thinking to profit from his death.

"I might have a few, but they're for me alone," he said, but politely. "Thanks all the same." No reason to anger the man who'd be responsible for his death coming fast or painfully slow.

Apparently, he'd declined the hood, because instead of darkness, he gazed out over the crowd that stared back even as the noose, thick and heavy, was laid with surprising gentleness around his neck. The breeze ruffled his newly shortened hair.

He wanted to close his eyes—and fought that childish urge to hide behind his lids. They'd be closed forever soon enough. *Fifteen... sixteen... seventeen...* heartbeats.

The warden, a man with silver hair, stood close by. He used an upper-crust accent Dez suspected he hadn't been born to. "Not so swaggering now, are you? Not so brash, nor full of yourself."

Nor so drunk, Dez thought, and that might have been a mistake after all.

The warden tilted his head back, as if trying to find a scent in the breeze or look down his nose at the condemned man. "What are your final words, Moore? We are all waiting—in fact, we're curious beyond all measure."

Dez stared back and thought, but didn't bother to say, *I'll just wager you are, you shite-for-brains*. There, that was enough time spent on that waste of breath called a warden. Too many of his remaining seconds. He turned away and stared over the crowd.

Twenty... twenty-one... The beats came fast with his fear. He might count to fifty after all. He might also puke.

A sharp whistle rang out, especially loud because the crowd had grown silent listening for Dez's final words.

Everyone looked in that direction, but not Dez, because he desperately needed to count those heartbeats.

Another shriek of a whistle cut the air, and enough stirring in the crowd made him twist on his heel with a drag and jingle of his shackles to watch. Three men and two women shoved their way through the crowd. Actually, only one man shoved—a large man in the front used his bulk and elbows to push people aside. The rest followed like ducklings after their mother.

He stared at one of the women in the middle. His sister, Lucy, at last? No, this person's hair was brown, but pulled into some kind of braids-and-loops arrangement. The woman—lady, really—was far too elegant and tall to be Lucy. The other woman seemed vaguely familiar. As they drew closer, she lifted her face, and he saw red lines crisscrossed her cheeks. He thought of marks made by a knife in a dark alley. *Her*.

He stopped counting.

The bulky chap waved something white, holding it high and directed it at the group on the platform.

That looked like paper, but Dez was muddled, although he did notice that whatever the man waved or shouted made the warden curse.

Dez concentrated, but was too dazed and couldn't hear or think well enough to drown the buzz in his head. Perhaps they had already dropped him through the door and this was a last dream of the world he'd just departed.

He might as well take part in the absurdity. "Halloo," he called out to the girl. "You're a bit late."

He took a step forward, intent on catching her before she escaped into the thin air from which she appeared—perhaps if he went over the edge, he'd fly away or tumble to the next life. But the manacles on his hands jangled and the ones on his legs caught at him. He looked down, stumbled, and fell forward. He was still on the platform.

It was real.

He wasn't dead.

The world went black.

If Carl heard the words "this is highly irregular" one more time, he might resort to violence—and he'd left his brawling days behind more than a decade ago.

No, no, of course he wouldn't row here. He'd learned patience during his thirty years on this earth, and the main way he found to exercise it was to smile and say nothing. That response drove people mad.

The warden, three barristers, a judge, a solicitor, Wendell, Crimson, and Carl all jammed into the warden's painfully neat office. Carl allowed his lawyers to explain it all one more time, while he examined the pictures of Penance and Guilt that hung next to commendations. Every wall in the office was covered with that nonsense.

Only a little of the stench of prison reached this room, but apparently the atmosphere was enough to make Crimson go far too still and quiet, retreating back to the broken woman he'd met at the Old Bailey.

He should have remembered her past and insisted she stay at the inn.

The fallen woman known as Meggie had given her sworn statement and had returned to the inn in the company of a lady and a gentleman Carl had hired for the occasion. The pair, a married couple, was mainly on hand to make sure Meggie didn't try to scarper off again. She was as fearful as a rabbit, although Carl wasn't inclined to blame the poor scarred creature for that.

He stifled a yawn and wondered if Dez had woken up yet. *Dez*. Carl couldn't think of the man as anything other than that, not Desmond, not Mr Moore. Dez, who'd almost died wearing a stained shirt and a dusty driving coat. He might end up in prison again, but Carl wouldn't allow him to be killed.

Another *highly irregular* came from the judge, and Carl had had enough. He excused himself and asked the judge to join him in the antechamber.

"How many guineas will it take?" he asked the judge, and finally they got down to the real business.

After some negotiations, they pushed back into the crowded office filled with arguing lawyers and the warden, who was pounding his desk with his fist. Carl gave Crimson a small nod, and her eye flickered, a sign of disgust.

Silence fell in the room as the judge explained that Mr Moore was clearly in a weakened state and Mr Reis had taken over his care until the case could be reexamined.

"You'll be held responsible should he escape."

"Of course."

A few more *highly irregulars*, and Carl and his party were quietly driven out the back of the prison to take a circuitous route to the inn. That party included Dez, who was now awake and staring about him as if he'd landed on the moon. He wore irons and jangled almost continuously as he shifted and stared, shifted and stared.

Outside they heard shouts of laughter and some singing.

The crowds around the prison had dispersed, but a holiday air had come over the town. The last-minute reprieve had turned the bloodthirsty mob into one ready to celebrate the rescue of a man who'd almost hanged.

Dez's story had changed—the facts hadn't, of course, but official documents could transform any situation. Well, as long as they were accompanied by gold. Many purses of gold, large and small, had been discreetly delivered to powerful men from London to this town in Lincolnshire.

Five of them rode in the coach with darkened windows: Dez, Carl, Crimson, Wendell, and one of the lawyers. The two guards from the prison—paid for by Carl—sat up with the driver.

Carl sat next to Dez and tried not to notice the man reeked of fear-sweat and the rancid air of the prison.

Dez was breathing fast like a man at the end of a race.

“You’ll pass out again if you don’t slow your breathing.” The first words he’d ever spoken to Dez—and an admonition.

“Yes. I know. I can’t seem to stop.” His voice was pitched low. For some reason, Carl had thought he would have a tenor. Perhaps because of that photo that he’d held and memorised.

Carl gave an impatient grunt, directed at himself. Carl was not a sentimental bloke, and this idiocy directed at a murderer based on a letter and a photograph was costing him time and money and perhaps more sanity than usual.

And then his own breath went odd when Dez’s brown eyes opened wide and he gave a huge grin. “Carl Reis. You are Carl Reis. I can *smell* it.”

Smell it? Yes, definitely sanity was no longer in his makeup or Dez’s. Carl returned that smile.

Dez had forgotten the scent of freedom, but he knew the tobacco-and-leather fresh-air smell of the letter. It sang out even over the smell of horses and dust and... oh, he had trouble concentrating, because every sense he possessed seemed to be magnified beyond anything he recalled. Even the metallic tang of blood in his mouth tasted delicious. The cut inside his lip—probably from his fall—a wonderful, amazing pain.

His heightened senses had to be the result of nearly dying, but he wanted to take it all in and keep every jot inside him. Life. He was alive. He wasn’t dead. He wanted to sing. He would have burst into some rousing song, but he still felt dizzy, and this crew he’d landed in seemed a grim lot. Also he couldn’t carry a tune to save his life.

Save his life. His life had been saved.

When he was first shoved into the carriage, the man next to him had reminded him of a bully, with that pale hair that was cut too short, a plain face with ice-blue eyes, and a blocky figure. The sort of person who might be a particularly unpleasant guard at the prison.

But then he saw the clothes were well-made, and the big hands wore a large gold ring. And the man smelled like familiar hope.

He blurted out that idiotic comment about knowing how Carl Reis smelled and then...

And then...

The man smiled.

Good glory. Every aspect of his face transformed with that smile. His eyes warmed. The heaviness of the blunt features lifted, and damnation. He was a goddamn angel.

“You have the best smile I have ever seen. The most bloody gorgeous smile.” Dez had said it out loud, and someone guffawed. Someone else made a clucking sound. The elegant lady across from him heaved a sigh.

“Pardon,” Dez said. “My brain seems to have been scrambled today.” He directed what he hoped was a cheery grin at the rest of the occupants. None of them smiled back. A soft rumble came from Carl Reis—a chuckle.

Good. If he was amused, Dez could relax. He closed his eyes.

“Has he fainted again?” the woman asked. She had a well-cultured accent, a real lady—and wasn’t that a mystery. Why would she be present at a hanging? She was Reis’s wife, perhaps?

“Mr Moore?” someone said.

“Don’t mind me. I haven’t slept or eaten well for a bit,” he said from behind lids that refused to open. “Relief is hitting me like a stuffed eel skin on the back of the head...”

He passed out again, only this time, he slipped gently into sleep. He slammed awake when the world jolted. *I’m falling through that trapdoor. Now I’m dead.* He screamed, and his eyes snapped opened.

“Sorry,” he said when he realised they all stared at him. The scream must have been real.

The door swung open. The day had grown overcast, and a fine misty rain coated everything.

Dez smiled at the rain. He loved the wet. Two familiar men hauled him out of the carriage, catching him when he started to fall.

“Take those irons off, for pity’s sake,” said the woman. “We don’t need to make a spectacle of ourselves entering the inn.”

She had the crisp manner of a person used to obedience—which probably meant she was obeyed.

“Yes’ m,” said one guard.

“Yes, Miss Crimson,” said the other at the same time.

For the first time in months, Dez stood in the open, unshackled and free. He drew in yet another long breath, filling his lungs with the smell of hay and horse, rain, cooking scents. And there it was, the lovely lingering odour of freedom, the smell of Carl Reis.

He shambled along between his two guards, rubbing at his wrists.

They led him to a bedchamber, as fine a room as he’d ever seen in any inn. And he nearly blubbered at the beautiful sight of a tin tub filled with hot water. He wolfed down the plate of cheese and bread fast so he could get at that tub.

Don’t forget the glory of this moment, he told himself as he lowered his body into the hot water. Do not take any heartbeats of time for granted ever again.

After he bathed, he couldn’t bear to put on those clothes—they felt like death—so he wrapped himself in a sheet.

Someone knocked on the door. Carl Reis and another man entered the room. The other man carried folded clothing, and Mr Reis carried a bottle and two glasses.

He held the bottle up in mute offer.

Dez shook his head. “I’m sorry, sir, but I made a bargain not to drink anymore.”

“A bargain with God, eh?”

“More like God and myself—and I know at least one of us was listening.”

A subdued version of that glorious smile appeared. “And what did you get in exchange? A chance at life?”

Dez sniffed and rubbed a drop of water trickling down his nose. “I made stupid decisions when I drank.” He eyed the man who was laying the clothes out on the bed. Dez dropped his voice. “That night in the alley, I should have called for help, or not hit that fool over and over.”

Mr Reis also spoke softly. “You forget I read that letter you wrote. You said you’d do it again, and more slowly.”

Dez snorted. “Eh, well, my sister. I’d say as much to her.” He scratched at a fleabite, then stopped himself when he noticed Mr Reis frowning at him. “If I

hadn't been so drunk, I could have stopped him without going so far. Good riddance to a man who'd slash up girls or anyone else, yes, I'd say that. But it wasn't my job to do."

A table and two chairs sat by the window of the room. Mr Reis walked over, pulled out a chair, sat, and poured himself a glass. Was he going to sit and watch Dez dress?

The other man stood, hands folded, a blank look on his face. Christ, was the servant planning to help Dez?

Dez asked, "Here, now, should I just drop this sheet and get dressed?"

"Yes," Reis said simply. And damned if he didn't lounge back, sipping a glass of wine while he waited for the show that Dez would put on. *Probably wanted to see what he'd bought and paid for.* The thought made Dez indignant, but it also excited him. Oh no. He'd best get to work, because the longer he considered the strange moment here with Mr Reis, the more interesting it became, and he would rather not flash them with an erection.

Dez waved off the servant and scrambled into the smalls as fast as he could. The trousers were wool cloth, far finer woven than the homespun he usually wore.

"You guessed my size," he said as he drew the shirt over his head.

"I believe my man Wendell consulted with the prison." Reis didn't seem disappointed that Dez had raced into his clothes as fast as he could move. But then... "You may go," he said to the servant.

Flea-free, freshly bathed, and in clothes finer than any he'd ever worn, Dez felt ready to take on the world—or possibly do what it took to make his guardian angel happy. He eyed Reis with interest. He hadn't been attracted to a man so big before, nor with such a pugnacious face. Perhaps if he smiled again? But Reis was frowning, and that made him look even more oppressive.

Dez had some experience with bullies on the road. He knew better than to truckle or whimper with them. As long as they weren't holding a knife or a club, he preferred to go straight at them rather than wait for them to move against him.

"You got me cleaned up and fed. Why'd you go through such trouble? What do you want with me?"

The frown deepened. Those lines would stay on Reis's face and make him a frightening sort of man. Dez wasn't going to be intimidated, even by the gent

who looked used to power and who clearly had enormous sway in the world—and who'd given Dez hope. He walked over and sat across from Reis at the table by the window.

The rich scent of alcohol hit him, and oh Lord. Just the smell could intoxicate a person. The bottle and empty glass crooned to him. He stared at the wine.

But then a big hand grabbed the bottle and whisked it away. Mr Reis put the wine on the floor next to him with a decided clunk. "If you're thirsty, would you like some tea?"

Dez laughed with relief. He was wrong to be frightened of the man's intentions. Hadn't he saved him from the noose and now would save him from his own impulses? Mr Reis had actually listened and paid attention to what he'd said about drinking.

He stretched out in the chair, still luxuriating in the feel of soft cloth brushing his raw skin, sending quivers of pleasure through him. "Thank you for that and for all you've done. But now I need to know how to pay you back. Spell it out in plain, easy-to-understand terms, please. I hadn't known looking death in the face would make me so simple-minded, but that's a truth."

"You're not simple-minded."

Dez clamped the urge to babble at the man some more, talk and talk about life and baths and food. He'd never before noticed the sharp, complicated flavour of cheese, or the way it gave against the teeth.

Not simple-minded? He was the very essence of simple—he'd been stripped down to it.

But no, he must concentrate on the next step. Dez managed to hold his tongue as he waited to learn of his fate—and he waited with some semblance of patience. After all, he had all the time in the world, more than fifty heartbeats.

He looked into Mr Reis's face, and then noticed with a sharp amusement that the man's cheeks had turned pink.

Mr Reis was blushing. Mr Reis's gaze woke an old sensation Dez had almost forgotten. Those blue eyes reflected longing. Dez wondered if Mr Reis had any notion how transparent he was.

Carl had no experience with uncontrolled lust, mostly because he had no interest in anything out of his control. He should have heeded the signs that he was not himself days ago, when Crimson had pointed out his excessive use of time and money to go haring off after the condemned murderer—extravagant, even for his hobby.

Carl had spent more capital and effort on this venture than he had on renovations to the mill, his last project. The fight to stop the hanging of Dez had engaged him more and more. Now Dez was saved, and Carl ought to return to his regular existence. But his thoughts were still wrapped up with Dez, and his body, too.

He should have realised when he'd memorised a letter written to a stranger from another stranger that his life had become... unbalanced. The neat boxes of his mind were a shambles.

So now, he was in a room, alone with the man he'd basically bought, and he was blundering into new territory.

He didn't enjoy the experience.

He did, however, enjoy watching Dez. The man was too thin, and the circles under his eyes weren't in that picture—oh yes, that picture that lay in Carl's pocket. He was reluctant to give up the picture he'd carried for days. Yet he had no idea what to say to Dez, how to talk to the man he'd been single-mindedly focused on for days.

Now they were alone together... Perhaps he could release them both from further obligation with a bout of sexual contact; *you owe me your body. Let me use it as I wish for today, and then tomorrow I will return to my life and help you return to yours—from a distance.* That would be easy and clean. An excellent bargain for Dez, too. His life and a possibility of a future bought by well-paid lawyers, all for a fuck or two... or three.

But Carl suddenly knew he didn't want to see how Dez would respond to that kind of straightforward offer; whether with relief, distaste, or eagerness. None of those options appealed. That left waiting. He crossed his arms and sniffed and felt embarrassed. He *never* felt embarrassed.

Another experience he didn't appreciate. But his curiosity about Dez overcame the lust and discomfort.

He reached into his jacket pocket, pulled out the picture and placed it on the table between them. "This is from your sister."

"You saw her? Is she well?"

“Well enough. She, uh, seems happy in her employment.”

Dez's full mouth went tight. “I should have liked to support her, but I doubt she'd take my money. Not now.”

Since that was Carl's guess, he didn't say anything.

Dez leaned over the daguerreotype then flopped back against the chair back. “For pity's sake, why would Lucy send a picture of *me*? I'd rather have had one of her.”

Carl took the picture back. He'd keep it, then, and hope no one noticed. He pulled the other picture from his jacket. “She sent this one of your mother.”

Dez picked that one up gingerly, as if lifting a dead animal from the table. He frowned at the picture. “She looks terrible.”

“It was taken after... uh.”

Dez's eyes widened. “A death picture? God Almighty.” He dropped the picture then began to laugh and babble. “My mother. My sister, oh Lucy.” He laughed, rocking back and forth on the chair. Carl realised he had begun to cry.

Carl froze. A gentleman would pretend not to notice the weeping; he knew that much. Crimson explained that rule. Perhaps he should quietly withdraw from the room. But he wasn't a gentleman.

He rose from his chair, went to Dez, and laid a hand on his shoulder. “Here, now. It's been a hellish day for you.”

Dez looked up at him, his nose and eyes streaming with tears and snot. “No. It would have been, literally, a trip to hell. But you came along.” He stumbled to his feet and wrapped his arms tight around Carl.

It was an embrace of need—for comfort, not passion. Carl awkwardly patted Dez's back as Dez plastered himself to his body.

“Thank you,” Dez said into his shoulder. “I need to do something for you. I need to make it better.”

“Make what better?” Carl, impatient now, added. “If you're talking about your dealings with me, you don't owe me anything.”

“Don't lie, Mr Reis.”

The arms around him loosened. Carl could feel as the hands touching him transitioned from a frenzied hold to something more deliberate. Warm breath touched his neck, and Carl shivered, growing aroused painfully fast. Dez must

have felt the growth of his erection, because he gave a small moan that sounded like approval.

Carl allowed himself to press his face to the side of Dez's head, still damp from the bath. The soft bristle of short hair touched Carl's cheek. Then Carl took the hands from about his waist, and with some reluctance pulled himself free. "I am used to deals and negotiating. I am used to buying human labour. But I won't pay for *that*."

Dez wiped his face with his sleeve, erasing the evidence of his tears. "That?" he said with a touch of amusement.

"Companionship."

"How about any sort of sexual contact? Do you pay for that?" He stopped. "Is Miss Crimson your—?"

"No and no." Carl refused to be embarrassed again. "She is a valuable assistant, and I pay for her help, but not her body. See here, Mr Moore. I am not entirely certain why I took such an interest in your situation, but I did, and that's the end of it. We do not need to speak of what you owe again."

"I felt your interest, you know." Dez touched his hip, where Carl's erection had swelled against him. "You like men." He sounded as if he'd been given a wonderful gift.

Carl glared. Strong men had quailed at that look, but Dez beamed back. "Are you in love with anyone?"

"That is a personal question."

"I know. Are you offended?"

"No." Carl wanted to tell this man he was sending him into strange new territory, but he wasn't brave enough to admit even that. He had enjoyed men, but he'd never felt a pull beyond the sexual during those encounters. His partners certainly never annoyed, embarrassed, or preoccupied him the way this man he knew only from a photo and a letter did.

"Are you in love with anyone?"

"No, this will not do." Carl had already been teased by this man's existence. He wouldn't allow himself to be tormented any further. "I have no interest in such a thing."

"Have you ever been in love before?"

"No." He practically shouted the word, but Dez wouldn't be repressed.

“Neither have I, until two days ago. Then I got this note.” Dez went to his clothes and pulled out a grimy grey sheet of paper. “I grew to love whoever sent this note to me. I understand that now. I fell in love with your scent, by the by. A strange way to start.”

“You don’t know me.” This was ridiculous.

“No, but I knew I loved you—you were the only thing left I had to love. You were hope. Now that I have my life back, I’m going to learn what I fell in love with.”

Carl tried not to smile, but he lost the battle. “You are absurd.”

“That’s been true for years. I’d hoped the end of drinking would bring the end of absurdity, but I don’t think it will. No need to worry, Mr Reis. I don’t require you to love me. And if you walk away and tell me to leave you be, if you send me back to prison or revile me as a lunatic, perhaps my love would fade, a little but not entirely. You saved my life. You’re burdened with me—if not with my presence, then with my soul.”

Carl opened his mouth to tell him he was a fool and he used the word “love” far too casually. Instead, he said, “That photo of you. I couldn’t stop looking at it. I wanted to see your face in person.” He clamped his lips shut before he went on about the brave and touching and amusing letter that had arrived at his office by mistake.

“I am going to kiss you,” Dez said. “I need to.” It was something of an order. Carl took orders from no one.

He had a premonition that he was doomed. But Carl Reis didn’t fight fate. He held himself still and allowed Dez to kiss him.

The kiss was soft but not tentative. Carl understood from that first bone-melting touch of mouths that Dez was far more knowledgeable than he.

Dez gripped Carl’s biceps, stepped back, and gazed at him, a look as stern as one of Crimson’s. “This isn’t to repay you. This is my celebration. I’m taking advantage of you again, Mr Reis. I’m alive, and I need to prove it. Will you let me use you?”

Carl swallowed, and then nodded. “All right.”

He had very little experience ceding power, not as a man, nor in any part of his life, but suddenly he was eager and interested.

Dez had a cockstand that would have driven nails into a coffin. But not his coffin—not today. He yanked his large saviour impatiently to the bed. He pushed Mr Reis down onto his back, and then slid up and onto Reis, who was warm and groaning and, God, he was huge all over. Dez kissed and licked and nuzzled skin, hair, and even ran his tongue over cloth. He was too impatient to wait.

He fumbled at buttons and braces. He went up onto his knees, and climbed off Reis. “Strip off those clothes,” he ordered Reis. “I’ll help you.”

Together they revealed a body with surprisingly graceful lines in the throat, back, and shoulders. Reis had almost no hair on his pale body, and his skin was too soft for a man composed of granite, though the pads on his hands and fingers were rough. No surprise that he worked in manual labour or had in the past, this roughneck gentleman.

Those hands impatiently tugged at Dez’s clothes—or rather, the clothes he was wearing. For a brief second, Dez recalled Reis had claim on all he possessed, body, soul, and trousers. Such a man might try to engulf and overwhelm him if he wasn’t careful.

But then Reis lunged forward for another kiss, so desperate and wonderful, Dez lost interest in thinking and retreated to blissful sensation. They were naked and warm. The best of his dreams coming true, only so much better, because he discovered a new craving for large-bodied gents with pale skin.

Again, he pushed Reis down, and again he slid along his body but now, oh, skin and cock met, nothing but skin and cock.

“Please,” Reis growled, and thrust up at him.

“Shall I lick you? I’ve missed the taste of men,” Dez mused.

“Oh God,” Reis whimpered. “Oh... *God*.”

Just the mention of Dez’s mouth on his cock seemed to arouse Reis so much, and it dawned on Dez that his large gent didn’t have a great deal of experience. Dez took a peculiar savage pleasure in that thought as he lowered his head to the musky nest of hair around the thick erection. Reis tasted of heat, life, and salt. He panted as Dez licked him from balls to tip.

With a restless groan, he pushed that almost too-large blunt head past Dez’s lips. Dez used his hands and his tongue and mouth and teeth, and enjoyed each jaw-aching moment of sucking Reis.

So delicious and so... alive.

He reached over and grabbed Reis's hand, directing it to his own cock.

"Oh pardon, yes, yes." Reis's apology sounded like eagerness, and his fingers were almost too tight around Dez—but no, not too tight after all, because Dez pumped into the fist that nearly engulfed him. His climax came first and so hard, he forgot everything until he noticed the needy, damp cock sliding along his cheek, still iron.

Reis whimpered quietly, a wordless pleading that told Dez he was still in charge.

"Back to work," Dez said cheerfully. He considered the pat of butter that lay among the crumbs on the plate that had held his meal—that might smooth their way. Soon. Next time, he'd take that cock into his body. Now he wanted the flavour of Reis in his mouth. He'd promised himself that joy.

He returned to his task with gusto, and it didn't take long before the cock in his hands and mouth seemed to grow even larger and harder, and the thrum of semen filled his throat, each burst of life.

His hands and mouth glazed with Reis's spending, and he kissed and caressed his way back up to Reis's mouth.

Reis had pulled a pillow under his head and looked relaxed, though his blue eyes were solemn and a little sad. "I wasn't going to do that," Reis said.

"I didn't give you much choice," Dez said happily.

"It's *not* the reason I came to find you."

"Came to find me? Ha, a polite way to say you came to snatch me from the hangman's noose. Be honest. Do you know why you did that?"

Reis moved his head side to side, his hair sliding against the soft pillow. "Your letter. I thought it would be too bad if that voice was silenced and I didn't even try to save it."

Dez considered the deep significance of the two letters they'd exchanged—the letters that saved his life. "I can't recall what I wrote to Lucy. Nothing too mean, I hope. I had felt nothing but despair for so long."

"No, though Crimson thought you a bit dramatic, but she's a stern critic."

Dez laughed. "A formidable lady. I hope I get to know her before this is over."

Reis went very still. And Dez realised he'd been living moment to moment since he woke and wasn't dead. "Is there a plan?"

"You mustn't leave until a retrial takes place. You will stay and..." Reis's voice trailed off. And Dez wondered if he'd made a plan for anything past the moment Dez had been saved.

Reis asked, "Do you like this inn?"

Dez contemplated a world he'd fallen back into. "A chicken coop, a barn, any place with a roof will suffice. Will I be able to work? If I can't leave this town, then my driving days are done. I was a clerk—not a particularly good one, but maybe now my mind will be less prone to wandering."

"No need," said Reis brusquely. "I've arranged to keep these rooms for a month or more."

So Reis's hesitancy was not due to a lack of plan.

"I don't have another option, do I?" Dez rolled onto his back. "I'm not ungrateful, but I shall have to take and take and take from you, and I wish it was otherwise." He looked at Reis, who watched him with a scowl.

"I am well able to support you and a dozen more besides."

"You'll go about the place rescuing condemned people?"

"Nonsense, though you aren't the first. One of my best friends was accused of a crime she hadn't committed. I helped her."

Dez suspected he was talking about Miss Crimson.

"It still makes me uncomfortable," Dez said. "You've done more than enough for me. More than anyone could ask for."

"No need to ask, dammit. It's the plan. You have the choice of my help or prison again. Don't be an idiot."

With each passing moment, Reis grew more stern and chilly. He would be a grim bully.

Dez smiled. "You, of course. I'm not so selfless that I'd go willingly back to prison."

Reis seemed to relax, but only a little.

Dez turned onto his side. He ran his fingers along the rough pale hair at Reis's temple. "You're used to getting your way, are you, Mr Reis?"

"No." He paused. "Well, to be honest, yes."

Dez laughed. "I'm not afraid of you, or at least not very, so we should get along swimmingly."

That lovely smile blossomed, and Dez had to touch the lines it created. "You'll go back to your life soon," Dez said softly. "A life of deals and money and pies."

"I don't know so much about pies. The rest..." The smile vanished. "Yes."

"But you'll visit when you can."

Reis dragged in an audible breath and let it out before speaking. "Will you want me to? Because you must understand, I offer this help, any future help, without restrictions."

"What are you talking about?"

Reis rubbed his palms over his face, another long pause. "I don't want to force my presence upon you. I wish you'd believe me when I tell you that you owe me nothing. The challenge of getting here in time—and succeeding in my goal—that was ample compensation. I do this sort of thing from time to time for my own pleasure. I don't usually encounter the person again. But you. You might be different."

Dez hoisted himself up onto an elbow and stared down at Reis, who looked back, grim as a hangman. "You haunted me," Reis whispered.

He finally believed Reis's claim that he wasn't going to try to possess Dez. "Gods above, here I've thought you something of a ruffian, a ruthless pirate."

Reis pursed his lips. "That seems about right. Yes."

"No, it's all a lie. You are a gentleman through and through. How lowering to learn I'm in debt to a man who's not only generous, but also kind. I'd hoped for a rascal."

"Huh. I suspect you're rascal enough for us both."

"You shall have to find out. Do tell me when you know," Dez said.

Reis's smile—the one Dez had put on his face—glowed bright enough to touch Dez's core. After months of cold, he was entirely warm at last.

The End

Author Bio

Summer Devon is the alter ego of Kate Rothwell who also writes under her own name. Summer writes romances of all sorts, including historical m/m books with Bonnie Dee. She is published with Kensington, Loose Id, Samhain, Simon and Schuster, Ellora's Cave and others. This is her third Don't Read in the Closet story. She loves these things, a whole lot.

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