

Post-Epilogue

Susan Holmes, award-winning author, sat despondently in front of her computer. It was done now— finished! Five books all told, and a prequel novella, sitting on the bookstore shelves. The book signings were over, the whirlwind tour around the country, the interminable interviews.

That was it. It was over. There was no more to write, no more ‘Thieves’ Canticle’ series. No more Gideon Silvershift, her lovely, clever character, and his rich, verdant tapestry of a world. The characters that had lived inside her head for the last eleven years were gone. She could write no more about them, even if she tried. Finally she could sit on her laurels and relax.

She should have been happy, but instead she was completely miserable.

Susan unplugged the computer without bothering to turn it off first. The machine beeped once in protest and went dark. There were no files to bother saving anyhow. She padded in her bare feet to her bedroom and flopped face first onto the thick patchwork quilt. After a brief moment, she screamed into the mattress.

What was she supposed to do now? Susan thought. For the past eleven years, the series had been her heart; her purpose. Gideon and his crew had lived inside her head, and been her solace when life had thrown its worse at her. She knew them better than she knew her best friend. How could she go on, now that they had so thoroughly fled her mind?

“You know,” said a voice from in front of Susan, “I’d think you’d have better things to do with your time than flop around feeling sorry for yourself.”

Susan stilled, suddenly afraid. There was *someone in her house!* She had not heard the stranger arrive; it was possible that she had fallen asleep. She had been doing that often, since she finished the series.

She prayed silently for the intruder not to kill her. However, the voice of the intruder sounded vaguely familiar. Perhaps, if she was lucky, it was merely some overzealous fan. She looked up slowly.

Lying in repose on the bed in front of her, his feet propped up on the bed knob, was a young man of perhaps twenty-eight. His clothing belonged more to a fantasy novel than to any particular period on Earth: supple leather boots to his knees, dusky green hose, and a black, billowy shirt open across the chest and held loosely in place by a few carelessly tied laces. His waving blonde hair spilled over his collar except for a singular hank that hung down between his eyes and over the bridge of his crooked nose. His full mouth curved in a wicked grin as pointed as his chin, which he propped in one long-fingered hand. His eyes, a fluid hazel color, glinted in the half-light that filtered in through the long curtains.

Susan gasped and pressed a hand to her mouth, backing away until she bumped into her dresser. Surely, this was a fan; the man was the spitting image of Gideon! Despite her fear, her eyes traveled hungrily over the man. This was what he looked like, this man who had previously lived solely in her mind! She had never been able to draw, and to see him with her eyes instead of her imagination was more wondrous than she could ever have hoped. There! There was the scar on his mouth where Glen Robin had slashed him in a fight! Moreover, his right ring finger was missing, from the time the

magistrates had caught up with him! The man must be insane, to copy her description so exactly, wounds and all.

“Who are you?” she quavered. Her left hand searched over the dresser behind her for something to defend herself.

The man rolled to a sitting position on her bed and half-bowed in her direction. An ornate silver wrist-cuff flashed on his outstretched left arm. She had written about that wrist-cuff...

“Gideon Silvershift, at your service,” he said, looking at her from beneath lowered lids. “But then, you already knew that, Susannah Marie Holmes.”

“Look,” Susan said, “I’m not stupid. I know you’re a fan, although admittedly this is the most interesting thing a fan has ever done. I’m not going to call the cops, but you need to go now.”

“Ah, Susan,” he sighed, sliding across the bedspread, “We both know that’s not true.” He swung his legs off the side of the bed and stood; he was nearly a foot taller than she was. She was suddenly aware that she was alone in the house with a crazy man. There was no telling what he might try to do. Susan’s left hand seized upon something promisingly pointy on her dresser and she grabbed it. ‘Gideon’ stepped closer to her. She let out a panicked whimper and stabbed the pointy item at him.

Quicker than she could believe, his left hand flashed forward and grabbed her wrist. The point of her sword-shaped letter opener hovered a few inches above his throat. She could see his pulse beating there below the rosy skin.

“You know, Susan,” the man said, “I’m really rather angry with you.” His hand tightened on her wrist, and although she struggled against him with her full strength, he

pushed her arm inexorably backwards. He pressed her hand down upon the dresser, plucked the letter opener from her numb fingers, and set the miniature sword back upon its stand. “I always expected the power in charge of my life to be some great, glowing, all-powerful God,” he continued, “Not some mousy, impotent scribe without any self confidence.

“You’ve been responsible for everything evil that has ever happened to me. When my mother was killed by bandits, when I was attacked my first night in the city—your fault. When the magistrates caught up with me and cut my finger off—” He brandished his right hand in her face. Susan could not avoid looking at the misshapen stump where his ring finger had been. “-all your fault.

“And now, to add insult to injury, you refuse to believe that I am myself! Shall I tell you, I might never have caught on to your existence, were it not for that in the quiet moments, I could hear you *narrating!*” His face twisted up into an enraged grimace. For a long second, Susan thought he might slap her. The man let out a long sigh, and his face smoothed out into a composed mask.

“You’re crazy,” she whispered. “Gideon is fictional. I made him up! It’s not real! None of it’s real!

“You don’t know how badly I wish it were true, how much I wish I could live in his world, but neither of us can! You have to let it go!”

Anger darkened his face again, and Susan flinched back. When he spoke again, his voice was low and choked.

“It was spring. I was seven years old. A party of nobles came through my town on a hunt. I had a dog, a puppy. Black and brown, it was, with big brown eyes. It would

trust anyone. When the nobles came riding through, it ran alongside the horses. It only wanted to play. One of the nobles saw it. ‘Cur’, he shouted, ‘Mutt! Get away from the horses, filthy thing!’ And then he kicked out with his foot. He hit my dog in the head, and it dropped like a stone, dead. I cried and shouted, and my mother had to hold me back because I would have run at the nobles, and she was afraid they would kick me and break my head too.

“You know that’s what happened, don’t you? Yet you never wrote it down, so how could I know it unless I was me?”

Susan’s head spun. The man was casually spouting Gideon’s secrets, things only she and he should have known.

Oh God. It was he. It was Gideon, her Gideon!

“Or should I tell you your own secrets?” Gideon asked. “Once I realized you were in my head, it was easy to make it work both ways. I’ve been in *your* head, these past three years. There was the time—”

“It’s you,” Susan cried, “Oh my God, it’s really you!” Her knees felt weak, and she began to sag to the carpeted floor. Gideon caught her under the arms.

“Whoa, there,” he murmured. He lifted her onto the edge of the bed and sat down next to her. She slumped, boneless, backwards. Gideon leaned worriedly over her. “Are you alright?” he asked. Susan looked at his face, his hair shining like a corona as the sun passed through it, and began to sob.

“Hey, hey, hey,” he said. “Shh, now. Don’t cry.” He picked her up and cradled her in his arms. She knotted her fingers in his shirt and buried her face in his shoulder.

He even smelled the way she had written him— soap and the pine fragrance he kept in his clothes drawer.

She stayed curled in his arms for a long time. When she finally lifted her face again, the sun had moved in the sky and the shadows in her room were longer. A slow anger was building in her chest now, as she thought more and more. Susan pulled away from Gideon and looked him in the eyes.

“How dare you?” she asked. Gideon’s eyes widened, his jaw dropped.

“What?” he spluttered.

“How dare you?” she repeated. “Your story is over! You were my, my best freaking friend, the only person I really knew, and you just *abandoned* me! I was *mourning* you, and now you have the, the, the *audacity* to show up at your own wake! How am I ever going to get over you now?”

Gideon leaned backwards, as though her words were a physical pressure.

“You’ve always been infatuated with me!” he countered. “Your last man left you because you thought about *me* more than him!”

“What about you?” Susan yelled. “You’ve never loved a woman in your entire *life*! You’re a selfish, thieving, vain magpie!”

“If I’m incapable of love, it’s through no fault of my own! You wrote me; you wrote everything about me! ‘Luck be a lady’ indeed! You’re Dame Fortune herself—cruel, cold, inhuman vixen! You *ruined my life*!” Gideon bellowed.

“YOU MADE ME LOVE YOU, YOU BASTARD!” Susan shrieked. The echoes of her outburst rang softly in the room and died away. There was a long moment of silence. “And then you left me,” she added quietly.

“Well,” said Gideon after a moment, “I guess that’s how it works. You writers play puppet-master with your characters, and we break your hearts. Fair as fair.”

Susan tried to slap him, but Gideon stopped her hand again, so she kissed him instead.

His mouth was soft and full, and the small scar on his mouth was a raised texture against her lips. His lips parted and they twined gently together for a moment, and for a moment Susan was perfectly happy. Her happiness was tinged with anger and sadness, but it was no less perfect for all that.

They parted. Gideon placed his mutilated right hand on Susan’s cheek.

“Whoa, there,” he said again, looking at her. There was a fire in his eyes.

“Are you going to leave?” she asked him mournfully, turning her face into his hand.

“I have been watching your world through your eyes these last three years. For all its technological marvels, it is a crude, dull place. I will return to my home soon.”

“Take me with you,” Susan begged. Her throat choked with emotion, her heart pounded painfully in her chest. Everything, *everything* she had ever wanted was here and now, in the man in front of her, and she was going to lose it.

“I don’t think it works that way, sweet,” Gideon told her. “I don’t think I will be able to come back either.” Susan let out a small, broken cry and hid her face in her hands. Gideon pulled her hands away and kissed the tears off her cheeks. “But I got here, didn’t I? I found my way into your world because I believed in it enough. Shouldn’t that work both ways?”

She looked up at him, hardly daring to hope, and he smiled back at her.

“Try, love,” he whispered to her. “I am sure you can find your way.”

Susan curled up on the bed next to him and rested her head on the pillow next to him.

“Wait to leave until I fall asleep, please,” she asked. “It will be easier that way.”

Gideon nodded, and stroked her hair, and sang to her in a language she did not understand until she fell into dreamless sleep.

Susan awoke alone the next morning, sprawled across the bedspread, still in her clothes. She must have fallen asleep after she stormed away from the computer yesterday, she thought. Oh, but what a magnificent dream she’d had! She’d dreamed about Gideon. He had been angry with her for writing tragedy into his life. Rightly so, too, she thought with a sad chuckle.

Half-hoping, she turned to look at her dresser, hoping there might be proof of her dream there. However, the sword letter opener was still on its stand where she’d left it, and the tangles of jewelry were no messier than usual.

She sighed and moved on with her life.

A few weeks later, Susan sat typing half-heartedly at a lame book proposal for her editor. She knew it was no good, and that her editor would never go for it, but she needed proof that she’d been doing *some* work. Her friend Madge was over, having

insisted on tidying the rapidly growing mess in Susan's room that Susan couldn't seem to find the will to clean.

"Hey, Susan!" Madge called from back in the bedroom, "Where'd you get this bracelet?"

"What bracelet?" asked Susan. She was not in the habit of wearing bracelets, as they got in the way whilst she was typing.

Madge plodded out of the bedroom with a hand-held vacuum in one hand and something silver and shining in the other, a bandanna tied over her unruly light brown curls. She handed the silver thing to Susan, who stared at it for a moment in incomprehension.

It was an ornate silver wrist-cuff. Susan was certain she had seen it before, but could not remember buying it. She turned it over in her hands, admiring the scrollwork of vines and strange animals. A flaw on the smooth silver interior caught her eye, and she bent in to look at it closer.

Carved into the soft silver by a rough hand were the initials GS. Underneath, in a marginally steadier hand was the inscription '+ SH'.

Susan stared for a long moment, and then, slowly, smiled.