



Autumn Means Marriage... and Murder (Mary and Bright #3)

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Category: Historical

Description: It's a bad omen to find a corpse on the eve of a wedding... unless it was fate's plan all along.

Autumn has arrived in England and so has Mary Tomlinson's long-awaited wedding day to her handsome former Bow Street inspector. Though her newfound happiness frightens her—she's had ill-fortune with men in the past—she's looking forward to what her future will bring, for assisting in solving crimes is quite invigorating, especially when mixing business with heady trysts of pleasure.

After retiring from his position at Whitehall, on the eve of Inspector Gabriel Bright's wedding to the intriguing Mary, he attends the opera with her for no other reason than to treat her to her favorite play. Despite their obstacle-strewn path to romance, he's anticipating wedding—and bedding—the attractive woman and being a husband again as well as making their oftentimes hotly passionate relationship legitimate.

Yet when they stumble over a dead body in a shadowy corridor at the opera house, the course of those plans is thrown into jeopardy, for the dead woman had been a paramour of her former husband's. As tension brews between Mary and Bright, their investigation takes them to Brighton and plunges them into a secret pleasure spa. The distractions prove harrowing and dangerous to them both, and unless they solve the case, there will be nothing left of the relationship to warrant a union.

Total Pages (Source): 17

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Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:56 am

October 15, 1819

No. 10 Orchard Street

Portman Square

Marylebone, London

Mary Tomlinson talked quietly with her maid, Maggie, as she sat at her vanity table and the maid wove a string of pearls into her upswept blonde tresses. Clad only in her under things, she had yet to don her gown for the night to minimize wrinkling the orange satin or inadvertently tearing the delicate lace and gold thread overskirt.

Tonight, she would attend the opera with her fiancé former Bow Street principal officer, the Honorable Gabriel Bright, but what had her nerves feeling strung too tight with flutters of excitement in her lower belly was the fact that they would be wed tomorrow morning. After nearly a year of an unorthodox courtship that had been much closer to a wildly torrid affair, she would become a married woman again .

And this union would prove as different as the men involved.

“I think your final look could use that butterfly brooch with the citrines in the wings,” Maggie murmured to her as she peered into the cheval glass and smiled at Mary. “Once we are completely finished, then we’ll put on your gown.”

“Thank you, Maggie. I appreciate your artistry and creative eye.” She hadn’t given much thought personally to the gown she would wear tonight, for all her attention had

gone into the gown for the nuptial ceremony.

“I’ll go grab the brooch now.” The maid went into the adjoining bedchamber from the dressing-sitting room and Mary relaxed.

It wasn’t that she had misgivings about marrying the inspector, it was just that her last husband as well as marriage to him had been all too horrid. Once she wed Gabriel, would he turn into a different person as had been her previous experience? Surely not, for she knew him exceedingly well, and he wasn’t the type of man who would lie to manipulate. In fact, everything between them had been grown and built on the altar of truth and being candid with each other.

She frowned into the mirror as she held up a pair of dangly golden earbobs against her cheek. No, those just weren’t right for this evening. As she searched through her jewelry case, her mind wandered.

They’d met at a house party in the countryside at Christmastide last year where she’d escorted her niece and he’d done the same with his son. The host of the event—Viscount Stanwick, had been an old flame of hers before he’d ever taken the title, and that indiscretion from the past would prove unfortunate as time wore on, and it had made her quite upset. So upset that she had contemplated leaving the house party altogether. However, after an unexpected and lovely kiss shared with a strange man in a carriage house did she discover that man was in reality the brother of the viscount—Gabriel Bright. Barely did she have an opportunity to decide how she felt about the introduction of a possible romance—or something else—into her life when the butler—who was not a very nice person—was found murdered. That was when she discovered Gabriel turned out to be an inspector with Bow Street.

And straightaway, he’d accused her of said murder due to the ill-advised relationship with the viscount in her past.

What an evening that had been!

Mary smiled at her reflection in the mirror. It was the first time she'd ever been impressed by a man, for Gabriel had an intelligence and cleverness that had first drawn her to him. To say nothing of the fact they had been naturally attracted physically to each other from the first. As the house party had gone on, they'd entered a relationship of sorts with him investigating the murder and her assisting. Working so closely together had fueled that desire, and soon after that, they'd begun their affair.

That relationship hadn't yet grown stale.

Last spring, the inspector had finally asked for her hand, but the engagement had been thrown into chaos when they'd stumbled onto a case where the murdered woman had ties to Bright's past. That meant it was his turn to have a murder investigation delve into his life, but it had been another opportunity for her and him to be honest with each other and unearth secrets from their pasts.

Now, on the morrow, they would be married after a six-month engagement period. There had been no other reason for the length other than he'd wanted her to enjoy the engagement, wished for her to have enough time to plan her outfit, to do a few renovations to the townhouse they shared, as well as to prepare their newly adopted daughter, Cassandra, for the changes that would follow. In fact, they'd come upon the young girl during their investigation of that memorable case, and since neither of them had wanted to leave her to fend for herself on the streets, they'd taken her in.

Now she was a part of their family. More or less. The adjustment period had been long for all of them.

Maggie's return wrenched Mary from her musings. "On second thought, I decided against the butterfly. Instead, I found a lovely silver and diamond brooch that will

work better, and you can wear silver and ruby earbobs. Didn't the inspector gift you with a ruby necklace that will match?"

"He did." For no other reason than he'd seen the parure in the window of a jewelry store and thought she should have it. Her heart squeezed. "Perhaps I shall indeed wear it tonight." When she'd turned five and thirty at the end of last month, he'd given her an exquisite cloisonné case to carry in her reticule. It had a tiny receptacle on one side for headache powders or snuff—if one was into that—but she used it to keep a few mint tablets, and on the other side was a dear little clock so that she would always know the time.

Truly, he was a thoughtful, remarkable man, and so different from her last husband.

The maid nodded as she fixed the brooch into Mary's upswept blonde hair. "It is lightly raining tonight, so be sure to put the hood of your cloak up. Don't want to muss the hair, Mrs. Tomlinson."

"Thank you, Maggie. I will remember. "

"While you are at the opera tonight, I am going to press your gown for tomorrow."

"I appreciate the thoughtfulness." Mary glanced across the dressing room to where the gown she would wear in the morning rested on the back of a chair.

It was a gorgeous affair of ivory velvet with silver embroidery and had seed pearls sewn all over the skirting as well as along the bodice. The neckline was rather lower than she was comfortable with, but that was one of the things that made it exciting, and it would be certain to grab Gabriel's notice. It also featured long sleeves that tapered at the wrist. Silver satin slippers matched the embroidery work and had also been enhanced with pearls. She would wear a strand of pearls woven into her hair and perhaps another around her neck, for her brother had given her both long ago. As a

whole, the costume was showier and more feminine than she usually wore, but she wanted this wedding to be extremely different from her first one.

Since the men were different as well.

Before either of them could say anything else, Gabriel came into the room. Dear heavens, he was resplendent in his evening clothes, complete with tailcoat and a brown brocade waistcoat. As always, the curls in his brown hair remained untamed, but that was the way she liked him. Seeing him in such finery accelerated her heartbeat.

“Why am I not surprised your toilette is not finished?” As she watched him in the mirror, he winked at Maggie. “Has she been woolgathering again?”

The maid blushed, which wasn’t surprising since every woman within Mary’s employ had fallen beneath Bright’s spell. Possibly because he was charming, handsome, and he treated everyone he met with respect. “A bit, Inspector, but then, we still have plenty of time before the carriage arrives.”

“Indeed. I will help Mrs. Tomlinson complete dressing for the evening, Maggie, if you don’t mind.”

“Of course, Inspector.” Maggie met her eyes in the mirror. “Enjoy the opera. Ring if you should need me either before you leave or when you return.” She gathered the wedding gown and then took her leave, softly closing the door behind her.

“You realize that the servants no doubt talk about how scandalous you are behind closed doors, don’t you?” Mary couldn’t help but tease, for it was well known that the inspector enjoyed helping her dress for the mere excuse of getting handsy.

“I am aware of that, but I’m choosing to let them think what they will, for I am not

ashamed of showing my love and affection for my soon-to-be wife.” Moving behind her, he dropped his hands on her shoulders. “And I particularly enjoy it when you are in this state of dishabille before you’ve donned your gown.”

That prompted a grin. His scent of sandalwood and orange wafted to her nose, and she sighed. “It should be criminal for you to look so handsome.”

The cheeky man leaned down to nuzzle the crook of her shoulder, and a shiver of need twisted down her spine. “Well, I have been fortunate.” When he gently tugged her into a standing position, he led her away from the vanity then wrapped his arms around her. “In many aspects of my life, including winning you.”

Despite being with him in various ways over the past ten months, heat sank into her cheeks. “Hush, you. I rather think I’m receiving the better portion of this union.”

“I beg to differ.” With a wicked grin that threatened to make her knees weaken, he lowered his head and fit his lips to hers.

Every time the man kissed her, Mary nearly lost herself. It was still a marvel to her that any of it had happened, let alone the fact she would marry him tomorrow, but the fact he never failed to ignite her desire each time they were together made her breathless. It was only natural that she return his embrace, and in doing so, she slipped her hands up his chest to loop her arms about the broad breadth of his shoulders.

The raw feel of his solid body against hers, the warmth of his mouth on hers, the tender yet forceful way he held her and caressed his hands over her person all worked to see her undone, and all he’d done was kiss her. Make no mistake, he claimed her mouth with authority and skill, but it was insanity how much and how quickly she wanted to couple with him.

And it had been that way since they'd met last Christmastide.

As she sighed and fairly melted into him, she realized being with Gabriel was more than just having a need fulfilled. He made her feel protected, wanted, respected, and beyond that, being in his company was exciting and had taught her what it was to truly live.

Slowly, hoping to tease him, Mary drew one of her hands down his body cup the bulge that pressed against the front of his black satin evening breeches. When he stifled a groan, his eyelids flickered and she smiled. So predictable. "I want you." At her age and in this relationship, there was no point in games or coquettish behavior.

"Stop, sweeting," he said against her lips. "Otherwise, I will indulge you, and we will be late to the opera."

"Ha!" She gave his engorged length an experimental squeeze, smiling when he shuddered. "We have time because you always tell me to be ready by at least a quarter of an hour more than we need." When she raised her gaze to his, she caught matching desire in his dark eyes. "And if we are late, it will only be for dinner before the opera, and besides, with the planning for the wedding, as well as Cassandra's inability to acclimate to us as a family, you and I haven't been as intimate as we are accustomed to being."

"True." He briefly kissed her lips again. "Where is the girl?"

"Taking dinner with her governess. She had an outing today to the British Museum."

"Oh? How did she like it?" As he spoke, he loosened the laces at the back of her stays.

"I think she was overwhelmed but curious. She's slowly coming to grips with her

new life, except her relationship with me isn't going all that well." Despite the flutters of arousal in her belly, she couldn't help a frown. "I'd hoped she would have been happy in having a mother, a family, a house to live in, a new life."

Over the course of the last six months, Bright had worked a handful of cases as a consultant or even on his own, and while that income was much appreciated, Mary had been left alone with Cassandra during those times. Only occasionally did she work a case with him now that they had a child.

She missed him in that capacity as well.

"Perhaps the girl is still skittish." When he'd finished with the stays and the garment sagged, he undid the few buttons at the bodice of her plain lawn shift. "Living as she had on the streets, being treated like rubbish by nearly everyone she's ever met is bound to have taken a toll on the psyche."

"I know, but I had hoped she might have warmed up to me by now, that she would have realized I mean her no harm and want nothing more than to be a mother." It was another reason why she wanted the distraction of Gabriel's touch, because it would help her forget. Otherwise, the situation was too sad. As she spoke, Mary fumbled at the buttons of his front falls and freed his shaft. When the hot, hard length of him fell into her palm, she blew out a breath and gave into a shiver.

In this, she wouldn't be denied.

"Perhaps she needs more time, love. Don't give up. Draw from your own experience or even mine. After what we both went through with our marriages, trust is difficult." Since she hadn't yet donned her gown, it was easy work for him to uncover her breasts from the loosened stays and chemise beneath. As soon as he cupped those mounds of flesh, squeezed them, pressed them together, he grinned. "God, I need this after the week I've had. "

A moan escaped her throat as he brushed the pads of his thumbs over her taut nipples and wild sensation coursed down her spine. “I’m sorry your last case didn’t end happily.” She could hardly concentrate on conversation when all she wanted was to feel him moving against her.

“Sometimes they don’t.” Then he dipped his head and took one of her sensitive nipples into the warm cavern of his mouth, suckled hard until she moaned, then he soothed the bud with the flat of his tongue.

“Oh, you...” There was no need to talk, for carnal communication was much more effective. As he teased and tormented her breasts and nipples, Mary curled her fingers around his thick shaft and slowly stroked her hand along his length. The more she played, the more he did, and it took very little time to have them both panting and heated. She clung to his lapels as the strength in her knees wavered. “Will you take me against the wall tonight?” Throughout their history together, they weren’t strangers regarding coupling in odd places or positions.

“Mmm, while that does sound delicious, perhaps we’ll do something more daring, I think, something unexpected but highly pleasurable for us both.” So saying, he urged her hand from his shaft and then led her to the settee that rested at the foot of the four-poster bed. “Though it will go quickly, we will be satisfied and can still leave at a decent time for the opera.”

“Oh?” Excitement buzzed at the base of her spine. “What have you in mind, Bright?”

“Just this.” Gently but with firm pressure, Gabriel led her to a sofa and bent her over the bolstered end, tossed her petticoat and chemise up over her back. “I’ll take you from behind.”

A shudder of need ricocheted down her spine. “Lovely,” she managed to whisper. They didn’t often indulge this way, for it did go by quickly and they couldn’t see

each other's faces during the coupling, but it was highly pleasurable. It always reminded her of his dominant side and that he sometimes liked to show it when he felt helpless regarding one of his cases.

His last one had gone wildly unsolved; there hadn't been enough evidence, and it would probably be one that would haunt him.

"Do I have your agreement?" When he caught her gaze once more, his eyes were dark with raw need.

"Do you even have to ask? I thought you knew me better than that." With a grin, she wriggled her hips, which made her naked backside brush against his erection.

He caught his breath, and she snickered. "Vixen. I will show you how well I know you, indeed." With a soft growl that sent awareness over her skin, he delivered a sharp smack to one of her buttocks. "You've tempted me beyond reason this night and my patience for foreplay has quite vanished, Mrs. Tomlinson."

The command in his graveled voice sent shivers down her spine. "Oh, I can't wait to be able to drop that surname." When she glanced over her shoulder at him, her heart squeezed, for she loved him so much. "I like this forceful side of you." Tingles made themselves known between her thighs, brought her to the edge of bliss before he'd even manipulated any of her more sensitive parts.

"You bring it out of me," he all but growled. "Exactly when I need it." As he gripped her hips while she splayed her legs with her pulse racing in anticipation, Gabriel fit the wide tip of his length to her opening.

"That is but reason why you and I are so good together, why we work—"

Her words were abruptly cut off when he thrust into her passage with such authority

and went so deeply that they both groaned with appreciation. “Ooh...” Mary’s eyes briefly shuttered closed as intense pleasure danced through her body. Coupling in this manner was so incredibly wonderful. “That’s a good start,” she managed to gasp while shifting her stance into something more comfortable that would accommodate his girth. “Send me flying, Bright. Dissolve my anxiety about all that is going on.”

At this different angle, every movement, each thrust seemed amplified and larger. Every time he penetrated her channel, he went deep, oh so deep. His shaft rubbed against the swollen nubbin at her center, enhancing the need he’d already invoked.

“Ah!”

Gabriel’s hold on her hips was hard enough that he’d probably leave marks on her skin. Oddly, she craved that souvenir—his claim. “This will go fast.” His whisper was quite thrilling. “I can’t sustain momentum.”

She was lost to the sweet madness he created. “Make it unforgettable, Bright.” Her knuckles were white as she gripped the cushions of the settee as best she could. A low moan released from her when he slammed into her. “Give me all of you. I don’t want gentle and tender tonight.”

“But this goes against everything a gentleman should be.”

As if this was a lovemaking position of a gentleman. She huffed with both frustration and amusement. “Put that thought out of your mind for the time being. Claim me as if this is our last night on earth.”

“If that were so, love, I would take you slow and sweet and all night long to savor it. Stare into your eyes to see your emotions and let you see mine as we face the end.”

Was there any reason why she adored him? “Gabriel, please!” She bit her bottom lip

for his next push nearly hurtled her over the edge toward bliss.

“As you wish, sweeting, but on our wedding night tomorrow, we shall do it my way, as many times as you will let me.”

The words nearly finished her off. “I can’t wait.”

“Such a managing baggage.” Soon, he found a rhythm, tightened his hold on her hips, and apparently set out to send her to the heights of pleasure with alacrity and conviction, just like he’d done numerous times over the ten months.

Over and over, he slammed into her, giving her exactly what she’d asked of him. It was heady stuff, addicting, like a fever dream, and she couldn’t have enough. “I need more,” she gasped, lifting her head, and looking at him from over her shoulder. Pleasure lined his face, his eyes were mere slits, but there was a smug grin on his lips that betrayed the fact he was enjoying this all too much.

Truly, he was the most handsome man she’d ever seen.

“I want to feel all of you, Gabriel.” Her voice broke. “To know beyond a doubt you would have chosen me if you could decide again.”

“Of course I would. You are my greatest strength.” Enough emotion rode on those words that her eyes filled with tears.

Deeper he stroked. Faster he moved. This coupling was raw, real, and based in mutual need and primal passion, not the fact they would be forever linked as husband and wife on the morrow. The sound of flesh hitting flesh echoed in her ears, but she was ever mindful to keep her cries muffled lest the servants hear or worse, Cassandra in her room upstairs. Mary’s breasts swung wildly from the exercise, her sensitive nipples scraping against the velvet of the settee. Heat engulfed her, and still he thrust

while she bucked her hips backward, meeting each one with her own power, which only sent him ever deeper.

And it made her feel not only loved but worshipped, needed, wanted, powerful.

Other women might be aghast at that or say she was immoral or even fast, but this man... he was her partner in everything. He had shown her what it was to truly be on equal terms, to have a man's respect, to not be treated as an object, what it felt like to be loved.

She couldn't imagine life without him.

"Yes!" When he snaked his free hand around her hips to rub his fingers over her swollen button, her control shattered. "Hurry, Gabriel! I'm nearly done. "

"I'm trying my best, sweeting." He followed the words with a series of deep, oh so impossibly deep and hard, teeth-shatteringly hard, thrusts that sought to separate her soul from her body. "Mary, for the love of God say you are there."

"I am." White light moved up to meet her as she fell over the edge and tumbled, hurtled really, into an intense release. A keening cry pulled from her throat, but she pressed her face into the settee cushion to keep it muffled. It was all she could do to keep her toes on the floor as he continued to spear into her. Her core convulsed erratically around his member. "Ah!"

Seconds later, Gabriel hit release. He shouted her name despite the risk of bringing a maid running, buried himself in her passage while tugging her tight to his body. His shaft pulsed, and her body greedily sucked at him until he was spent.

"Bloody hell that almost bordered on madness," he whispered and put his arms around her, hugging her to him. His breathing was as ragged as hers. "It has been a

long time since I found release that exaggerated.”

Oh, he was adorable. “Perhaps we both needed that outlet tonight.” She laughed, but it was a shaky affair. Exhaustion clung to the sound and made her legs shake. “It was wonderful, and I rather think you’ve spoiled me for anyone else.”

“I should hope so, since I’m marrying you tomorrow.” A few seconds later, once they had both recovered, Gabriel leaned down and kissed her hip, the small of her back, her left shoulder blade, then he pulled her up, turned her about, and deeply kissed her as if he would never see her again. “I can’t wait to marry you,” he said as he settled her into his arms and held her close.

A tear fell to her cheek. I am the most fortunate of women. “It is going to be the highlight of the year for me.”

“In this, we are in agreement.” Eventually, he stood slightly back enough to cup her cheek. With shining eyes, he brushed his lips over hers then he kissed her forehead. “Let me help you dress as I’d told Maggie I would do. No doubt the carriage will be here soon.”

A few minutes after he’d put his clothing to rights and tightened the laces of her stays while she tucked her breasts back into her own underthings, there was a knock on the door.

“Inspector Bright, your carriage has pulled up,” the butler, Mr. Davies, announced, for yes, since Gabriel had become a consulting inspector, it meant they often had callers, which meant it was necessary to hire more staff.

Gabriel winked at her. “Thank you, Davies. We shall be down directly. Mrs. Tomlinson is still fussing with her gown.”

Cheeky man. Mary smiled as she retrieved the exquisite gown. Life was essentially perfect.

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Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:56 am

The Honorable Gabriel Bright, or rather Inspector Bright, formerly of Bow Street and Whitehall, grinned at his fiancée Mary. After that spirited round of coupling, he was quite relaxed and more content than he'd been all week. The memories of his failed case were no longer uppermost in his mind.

All because of her, but then, she had been instrumental in bringing him out of his own head to focus on other things in life. His mind jogged to the Christmastide house party his viscount brother had thrown last December where he'd apparently gotten a wild hair and kissed a strange woman in the carriage house, yet that meeting had led to him forging a friendship with Mary Tomlinson and then that friendship changed into an affair which had progressed into an engagement with so much heat he thought himself the most fortunate of men.

Back in December, though, they had managed to solve the murder of his brother's butler, and while there was a mantle of satisfaction there, having the widow in his life beyond that had brought him a state of contentment he'd not thought possible. It had only gotten better since the spring, when he'd finally asked for hand... after a complicated case they'd worked together that had seen him as one of the principal suspects.

Truly, the last ten months had turned his life upside down in all the best ways, and he couldn't wait to marry for the second time tomorrow.

"I shall wait for you downstairs, love. Ring for your maid to help refresh your look. Your hair is a bit mussed."

"Ha." The grin she shot him had renewed interest firing in his blood. "Are you afraid

I'm not finished off enough to go out into public, especially to the opera?"

Damn but he adored the fact she liked to tease and challenge him. "Hardly that, and I could eat you up right now, but I also don't want any other man to glance at you and know exactly what you and I have been up to before we left the house." He winked, for he and Mary enjoyed a healthy physical relationship, and they had from the first. It might be considered scandalous, but he didn't care. Shouldn't a man show affection for his woman in every way possible as many times as he could? "Don't dawdle. We're nearly late. "

Her laughter tinkled in the space. "Whose fault is that, Bright?"

"Don't dawdle!" he called as he left the room with a smile. She only called him Bright when she was annoyed with him or teased by him. And that was a very thin line indeed, but usually the results were the same.

Their wedded life would not be dull, and neither would it be aggravating as his last one had been. Two different women meant two very different experiences. By and large, he much preferred the one he'd found with Mary.

In the entryway, he nodded to the butler. "Mrs. Tomlinson will be down shortly." God, he couldn't wait to marry her tomorrow merely to give her a different surname.

"Very good, Inspector." The older man held out Gabriel's greatcoat and waited for him to don it. "You are attending the opera tonight?"

"We are. Dinner beforehand, though by the time we arrive, we will no doubt be too late for the full scope of it. In any event, I'm treating Mrs. Tomlinson to MacBeth at the Royal Opera House Covent Garden, since it's one of her favorites." Once the greatcoat was on, the butler gave him a pair of kid gloves. "After the interim break, there is to be a comedy that follows. I am not certain if she will wish to stay that

late.”

“I’m certain she will adore that nicety.”

“I hope so. ”

Over the course of the last several months, Mr. Davies had been primed with the history between Gabriel and Mary, had been apprised regarding how Cassandra had come to live with them, given pointers on how to treat clients as well as potential clients when they came to call, and everything else in between.

“Will your son come home for the wedding?”

“Ah, no. Henry has just started back at Cambridge for the Michaelmas term. He won’t return to London until mid-December.” He accepted a silk top hat from the butler and then set it upon his head. “I would rather the boy finish his schooling with high marks than to keep running back to London each time there is something to celebrate here. However, depending on the schedule, Mary’s niece might be able to come up from her finishing school to attend.”

But his absence would be felt keenly, for it had been Henry who encouraged him to ask for Mary’s hand this past spring, and Henry who had put a stamp of approval upon the widow that eventually ushered Gabriel’s decision to make a permanent life together. Regardless, they would all be together as a family for Christmastide, and oddly he was looking forward to that time, especially now that they had Cassandra in their midst.

How would Henry react to having an adopted sister? Would he mind? Would he protest it? Of course, Gabriel had written to him about the proceedings, and the response had been cordial enough, but being together in person was a whole different matter.

It mattered not. Everything would work out as it was supposed to, and the most important thing right now was marrying Mary, the woman who'd upset his whole world and then put it back together again.

"Everything will be well, Davies," he assured the butler. Then he frowned. "Oh, and my brother—Viscount Stanwick—as well as his wife are slated to be in attendance." It was remarkable he'd been able to tear himself away from duties in Parliament or whatever else it was that filled his time, for there had been a bit of bad blood between them, ever since that Christmastide house party and the contretemps over his previous carnal relationship with Mary.

"I'm sure it will be, Inspector," the butler agreed.

After tomorrow, he would have a real family, beyond that which he had with his brother. He would finally have a family of his own where they were all a cohesive unit, and no one tried to pit one another against him. A family where his wife wouldn't attempt to belittle him for each decision or move he made .

It was mind boggling, really, the difference one woman made, how that same woman could completely transform a life.

"By the by, Mr. Davies, is everything is in place for the ceremony?"

"The plans have been gone over thrice and distributed to the staff. While you and Mrs. Tomlinson are out tonight, we will have the drawing room decorated to your specifications. The hothouse flowers were delivered this morning and are waiting in the root cellar. Cook has the wedding breakfast well at hand. She has even made a two-layer fruit cake for dessert after dinner tomorrow."

"What a lovely surprise. I shall be certain to thank her personally." Ever since he'd shared the townhouse with Mary, the female servants had gone out of their way to

please him. He didn't understand why; he'd merely treated them with the respect afforded anyone.

"The staff is quite excited for the ceremony, Inspector. Everyone adores Mary."

"As luck would have it, so do I." He exchanged a grin with the butler, for was nearly beside himself with anticipation. "I hope all goes well. My life and hers will exponentially change after tomorrow."

An indulgent chuckle escaped the butler. "Mrs. Tomlinson is quite taken with you. I have never seen her so happy since I came to work here, to say nothing of the fact that she has been filled with hope since the spring." He nodded. "You needn't worry. I have never seen a couple so well suited before."

"Thank you. I appreciate that." It was still strange for him to talk about or even show emotions, but it was becoming more natural as time went on. He ignored the heat rising on the back of his neck. "She has given me back the hope I lost long ago regarding women in general and marriage in particular."

He'd been married before, and eleven years into the union, the woman had decided motherhood and being a wife to a Bow Street principal officer wasn't what she'd wanted from her life. She had left him for one of the most notorious rogues of the ton . Henry had been but a boy of ten at the time.

Had he been able to voice an opinion or even an objection? Not then, for he'd just begun his career with Bow Street and hadn't wished to make a scene or become embroiled in a scandal that might jeopardize the position, but he'd made a promise to himself that if he ever had the chance to be alone with his wife's lover, there would be hell to pay. Willfully stealing away someone's wife was beyond the pale. Of course, if his former wife had been true to her marriage vows, she would have given him a dressing down straightaway, but that was beside the point .

As Gabriel's thoughts further drifted to his late wife, he frowned and focused his gaze to the corridor, sure that Mary would make an appearance soon. That had been an angry, embarrassing time in his life. Every dream he'd had died when his first wife had left, and quite frankly, they hadn't been resurrected. Years later, he'd accidentally run into her at the opera. It had been an awkward meeting at best that had ripped open the wounds and scars on his heart, but then she'd solidified his anger and decision to retreat by telling him her lover was everything he was not, better at everything, including efforts in the sheets.

Burning with anger, he had coldly wished her well—and to hell—told her their son had finally stopped crying himself to sleep, but it hadn't affected her. She'd rejoined her lover in their box, and there had been naught for him to do except return to his where he'd been invited to share the evening with his brother and his sister-in-law.

When he'd received word that she had drowned while on holiday in Rome with said lover, he'd been plunged into a world of confusion, for the love he'd held for her had evaporated shortly after her betrayal, but that hadn't meant his heart wasn't affected. That organ came away from the scandal battered and bruised, and he'd locked it away behind walls and chains, vowing to himself that he would nevermore trust a woman so deeply that it changed over into love.

Until Mary came along. Steadily, she'd torn down those walls, tossed away the chains link by link, and then she'd burrowed her way into his heart and made everything new. Truly, she'd saved him, revitalized him, and in return, he'd restored her faith in men after the way she'd been horribly treated by her first husband.

In each other, they'd found new life, and he was grateful for it every damned morning of his existence.

“It would seem your wait is over, Inspector.”

The sound of the butler's voice wrenched Gabriel from his thoughts. It was then that he saw Mary in the corridor, and as she approached him, she offered a smile.

"Bloody hell, she is a vision," he said in a barely audible whisper, and couldn't help but stare at the woman who would soon be his wife.

If someone happened to glance at her, they wouldn't have guessed that she'd been thoroughly loved not twenty minutes prior. The muted peach satin gown put him in mind of fragile tulips in the spring, and the shade suited her pale complexion, but the lace overskirt shot with golden thread as well as the matching ribboned band about her waist truly made a lasting impression. Her lovely blonde hair had been caught back in a clever updo. A silver brooch glimmered in those tresses that perfectly matched silver earbobs and the necklace, both of which glimmered with a few rubies.

The set he'd given her.

He put a hand over his heart while that organ squeezed. "I am the most fortunate of men, Davies," he said softly as Mary approached.

"I would quite agree, Inspector," the older man said, then covered his grin with a cough. "Good evening, Mrs. Tomlinson." When he went briefly away to retrieve her outer things, Gabriel took one of her hands.

"You are lovely tonight." Slowly, he brought her gloved hand to his lips and kissed the back. "That color is perfect for autumn and is wonderful on you."

"Thank you. I'd been waiting for an opportunity to wear this gown; it's been made and waiting for a couple of months now."

Mr. Davies returned with a black velvet cape in hand. As he held the garment out for her, a light blue satin liner showed in the candlelight. "To keep the chill off," he said

with a nod.

“Thank you, Davies.” Once it settled about her shoulders, she manipulated the silver frog fastening. “I adore this time of year for the chill in the air, but I could do without the rain.”

“I would imagine the inspector will usher you directly into the carriage with no harm to your gown.”

“Indeed,” Gabriel rejoined with a nod and a wink. Then he put his lips to the shell of her ear, inhaled the violet scent of her, and whispered, “You are so tempting tonight that I want nothing more than to bury my face between your thighs and show you how excited I am for tomorrow.”

“Oh!” A blush jumped into her cheeks, and that dark pink color betrayed the fact she no doubt agreed with that suggestion. Mary swatted at his chest. “Do hush, Bright. Let us go. We don’t want to miss the opening act because we were lost in the crush of people trying to find their seats.”

“Right.” He exchanged an amused glance with the butler. “We should return to the house around midnight.”

“Very good, Inspector. Enjoy the night.”

Once the carriage had rolled forward on its journey, Gabriel relaxed into the squabs with an arm about Mary’s waist as she nestled into his side. Never did he think he would ever feel this much happiness again, but here he was, with the woman he loved next to him, on the eve of their wedding.

“Would you like to go away on a wedding trip? We could leave as soon as next week.” It was something they hadn’t discussed due to busy schedules as well as a few

societal commitments he'd taken on. After all, he was the second son of a viscount, and that afforded him invitations to decent events. One never knew where one might find a new client. Additionally, he was proud to have Mary on his arm and wanted to show her off.

Especially if his brother was in attendance, for he loved to drive home the fact he'd won Mary's hand where his brother had failed years ago.

That was a story for a different day, and one he'd first become aware of last Christmastide.

"I haven't given it much thought." The softness of her voice was fitting for the shadows of twilight that engulfed the interior of the closed carriage. "You are building your consultancy business and crime doesn't stop for a holiday as you once told me."

"Our nuptial ceremony is hardly a holiday, but I understand your concern." When he glanced into her face and their eyes met, the banked heat in hers had awareness racing over his skin. "The livelihood will keep, but I want to spoil you. Did you go on a honeymoon trip with your first marriage?"

"Oh, good heavens no." She shook her head. "He said it was a gross waste of coin and time." A huff escaped her. "If the man wouldn't part with the coin for a bouquet of flowers or a box of chocolate one day for our anniversary, why would he pay for something like a holiday?"

Anger flared anew in his chest for the dead man who'd treated her so horribly. "All the more reason for me to take you away for a holiday wherein we can concentrate solely on ourselves and our union, to scrub the last vestiges of him from your mind."

"Ah, Gabriel." Mary's lips parted slightly with a smile. "You have done that and

more already.” Gently, she laid a hand on his thigh, and he almost launched from the bench at her touch. Everything she did seemed to send fires into his blood. “Besides, there is Cassandra to consider. She has been with us for nearly six months. Do you think it’s a good idea to leave her when it’s critical she feel comfortable with us?”

He bit back the urge to sigh. “We could send her to your brother for a week. He has a daughter, so he’s not completely a dunce when it comes to children.”

“Yes, but Adelaide is twenty and will be done with finishing school in a couple of weeks. That is much different than having an eight-year-old.” Then an unladylike snort escaped her. “Besides, William barely tolerates people his own age. I don’t see how he’ll be able to interact with a little girl who doesn’t trust easily. It would be as chilly and awkward as sending her to your brother and his wife.”

Perish the thought. “Well, to be fair, they have both grown as people since last Christmastide. And they have experience with children.”

“Good God, Bright, are you serious?” Mary shot him a speaking glance. “I wouldn’t be comfortable with that.”

“Neither would I.” Wanting to reassure her, Gabriel threaded their gloved fingers together. It would already be the height of awkward to have his brother at the nuptial ceremony. For far too long, they’d been on rocky terms, and that was before Gabriel had found out Francis had led Mary down the proverbial garden path and seduced her years and years ago. “We shall think upon it further before we decide. Truth be told, I think Cassandra might benefit from a break away from us. Consider that she had lived by herself on the streets before we took her in. Living as she does now has turned her whole world upside down. She might merely need some time apart to come to terms with it instead of trying her best to be a proper child under the direction of Miss Oliver.”

The governess they'd hired was a perfectly lovely young woman, but she was a rather proper sort, and at times, that kind of rigidity didn't blend well with the type of life they lived within their townhouse. The family he and Mary were trying to build was unorthodox at best, but somehow, that was what made it so thrilling .

And unique.

"Miss Oliver does need to realize Cassandra hasn't been raised within a society household. I will speak with her after the ceremony." Mary frowned. "Do you think I've put too much pressure or expectations on Cassandra? Granted, she simply can't go about London acting like the wild child of the streets that she was when we found her." A shudder went through her and transferred to him. "Imagine the things she's seen that she can't forget. The poor thing."

"That is why we ply her with so much love that hopefully some of those images will eventually become blotted out. Much like you and I with our previous marriages." After pressing his lips to her temple, he continued. "And no, I do not think you've put too much pressure on her. You are wonderful with her and patient. I've seen the longing in your eyes and the hope that she'll love you as you love her."

"Sometimes, it's a difficult endeavor," she managed in a broken whisper.

"I know. I truly believe Cassandra cares for you but give her time. Feral children, street urchins, have had much trauma and it has probably done some damage to her head and her ability to trust. When she is ready, she will let you know that she's accepted all of it and us as parents. Keep the faith, sweeting."

She sniffed and wiped at a tear that had fallen to her cheek. "I hope you're right. It's breaking my heart not to be able to hug her or spend time with her more than the typical polite greetings through the day. "I had thought after we took her in and she seemed so grateful, that family life would be easy."

“As you said, you don’t know all of what she’s been through or has seen. With broken trust, no matter if it’s a child or an adult battling it, things will take time to work out. Eventually she will see how wonderful you are. Didn’t I?”

“How do you always know what to say that makes me feel better? Even when I don’t want to?” Mary turned to him and slipped her arms around his middle. “I want to be her mother, Gabriel. There is so much I want to give her, but she won’t let me in.”

The upset she struggled with tugged at his chest, but he couldn’t help her. Only Cassandra could decide what was right for her. “Shh. All will be well.” His poor Mary had always had a big heart. During that case last spring when they discovered who’d killed a butcher’s wife, he’d discovered that Mary brought food, blankets, and medicine to the poorest wretches and families in the neighborhoods of the Seven Dials. Though she continued that to this day, and he loved her for that, he also knew she still longed for a family of her own, just as he did. Life had made it impossible for her to bear children, and with Cassandra’s seeming rejection, he knew that dream must feel increasingly out of her reach. “Just be patient.”

“For how long?”

“I don’t know, but I do know the fact that she hasn’t run away is a good sign. I’ll wager she enjoys living with us. Perhaps we should give her a kitten, so she’ll have an invested ownership in our lives and has something to feel responsible for.”

“I will think about that as well.” But her voice sounded far too teary.

“Ah, Mary.” He pressed his lips to the top of her head, caressed a hand up and down her spine in the hopes of soothing her. “Tonight, enjoy yourself during the play. It’s your last night as a widow. On the morrow, you will be my wife.”

She nodded and pulled away in order to peer into his face. “You are right. Perhaps

I'm being a silly goose. Just like there are no timelines or rules for grief, there aren't the same for moving past a transition." When she offered a slight smile, he did the same. "In many ways, Cassandra might be grieving her past life. It wasn't much to you or me, but to her, it was everything. I will keep trying."

"I'm so damn proud of you," he whispered, and once more tugged her against his chest to simply hold her .

He could hardly wait for tomorrow; he had missed being someone's husband, and being wed to Mary was his perfect idea of heaven.

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Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:56 am

Royal Opera House

Covent Garden

Mary breathed in deeply once they had entered the Royal Opera House, and then she sighed. There was a certain smell here that couldn't be replicated anywhere else. The scents of candle wax, rich and heavy fabrics, excitement, perfumes and pomades, along with that certain aroma of age and worn wood filled her nostrils. Oddly enough, it was quite comforting.

"We're just through here," the inspector said as they gained the second level of the opera house. "My brother's box should be the second one on the right-hand side of the theater."

She said nothing while she followed him through the maze of corridors. They had arrived far too late for dinner, but that didn't matter. Excitement fluttered through her veins. Bright might not wish to use his brother's coin or have to make his way through life as a viscount's second son bound by society's narrow-minded viewpoints, but on occasion, he did use the privileges afforded to his position. While Mary respected him for that, she also admired the dedication to finding his own way in the world. In that, he was different than many other men of the ton .

Suddenly, the thought occurred to her that once she married him tomorrow, she would also be part of the beau monde . Would that change his expectations of her? Would she need to act differently or become a society lady and enter that shallow world where women weren't supposed to do anything exciting?

It was something she needed to discuss with him.

“Here we are,” he murmured and then stood back at the door so she could precede him into the box. “And it seems that we have the space nearly to ourselves.”

There was one other couple sharing with them, and they were older. They both glanced over at her and Gabriel. Mary nodded at them and offered a smile. They were seated on the other side of the box, so there would be no opportunity for conversation. It was quite cozy, and she marveled again at how different it was being with Gabriel over how her life had been with her first husband.

“We have a lovely view,” she murmured to him as they settled into their seats. The cushions were soft, the frames of the chairs were gilded, and the curtains on either side of the box and along the rear were of heavy red velvet, no doubt to help with acoustics. “This is so exciting.”

“Well, I know how much you enjoy this particular play,” he said in a whisper as she leaned toward her.

“True, but I meant being here with you. I adore that.” He was such a darling man thinking of her and securing the tickets. It was surprising how two men could be at such completely opposite ends of the emotional spectrum, and time out of hand, Gabriel had patiently shown her how a gentleman should act.

His grin was a thing of beauty. “I strive to make you happy, Mary. We are not all bounders like your first husband.”

Fluttering went through her belly. “Thank goodness.” But she smiled to herself as she read the playbill and waited for the performance to begin.

Throughout the play, they both sat spellbound, for the actors were passionate and

genuine in their roles; the backdrops amazing. At some point, Bright rested an arm on the back of her chair, let his fingers drift along her shoulders, her nape, gently teasing. In those moments, Mary was very aware of him, and she reveled in that too, for she'd never craved the touch of her first husband as she did with Gabriel.

At the end, she sighed, for it had been very well done, and because of that, quite satisfying. "That was delightful. Thank you."

"You are welcome, of course." He glanced at her with a half-grin and mischief in his eyes. "What would you like to do with the break before the comedy gets underway? Stay in the box, seek out glasses of champagne, wander the gardens and eat from street vendor carts?"

"Mmm, champagne sounds lovely. I wouldn't mind a glass of that."

"Then I shall fetch you one."

"Such a rogue." But she smiled. "While you do that, I'm going to stretch my legs." So saying, she stood and shook some of the wrinkles from her gown.

He scrambled to his feet as well. "Once I procure the champagne, I will join you. Perhaps we can find a shadowy corner in one of the corridors."

"Oh? Why is that, Inspector?"

"Isn't it obvious? I want to kiss you. Quite desperately, in fact."

Heat seeped into her cheeks. "Haven't you had enough after what we did before coming out to the opera?" she whispered so the other couple wouldn't overhear as she and Bright went back through the curtain and then out the door to the corridor beyond.

His hand was at the small of her back and warmth emanated from that touch. “You are soon to be my wife, which means I will never have enough of you.”

“So romantic, Bright.” But her smile continued to grow as she turned to go the opposite direction of him in their errands.

“I can’t help it, and I’ve changed my mind.” As she looked at him with a frown, he took one of her hands. “I’ll go with you. Perhaps we can skip the comedy in favor of walking through the gardens. Suddenly, I’m finding it far too stuffy in here.”

“You won’t find argument from me.” The weight of his hand in hers, the way he threaded their fingers together all worked to bring her contentment.

The corridors were dimly lit with guttering gas lamps on the wall. Some of the halls were crowded with people either wishing to stretch their legs or heading out to seek punch or champagne. When they encountered a few acquaintances, they either nodded or paused briefly to greet them.

“Come, Mrs. Tomlinson.” Gabriel tugged on her hand until they’d found a short corridor that led to what seemed to be a backstage area on the second level. “Surely there are hiding places through here.”

None of that was to be, for near the door lay the body of a woman lay with a pool of dark blood beside her. She lay on her side with one arm flung up over her head.

Mary gasped. “Gabriel!” Her hissed whisper sounded overly loud in the sudden quiet of the space.

“Dear God,” he said as he gazed down at the body. “Quickly. There might be a possibility she’s still alive.” Wasting no time, he knelt on her other side to avoid the blood.

“I rather doubt she is.” Her utterance was quite a choked whisper, for the bottom dropped out of her stomach. The longer she peered at the body, the more apprehension gathered about her person. She knew the woman, and what was more, the jeweled handle of a letter opener— her letter opener—stuck out from the woman’s chest. Blood stained the front of the woman’s gown in mustard-colored silk.

While Bright removed his gloves and then checked for vital signs, Mary bit her bottom lip as cold foreboding played icy fingers up and down her spine. The woman who lay on the floor, the woman who’d lost her life in a violent manner, had, at one time, been a mistress of her first husband.

While it was true Mary hadn’t been fond of the woman—for her husband had made her watch him pleasure and bed the lightskirt—she had never wished her dead. Much. As her farce of a marriage had dragged on, those thoughts had changed. All emotions and feelings for the man had fled, and she’d washed her hands of him, had told him he could bed whomever he wished just to leave her out of it. To her way of thinking, she was no longer his wife after that.

“The woman is dead,” Gabriel pronounced with disappointment clinging to his tone. “However, she is just barely warm. Death probably occurred within the last hour or two while the play was in progress. No one would have passed through this area, and even if they did, the noise from the stage would have blocked the sounds of a scuffle or even a muffled scream.”

Mary didn’t comment; she couldn’t, for it would betray far too many things, but her pulse pounded so loud, she feared he would hear it. Instead, she nodded but couldn’t bring herself to look directly into the dead woman’s face.

The woman who her husband had apparently enjoyed bedding far more than he had her.

Gabriel didn't notice her unease as he continued to do a cursory examination of the corpse. As she wandered about the tight area, the toe of her slipper bumped against something that skittered over the floor, rolling away into the shadows. When she bent down to retrieve it, she frowned, for it was a tiny brown bottle of essence of clove.

"I wonder if this belonged to the dead woman or if someone dropped it earlier." She held the bottle between her gloved thumb and forefinger.

"It is impossible to say right now. Tuck it into your reticule and we'll start building a trail of clues, same as always," he said as he removed his notebook from an interior pocket of his tailcoat. The well-worn leather was as familiar to her as everything else from his person, but this notebook she would never forget. It was the first time she realized he was serious about investigating the death of his brother's butler last Christmas, and that she was his number one suspect.

As she thought about that, her unease grew. So much so that hot saliva filled her mouth, prompting her to swallow heavily a few times to stave off retching. Bright would not be pleased when he discovered how she was connected with the dead woman. And he would find out, but she owed him the truth, which meant she would volunteer that information before he uncovered it. The thought had knots of worry pulling in her belly.

"Uh, I am going to step away for a few minutes to compose myself."

He nodded. "I'll admit, stumbling upon a dead body, and one that has met a violent end at that, does take a person by surprise." With the leaded end of his pencil, he examined the ruffle that lined the bodice of the woman's gown. "Don't stray far. We will need to begin our investigation soon, and I'm going to want my partner there every step of the way." When he flashed her the grin that never failed to leech the strength from her knees, Mary nodded.

She hurried off even as her heart squeezed. Every time they worked a case together, he treated her as his equal. It was one of the things that had made her fall in love with him to begin with. "I'll return shortly." Needing to put distance between herself and the dead woman wasn't an excuse because she really did feel as if she would retch. The past that she'd worked so hard to put behind her was now rushing up to meet her and sink its claws into her person.

Barely had she turned down an intersecting corridor that would lead to the sweeping staircase when she ran bodily into a man moving at a fast rate along the hallway toward her. For a few seconds, she struggled to keep her footing while disentangling herself from the man.

"I am so sorry," Mary mumbled as she stepped far enough backward to sweep her gaze over his form. "I wasn't paying attention."

"I'm the one who should apologize." His voice was proper enough, but it wasn't cultured. "I shouldn't have been in such a hurry." The man was decent looking, well put together. Though he didn't wear a tailcoat or any of the other pieces of clothing that was *de rigueur* for attending the opera, he did have on a black jacket of superfine, gray breeches, and his boots were shined. However, he was one of those men that a person could easily overlook after the first meeting, because there was nothing unique about him. He blended in with the masses. "You seem ill, miss. Do you need assistance?"

Stop woolgathering or letting your emotions control you, Mary.

"No, I will be all right." Slowly, she shook her head. The longer she stood there with the man, the more a vague scent of... gingerbread blended with the citrus of his cologne or shaving soap. "I merely have a bit of a stomach upset. With something to drink, I should be well enough." Why she felt the need to tell a stranger that, she had no idea, but knowing who the dead woman was had upset her greatly. And knowing

how Gabriel would react kept her on edge.

“All right, then.” He nodded but frowned as he looked at her. “Did you at least enjoy the play?”

“Of course.” This time, she didn’t offer up anything else.

“Well, I should go, but it was a pleasure to meet you Miss...?”

“Mrs. Tomlinson.” For the love of God, Mary, stop talking!

“Ah, well Mrs. Tomlinson, I am Mr. Dempsey.” He smiled but the gesture didn’t reach his eyes, and a rivulet of sweat went down one temple. Perhaps he was overly heated after running through the corridors. It was a bit warm. “Call me a patron of the arts or a slave to them. Seems like I’m always here in some capacity or another.”

“Oh?” Truly, she wasn’t all that interested in this man or his life, but she didn’t want to offend him by moving away.

“Yes. One of my friends was in the play tonight; we are going for drinks afterward at his club since I’m not scheduled to work.”

“How lovely for you.” She made to move around him. “Enjoy your evening.”

“Wait.” When she drew even with him, Mr. Dempsey dared to lay a hand on her arm. Gooseflesh rippled on her skin, and not from pleasure, but she didn’t know how else to explain it. There was a certain intensity in his hazel eyes she didn’t care for, and the skin beneath his left one ticked. “Perhaps you and I can meet at a tea house sometime or perhaps walk in Hyde Park. I’ll wager we have much in common. Don’t you feel that affinity between us?”

Oh, dear. “I do not, in fact.” Gently but firmly, she removed his hand from her person. “And I’m afraid I need to decline your invitation. I’m getting married tomorrow.” She frowned as confusion gripped her mind. Was this younger man truly thinking she could be a romantic match for him ?

“But you aren’t married yet,” he said with a wink.

The cheek of him! “I’m sorry, Mr. Dempsey, but this conversation is over. Good night.”

For the space of a few heartbeats, he held her gaze. Then he nodded. “A pity. Of course a woman like you would already have been snapped up.” With an unreadable expression, he cleared his throat. “Well, I must run. Perhaps we shall meet again, and in better circumstances.”

“I hardly think that accidentally running into someone in a corridor is an unfortunate circumstance.” Perhaps she wasn’t in the correct frame of mind just now, but the whole conversation was exceedingly odd.

“The better circumstance would have been you taking tea with me.” When he winked, it still didn’t make him remarkable in any sort of way.

“Don’t let me keep you. I’m sure your friend must be wondering what has become of you.” With a sigh of relief, she watched the man lope off down the corridor, but what made the whole encounter even more queer was the fact he ran in the opposite direction from whence he’d come. Where was he going to begin with? Not knowing, Mary paused at the wall and briefly closed her eyes. She drew in a deep breath and let it ease out. After repeating that for a few times, she opened her eyes and stared at the opposite wall.

A handful of patrons strolled by, but no one seemed overly interested in her. Laughter

and chatter filled the air. Somewhere nearby, the clink of champagne glasses reached her ears. Perhaps she should return to Gabriel, even though she desperately could use a drink of something right about now. The sooner she admitted what she knew to the inspector, the better it would probably go. And the longer she lingered in the corridor, the more likely it was that some other man would think she needed to suffer through his unwanted conversation.

Stiffening her spine, Mary retraced her steps. As she walked, she wound the strings of her reticule about her fingers. What would she say to Gabriel that would soften her connection to the dead woman? Already, she could imagine the disappointment and resignation in his dark eyes, and she absolutely didn't want him to think less of her, especially on the eve of their wedding.

Will I ever break free of my past?

Eventually, she arrived back at the crime scene, for there was only so much dawdling she could indulge in.

"Ah, Mary. I'm glad you are here," Gabriel said without glancing up from his work as he examined the soles of the woman's half-boots. Already, the page of his notebook was filled with scribbles. "I sent a young theater worker out to summon a constable, so we need to be quick with the remainder of our own examination. If I have to shoo away another gawker, I will probably go mad. This isn't an ideal situation."

No, it is not. There was no point in delaying any longer. Once more twisting the strings of her reticule around her fingers, she hovered on the fringes of the scene. "Gabriel, I—"

"Come, now, Mary. Help me search for clues and odd things regarding this woman. I suspect that once the constable comes 'round, we'll lose control of the body."

She stifled the need to sigh. Everything he said was correct, and the first twenty-four hours after finding a dead body was crucial, but this would only postpone the inevitable.

Please forgive me when we come to that crossroads.

Then she dropped to her knees behind the body, avoiding the blood, and went to work.

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Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:56 am

Even though he was at the opera with Mary to enjoy a nice night out with her ahead of the nuptial ceremony on the morrow, something about being presented with a case to solve made him feel alive and vital, but the fact that his fiancée was acting quite odd gave him pause.

Why? She had worked cases with him before and had never had such a reaction toward a corpse, so what was different about this one?

“Where did you wander off to?” He frowned, for the soles of the dead woman’s half-boots were scuffed and worn, and they certainly didn’t match the gown she’d worn. To be fair, the garment wasn’t the quality or style that a woman would don to attend the opera, so that begged the question of what she wasn’t doing at the opera house to begin with.

Mary frowned, but there were shadows in her blue eyes that worked to further put questions into his mind. “I needed to get away from the body, to compose myself, but decided to come back. It’s quite stuffy in the corridors. ”

“It should clear soon; the comedy will begin shortly.” Lifting the edge of the dead woman’s skirting, he did a cursory check, but it didn’t seem as if she’d had carnal relations before her death. At least not immediately prior. A bit of staining on the shift indicated she had enjoyed that sort of thing but perhaps twelve hours off at the least. “Did you talk to anyone while you were out?”

She nodded. “I accidentally ran into a man in the corridor. Seemed congenial enough, a Mr. Dempsey. I was unsure if he was here to attend the opera.”

“Oh? Why is that?”

“He wasn’t wearing a tailcoat or the proper breeches and shoes.”

Now that was interesting. “Did you question him, ask if he’d seen anything suspicious?”

“Oh. It didn’t occur to me. My brain is clouded, my thoughts racing, and he appeared rather in a hurry as he was rushing through the corridor.”

That wasn’t out of the ordinary, for the intermission between plays wasn’t all that long, especially if one needed to procure a drink or had to find a toilet. “Ah, well that’s understandable.” As he examined the dead woman’s knees, he frowned. “Bit of bruising here. If she’s a maid and used to scrubbing the floors while on her knees, why the devil is she at an opera house? I wouldn’t think she could afford a ticket.”

Mary snorted. “Someone could have gifted it to her. Honestly, though, her gown isn’t fine enough for the opera, and she’s wearing half-boots instead of slippers. I’ll wager she’s not here as an attendee.”

“That was my conclusion as well.” Before he could continue, a large and tall man stormed over to their location, and when he arrived at the body, he put his hands on his hips and huffed.

“What the devil occurred here?” he demanded in a voice that boomed along the corridors.

Gabriel glanced first at Mary, who widened her eyes in surprise then he looked up at the new arrival. “I assume you are the constable?”

“I am.” The big man crossed his arms at his chest and glared at Gabriel. “Mr. Edding.

Now answer my question.”

It took all his willpower not to shoot off a smart mouthed comment. Instead, he stood, but even then, the other man towered over him by a good several inches. “There has apparently been a murder, Constable,” Gabriel said with a fair amount of annoyance in his voice. He gestured to the corpse. “As you can see, there is a knife in the woman’s chest where there shouldn’t be such a thing. That, coupled with the pool of blood would indicate that this woman has been stabbed in such a strategic place that she quickly bled out.”

The other man glanced at the corpse. Disgust went through his expression. “Her ilk isn’t welcome here at the theater, and there is another play about to start besides.”

Gabriel frowned. “What sort of woman is she, then?” From all accounts, the cut of her clothing wasn’t that of a maid or a prostitute or any other sort of fallen woman.

“A courtesan, I’ll wager. They are all over the gardens, working to separate a man from his hard-earned coin.” The constable shook his head, and for some odd reason, the color leached from Mary’s face. “We can’t have this spectacle in the corridor.”

“Obviously, I can’t authorize the removal of the body until I’ve collected clues.” He held out a hand. “Inspector Gabriel Bright, formerly of Bow Street but now working as an independent consultant on cases Bow Street can’t or won’t look into.”

Relief was evident on the bigger man’s face. “Good to meet you, Inspector. Perhaps you could take charge of this mess, hmm?”

Clearly, the constable had gained his position with no blessed clue how to actually handle a crime if one occurred. That was one of the issues in London currently. There was no real authority when it came to a police force, nor was there any cohesion of a “force” at all. It was a wonder justice was ever served. “I am endeavoring to do so,

Constable.”

Before either of them could say anything else, another man fought his way through the gathering crowds to join them. Of average height and weight, his chestnut hair had been fashioned into the latest style and held there with copious amounts of pomade. He wore the requisite clothes for an evening out, and there was even a red rose bud on his lapel.

“Good heavens! I’d heard rumors, but I wasn’t prepared to see a real dead body.” His eyes rounded as he took in the body, the blood, the jeweled knife handle still sticking out of the chest.

“Who are you?” Gabriel demanded while Mary watched the interaction with uncharacteristic silence. Concern for her brewed in his chest, but there was no opportunity to speak privately with her just now.

“Oh, I am Mr. Whirley, the theater owner.”

“I am Inspector Bright, formerly of Bow Street.” As annoying as it was to continue referencing his former employer, he’d found after six months of being a consultant and independent investigator that it lent authenticity to his credentials. “The constable here has asked that I take charge of the situation.”

“Yes, well, that is all well and good, but you need to do it quickly and quietly because it will upset the patrons. Additionally, the second play will start in ten minutes.”

What the devil did the man want him to do, wave a magic wand and make all the gawkers vanish? Annoyed, he tamped on the urge to show it. Instead, he nodded and conceded the point. “You’re right. We can’t have a stream of people trampling through the crime scene. That would be a messy endeavor at best and would cause a sensation.” He met the theater owner’s eyes. “I don’t guess you’ll want the press

sniffing about.”

“Well, bad publicity does have its place and would bring patrons, but my schedule is already quite full.”

Good God, the man was useless. Gabriel waved him away. “By all means, Mr. Whirley, go ahead and continue with the play’s opening, but at the very least, block off this corridor.” When he glanced at the constable, who shrugged, he gritted his teeth. “I can’t have the crime scene compromised.” Then dismissing the man, he once more addressed the constable. “Summon the coroner. Once he retrieves the body, I will not have access to it, so I intend to conduct my own investigation until that time comes.”

“Of course, Inspector.”

Both men left, and to his credit, Mr. Whirley managed to herd the bystanders away. A few minutes later, two young men wearing maroon jackets signifying they worked for the theater came to stand guard at the end of the corridor.

He blew out a breath, and glanced at Mary. “Now I can go back to work.”

“You kept your temper in check quite admirably,” she said with a faint smile, but the expression didn’t reach her eyes.

“Thank you for noticing.” He missed the banter they usually shared during a case. “Let’s see what we can gather before the coroner arrives.”

A tiny sigh escaped her as she moved to the back of the woman and then kneeled on the floor. “The gown is of a fairly recent style though the hue doesn’t suit her complexion.” Gingerly, she moved the head as Gabriel rolled the woman onto her back. “No earbobs or necklace, so she either wasn’t wealthy or she wasn’t finished

with her toilette, due to the half-boots still being on her feet.”

“You think she was interrupted while getting ready?”

Mary shrugged. “It’s a possibility.”

“Aside from the bruises on her knees, there aren’t any other wounds.” He picked up one of the dead woman’s hands. “She wore gloves, so there are no defensive wounds, but since she was stabbed at such close quarters and by someone who clearly hated her enough to drive a knife so deep into the body to the hilt, she must have known them to allow them into her personal space to begin with.”

“Why do you believe her attacker knew her?”

“Because if she didn’t know the person, she would have put up a fight and there would have been at least a few slash marks on the gown or her gloves. And she would have attempted to run from him or her, so the attacker would have probably stabbed her in the back.” As he spoke, he inspected the gown. It was still in pristine condition... except for the blood-stained front. “It would be best if we remove the knife and take it with us.” He took a handkerchief from an interior pocket, but when he reached for the jeweled handle, a whimper from Mary stopped him.

“Bright, stop.”

When he glanced at her, he frowned, for she’d gone as white as the proverbial sheet. Immediate concern tightened his chest. “What’s wrong? You have been acting oddly since we came upon the dead body, and that isn’t like you.”

“I know.” She nodded, but she was a bit green about the mouth as if she could retch at any moment. “I must admit something to you, and I’ll wager you won’t be pleased.”

“Oh?” Cold foreboding snaked through his gut. Perhaps this was the crux of her unease.

Briefly, she held her lower lip between her teeth as she looked at him. Finally, she swallowed and the delicate tendons in her throat worked. “I know who this is.”

“What?” His eyebrows rose in surprise. “Were you going to withhold this information?”

“I’d thought about it.” A faint blush stained her cheeks. “I knew you would find out eventually during the course of the investigation.” Sorrow and worry warred for dominance in her eyes as she stared at him from over the dead woman’s legs. “Her name is Theresa Kessler, and she was my husband’s mistress.”

Bloody hell.

His chest constricted, for that admittance changed the whole course of the investigation. “Obviously, she was someone for whom you didn’t have much love.”

“Yes.” She nodded, and instead of meeting his gaze, she focused on something over his left shoulder. “Also, she wasn’t stabbed with a knife.” When she pressed her lips together and her chin trembled, he steeled himself against feeling for her. At least not right now during an investigation. “That is a letter opener.”

“A wedding gift?”

“No.” A blush stained her cheeks. “Your, uh, brother gave it to me a long time ago when we were together, as a gift. ”

“What?” The inquiry seemed overly loud in the tight space. Now that he knew it had come from Frances, of course the damned thing looked familiar; he remembered it

from his childhood, for it had been on his mother's desk.

“After I married Benjamin, I thought I'd lost it or one of the servants had stolen it or that he'd even hawked it for coin during the time when he was down on his luck. I shouldn't have been surprised to find out Theresa took it.” When she snapped her attention to his face, a trace of bitterness skittered through her expression. “She took him from me, and now that I think about it, she probably stole other things from me that had gone missing during that time. Some of them I assumed he'd sold for quick coin, but then, that was a long time ago.”

Indeed, for she'd become Tomlinson's widow five years ago last month. “Damn it all to hell,” he couldn't help but whisper. This was bad. The woman he would wed on the morrow was now his prime suspect, and they would need to have a tough conversation soon.

Yet he knew deep down in his heart she didn't do this crime. But he also knew that he'd nodded off for about twenty minutes during MacBeth. Could she have slipped away during that time, come upon Theresa and then killed her with the letter opener she had already admitted was hers? Had she known the woman frequented the opera and had bided her time in the hopes that someday their paths might cross?

Farfetched, possibly, but he had seen people murdered with far less planning.

“I'm sorry, Bright.” It was said in a barely audible whisper, and as she gazed down at the corpse in front of her, the blonde arcs of her lashes that lay over her pale cheeks brought him back to the first case they'd worked together... where he'd also declared her as a suspect.

The feeling of numbness tingled through his hands. With every breath, betrayal went through his chest and his heart squeezed. Had she truly done this? In the past, they'd discussed the possibility that everyone, regardless of how good they were, had the

capacity to kill.

Did she? Could she? And on the eve of their wedding when she would leave her past behind?

Slowly, he shook his head. In some odd way, his brain was trapped between logic and disbelief and horror. “I have no choice but to question you, Mary, for you are a suspect, and the best one I have thus far. You had prior knowledge of this woman, had interacted with her during the years you were with your husband, and for all intents and purposes you had motive to kill her since she was Tomlinson’s mistress.”

Those words seemed to snap her out of the daze she’d apparently fallen into. With a scoff, she yanked her head up and raised her gaze to his. “Why? Ben is dead and has been in the ground for five years. I had no need to kill her now.”

Tension crackled between them, rolling through the small corridor, making them more strangers than a couple soon to be joined for eternity.

Hellfire and damnation.

“I wish you hadn’t said that.” It was tantamount to a confession. “However, I will question you at home. I don’t wish to do it here in this place where there will be gossip that might circulate through the ton.”

Her eyes narrowed slightly. “I would imagine that might look bad for you, hmm?”

“Absolutely, it will, and for you as well. Damn it, Mary, we are getting ready to start our lives together, and now this.” Immediately after the words came out, he regretted them, for tears sprang to her eyes and twin spots of color blazed in her cheeks. “I’m sorry.”

“No.” She scrambled to her feet. “You are well within your rights to think what you will or even say it too. I don’t fault you for that.” There was so much emotion in her eyes that it was his turn to want to cast up his accounts. “You must do the job that you have been put on this earth to perform. Because you are the best at that.”

If his heart ached anymore, he feared it would break. “Thank you for that,” he forced out in a whisper as he made a few scratches in his notebook. Then he cleared his throat. “In the meanwhile, let’s search for clues. The coroner will be here soon.”

“Right.”

“Here.” Gabriel gave her the handkerchief. “Remove the letter opener and wrap it up. Then go back to the box and retrieve our outerwear.” It went against everything he believed in, everything he’d discovered about Mary since meeting her last December, but he couldn’t have her working the crime scene with him if she was truly compromised.

“Ah. You don’t trust me.” Her hand shook as she gently removed the letter opener from the dead woman’s chest. As she bundled it into the handkerchief, she frowned. “I don’t blame you, Bright, but I’ve told you the truth. I didn’t kill her.” Then she put the letter opener into her reticule. “I also don’t fault you for doing what you must.”

He nodded. “Once I finish there, we will wait for the coroner and then go home.” Suddenly, his appetite had fled. Even though they’d skipped dinner, he didn’t think he could eat a bite after being handed a gruesome murder as well as the knowledge that his soon to be wife could somehow be involved.

With a poorly stifled sigh, Mary quickly fled the scene and went back toward the corridor that would lead to the opera box .

Shoving his feelings deep, Gabriel returned his attention to finishing his examination

of the murder victim. Half stuck in the pool of blood was a calling card with expensive embossed lettering that belonged to a gentleman, and a peer at that. After wiping off as much of the blood as he could, he then tucked the card into his waistcoat pocket.

Hidden in the folds of her gown was a matching reticule, except portions of the bag had signs of wear and use with a few smudges of dirt or soot. In cases like these, the investigator had to look at things with a detached mind; it was best not to consider the person as once alive because then emotions would be involved and that would cloud critical thinking.

Inside the reticule, he found a voucher from a London merchant giving her access to shop credit in a different man's name than was listed on the calling card. There was a folded sheet of paper that contained a brief note of adoration from a Clarence Taylor saying every performance he did was in the hopes she would take notice of him. Clearly, he was an actor. Had she come tonight to see him? Additionally, there was a scrap of paper with an address in Mayfair scribbled across it, but he didn't know who'd written it or why. A different calling card with no name, only an address in Brighton printed on it in embossed, silver ink with the image of a cluster of grapes. It had been hidden into a folded playbill, perhaps one the actor had been in? A small brown bottle of laudanum was next, three quarters empty. Hers or someone else's? At the bottom there was a hairpin, a tarnished brass compact of powder, and finally, a shortbread biscuit, carefully wrapped in a ladies' handkerchief with embroidery at one corner.

The personal effects of a dead woman, and the last objects she had touched and used.

With sadness clinging to his person, Gabriel stood and deposited the items back into the reticule. He would take the whole thing with him. Then he frowned. Her dark hair had been mussed, either from the attack or a different meeting, but the teeth of a metal comb stuck out of the tresses. When he reached down to inspect it, there was a

thin sheen of blood on one of the teeth. Did that mean there had been a struggle and in the process, the attacker had been cut?

It was the first real clue he'd found. After adding the hair comb to the reticule, he sighed. Now the work would truly begin, for once he arrived home, he would need to interrogate Mary, and that was something he never thought he'd be doing on the eve of his wedding.

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Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:56 am

No. 10 Orchard Street

Portman Square

Marylebone, London

The carriage ride back to their townhouse in Mayfair was a silent affair.

It probably didn't need to be, but after seeing that dead body and knowing that her past had been entwined and entrenched so heavily with the other woman's, Mary didn't feel like talking. All the joy from the evening had fled, and now guilt had crept in to mar the night.

For his part, Gabriel occupied the bench opposite in the closed carriage, which was not what he'd done since they'd gotten engaged. Usually, he sat next to her on the same bench, so it spoke to the state of his mind that he'd unconsciously put that space between them. He hadn't said much in the way of the case during the trip, and she didn't blame him, for while he considered her a suspect, he would keep things close to his chest. He kept his head turned, staring out the window at the darkened world the whole of the trip with the dead woman's reticule on his lap. He'd not discussed what he'd found inside and neither had he talked about anything else. In profile, his silhouette was the height of handsome, and only just two hours they had been so happy.

And it nearly broke her heart, for the closeness they'd previously enjoyed had been shoved to the side. Where they both grew and accepted the challenges of working a case together and would feed off each other's energy therein, that was suddenly was

gone, and she felt a bit lost because of it.

To say nothing of the fact that they were to get married tomorrow.

As soon as the carriage rocked to a halt in front of the townhouse, the driver hopped down. He opened the door and put down the steps. Gabriel immediately exited the vehicle, but he was a consummate gentleman and offered a hand to assist her out.

The brief touch of her fingers on his had a wash of tears rushing to her eyes, for she missed the closeness and intimacy she'd had with him hours before when they'd gone out to Covent Garden. When she glanced up into his face, he met her eyes but then looked away before anything meaningful was exchanged. Yes, it was his way of compartmentalizing what had happened tonight in the event that she might be a murderer, and in doing so, he thought to mitigate that emotional bond, but it was almost as if he'd slapped her.

The loss of that connection left her chest aching and her heart trembling.

"Please proceed to the drawing room," he said to her as they navigated the short walkway to the front door. "I shall join you there as soon as I'm able. I would like to put everything I found on the body in a safe place as well as to gather my thoughts."

"Of course." Oh, why did it feel more wretched this time around than it had last December? Then she knew and her heart squeezed. She was in love with him now, they had sought to build a life together, and though she didn't know if that was in jeopardy, it certainly felt as if the whole of their relationship would crumble at the foundation.

The door opened seconds later, and the butler greeted them.

"Welcome home, Mrs. Tomlinson. Inspector," he said as they came into the entry

hall. "Shall I take your outer things? I trust you didn't stay for the second play?"

While she appreciated the man's interest, she wasn't in the mood to make small talk. Before she could answer, Gabriel did that for her.

"For the moment, I'll see to my greatcoat, Davies. We, have, uh, stumbled upon a case tonight, and after examining the body and waiting for the coroner, there are a few things I must do just now."

"Of course, Inspector." He looked at Mary. "Shall I ring for your maid to meet you abovestairs?"

"No thank you, Davies. I will, um, go up in a bit and then ring for her at that time." With a glance at Bright's impassive face, she steeled her spine as she handed the butler her cape. "Though I would appreciate some tea and some cold cuts on a tray sent to my room as soon as you can manage. Then you can retire for the night."

"It will be my pleasure, Mrs. Tomlinson." After bouncing his gaze between her and Gabriel, concern wrinkled his brow. "Is all well?"

"That remains to be seen," Bright said, and with a curt nod, he strode down the corridor toward the staircase.

"More or less," she managed in a broken whisper then moved at a much slower pace toward those same stairs. Ordinarily, when they came in from an evening out, he would tease and flirt with her as they went up together, but not tonight.

All of that had evaporated like dew before the morning sun.

By the time she stepped into the drawing room, the longcase clock in the corridor outside chimed the midnight hour. Though circumstances weren't ideal and all she

wanted to do was go upstairs to her room and cry her eyes out, she would see the interrogation through because she knew she wasn't guilty, and she realized Bright was only doing his job.

That didn't make it any easier to swallow.

Neither did the room that had been transformed and decorated for the nuptial ceremony on the morrow—or rather later today. Vases full of hothouse flowers—sunflowers, roses, lilies, lilies of the valley, and various varieties of greenery to set off the flowers—had been strategically placed about the room. The mantel over the fireplace had a floral swag resting upon it. Everywhere she glanced, there were either containers of flowers or bows made out of white and pastel-colored ribbons. On one of the smaller tables that would serve as the place where they would sign the registry, a white lace tablecloth had been placed with a crystal bowl filled with roses. The scent of the flowers permeated the entire space, and ordinarily the whole aesthetic would have filled her with excitement and joy.

Her gaze went to one of the maids still working in the room. Why hadn't the girls not yet sought their own beds? "How did you know to decorate in here?"

Surprise went through the girl's expression. "Inspector Bright wished to have this room transformed into a bower for the ceremony tomorrow." She smiled. "Mr. Davies shared with us sketches of where we should put things. Shortly before guests arrive in the morning, we're to sprinkle rose petals on the floor."

"Oh." Her heart skipped a beat. He was just so romantic and thoughtful. The juxtaposition of the happiness that they were supposed to experience together in a mere ten hours compared to the wretchedness of the present moment had her fighting back tears. "Well, it's lovely, but it's also quite late. You two get to bed. There is so much to do before the ceremony." Unexpectedly, her voice broke on the last word, for would he still wish to marry her after all was said and done?

I am afraid to know the answer to that.

No sooner had the maids exited the drawing room and Mary settled on a low sofa than Gabriel came into the room. There was none of his customary greetings and neither did he immediately come to her location to kiss her. The lack of that nicety worked to further separate her from him.

“Thank you for agreeing to meet with me,” he said as he dropped into the chair closest to where she was on the sofa.

“For the love of God, Bright, please stop.” She couldn’t quite keep the irritation from her voice. “After all we have been through together, after all we are together, we are hardly strangers. I don’t appreciate being treated as a suspect on your list.”

“I apologize.” With a sigh, he took his leatherbound notebook from the interior pocket of his tailcoat as well as the small pencil he always used. Finally, he met her gaze. “This is an uncomfortable place to be, as we both know.” He opened the notebook and found a clear page. “When I’m faced with this sort of thing, my mind immediately shuts down any emotional connection in order to concentrate on the task at hand.”

“To protect yourself, because you have been hurt by a woman before.” She knew all about his last wife, and it broke her heart to think that he might assume she would betray him as well.

A couple of heartbeats passed before he spoke again. “Perhaps.”

“I don’t need the inspector in this moment; I need my fiancé,” she said in a barely audible voice as she stared at him. “Please, Gabriel.”

Emotions flitted over his face as duty warred with his personal involvement, finally

settling on resignation. “Let us suffer through this first. Then we can hopefully put it behind us, and I can return to the man you need.” As he pressed his lips together, he rested his gaze on her with speculation as well as love.

It humbled her, gave her hope that they would still be all right.

“Walk me through your history with Theresa Kessler.”

Just hearing the name spoken aloud gave her both feelings of dread and anger. They collided within her chest to make her almost physically ill. After a few moments of wrestling with those emotions, Mary blew out a breath. “I have told you bits and pieces since we’ve been together.” She hated that once again he had his notebook out and was questioning her about a murder. That wasn’t how she’d envisioned this night ending; memories of their intimacy from earlier this evening seemed a lifetime ago.

“I know.” Kindness reflected in his eyes. “Sweeting, you know why I must do this.”

The fact he’d used an endearment worked to further return her confidence. “I don’t want to talk about her.”

“No one ever wants the skeletons of their past to come out, but I must insist.”

“All right.” Tears welled in her eyes, and she nodded. When he gave her a handkerchief—obviously he’d secured another one before he’d come into the room—she accepted it and dabbed at the corners of her eyes. “A few years into my marriage with Benjamin, it was obvious his attentions were beginning to stray.”

“Due to your inability to conceive.” It wasn’t a question .

“Yes.” She nodded, and though a stab of pain went through her heart, she had long ago made peace with that. “However, I’d wager that even if I could conceive, he

would have strayed. Ben had a roving eye, and I didn't have much to recommend me." Silence reigned between them for a few moments before she spoke again. "I'd already told you that to his flawed way of thinking, because I enjoyed congenial relations, he figured that was the reason for my barren state. After that, he decided to punish me by bringing courtesans home and forcing me to watch him bed them. He said lightskirts didn't enjoy coitus and yet they were always finding themselves with child."

"I'm sorry to have to drag you back through that history," he said in a low voice, and when he gave her that special grin he only reserved for her, another round of tears fell to her cheeks.

"About halfway through my marriage, Theresa came into my life. Ben had grown tired of courtesans and had taken her as a mistress." She frowned and trained her attention on the handkerchief in her hand, pleating it in her lap. "My husband was shameless. At one point, he installed Theresa in the house as a live-in mistress. He made no secret that he was bedding her every chance he got. I think he considered it a game or punishment for me to have her underfoot, to take dinner with her, and sometimes to let her wear my clothing when he wanted to take her out into Town."

"I'll wager that made you angry," Gabriel said as he jotted down a few notes.

"Of course it did!" In some pique, Mary glared at him. "What kind of woman did you think I was? What sort of woman would even allow that in her own house?" Those had been horrible days, humiliating days. Each one broke her heart and killed a little bit of her dream of being a wife, a mother, and having a doting husband.

"Were you ever rude or aggressive toward Miss Kessler during the times she was in your home?"

"Not at first. I was still too stunned at Ben's effrontery and audacity." She dabbed at

the corners of her eyes with the handkerchief again. The fabric smelled of Gabriel, and that sandalwood and orange had her far too emotional once more. “It might sound odd, but after having her in the house for months, I was both ambivalent toward her, but I also hated her presence. When I wasn’t keeping accounts for my father, I spent time at home.”

“Was your husband there at those times?”

“Not during the day. He was busy with his own business, but Theresa was there, and she attempted to strike up a friendship. At first, I was dead set against that, wanted nothing to do with the woman who’d stolen my husband. However, she persisted, and I was lonely, so I began to warm toward her.” Perhaps that had been a mistake, but there was nothing to do about it. “I was desperate for human interaction, for a friend, for assurances that it wasn’t me who had failed in every aspect of life.”

“Did the friendship continue?” He continued to scribble a few notes while she talked.

“Despite my initial protests regarding it, yes. We got on well enough, for a married woman with her husband’s mistress. It seemed Ben didn’t treat her any better than he’d treated me, and he bedded her nearly every night.” Mary shrugged. It was the last horrid layer of her past she’d not yet told Gabriel about, and it was embarrassing. “Did I still resent her and the attention he lavished on her? Of course; I was only human. But during those months, I came to realize she hadn’t truly stolen Ben from me. We had problems in our relationship, and they had been there from the first. I just hadn’t wanted to see them, was blinded by being a new wife and hoping to be a mother.”

The scratch of Gabriel’s pencil stopped. He gazed at her with a slight frown and compassion shadowing his eyes. “I am so sorry, Mary. What you survived... What you were subjected to at the hands of that buffoon...” With the shake of his head, he sighed. “No one should ever need to do that.”

“That was my life at the time. Frankly, it kept Ben’s attention from me, and as the months and years went by, that was most welcome.”

“You said Miss Kessler had stolen your things? Can you elaborate?”

She nodded. “After that first year, Theresa started putting on airs the more Ben spent time with her over me. It was as if our domestic roles had reversed, somehow. Borrowing clothes was no longer good enough for her; she started taking them, adding them to her own collection. She took possession of my shoes and fripperies, she stole my traveling case that contained my stationery as well as my letter opener.” As she spoke, she withdrew the wrapped murder weapon from her reticule and set it on the table in front of her. “Little by little, I was being erased from life.”

“Did you ever wish to kill Miss Kessler during that time? Perhaps even with that same letter opener?”

She blew out a breath. “I wouldn’t have been human if I didn’t, yet I kept myself shut away hoping something would change. By the time Ben had tired of Theresa as a mistress, half of all the things I’d owned had been stolen. After that, I was numb to life. I had no more emotions to give. Thankfully, Ben expired about a year following.”

“Who ended the relationship between your husband and Miss Kessler? ”

“I honestly couldn’t say. One morning, I woke up to find her gone and Ben in a horrid mood. He accused me of being a bad influence on her, that she’d left him and had taken whatever would fit into her trunk.”

“And you never heard from her after that?”

“No.” Mary shook her head. “I often wondered what happened to her but figured

she'd found another, wealthier and more benevolent protector."

"No doubt she did. Women like Miss Kessler wouldn't be without coin for long." Heavy silence brewed between them for a bit as Gabriel finished writing up his notes. "I have no further questions regarding her."

"Oh, thank God." She nearly crumpled with relief but kept holding onto the handkerchief. When she looked at him, saw the relief in his own expression, she wanted to cry all over again. "You have every right not to trust me or even believe my story. I understand that, and interrogation is part of your job. However, what I told you was the truth. There was no love lost between me and her, but that didn't mean I wanted her dead—seriously. In an odd way, I felt sorry for her, because she was merely a younger version of me, and we were used by the same man." It had been a powerful revelation at the time. "There was no future there for either of us."

"Well, the future you do have is considerably brighter than that." Long moments of silence stretched between them while the long case clock struck the one o'clock hour.

"Where were you in the brief time I fell asleep during the play?"

She shot him a look brimming with annoyance. "Stopping your sorry arse from toppling out of your chair. If I'd gone out to kill Theresa, you would have embarrassed yourself by sprawling on the floor."

"Fair enough." At least she hadn't lost her spark or her tart mouthed responses. He tamped the urge to chuckle, for he adored when she was ruffled. "Every day when I work cases, I see people at their worst. I talk with people who have lost everything. I am forced to sit with people who are either hiding their true reactions because they're guilty or because they don't know how to act with their grief. It is a rather grim task most of the time." He held her gaze as he tucked his notebook and pencil into his pocket. "However, with you, though this may be your worst moment, it doesn't mean

you're defeated. There is still a spark of fight in your eyes. You wish for me to know the truth as much as I want to find it. That alone sets you apart from many of the people I interview."

They were wise, logical words, but they managed to set her at ease. "Then you realize I did not kill this woman. "

"I do." He nodded and a faint grin curved his lips. "I knew midway into questioning you."

She frowned. "Then why go through the farce?"

Gabriel shrugged, and his tailcoat briefly pulled taut across his shoulders. "I had to do my due diligence as an inspector. I owe it to the dead woman." When she would have protested, he held up a hand. "Horrible person or not, she died violently and not of her own devices. Surely someone somewhere mourns her loss."

"I couldn't say." The story was far too pathetic when forced to look at it like that. But there was another thought sitting uppermost in her mind that she couldn't be rid of.

"I intend to work this case."

"Why?"

"Because no one else will care about a prostitute and a thief." Shadows filled his eyes. "Everyone deserves justice."

"You are a good man, Bright." Perhaps it was gauche to ask, but she couldn't help it. The invisible divide suddenly between them had shaken her to the core. "Do you still wish to marry me?"

“Ah, Mary.” Gabriel stood up from his chair, took a step toward her, and offered her a hand. “Nothing will prevent me from wedding you, from speaking vows to you in the morning. Not even this.”

As if a huge weight had been released from her shoulders, Mary stared up at him as she slipped her fingers into his palm. When he tugged her to her feet, she tamped down on a sigh. “Why?”

The grin he flashed caused her heartbeat to accelerate. “Because I know in my heart you didn’t kill this woman; you aren’t that sort. And I also know in my soul that I love you no matter what.” Raising her hand to his lips, he kissed the back. “We are all human and make mistakes; we all have a past. Some of those branches of the past extend far and snag many people. That is life, but I’m still supporting you. Nothing will change that. Nothing will ever change that, and we will puzzle our way through this together. As we always do.”

“As partners,” she managed to choke out as tears welled in her eyes.

“Absolutely.”

Then she was in his arms, and he held her tight against him for many long moments. She melted into the solid support of him, reveled in the strength of his arms around her and the safety he represented. Eventually, she pulled a bit away and looked up to meet his gaze. Gabriel lowered his head and claimed her lips in a gentle kiss that was much like receiving a benediction from God himself.

After a few moments, he broke the embrace and stepped away while she mourned the loss of his warmth and connection. “It is late. You should retire.”

“Will you, uh, join me tonight?” Not that she wanted bedsport but because she hoped for his calming presence.

“I will not, for I’m going to my rooms at the Albany.” His expression was far too grim, which caused her heart to plummet. “Fear not. It is not due to what transpired at the opera tonight. I merely need to pack the remainder of my belongings, plus my suit for tomorrow is there. My valet was supposed to have it pressed tonight. Besides,” he winked, “I don’t wish to see you ahead of the ceremony.”

At least it was a believable explanation. “You are far too romantic.” And she didn’t deserve him. He needed someone far better than her.

Once more, he tugged her into his arms. “Hush, love.” He held her. “I can hear you thinking.”

“Oh?”

“You are my equal in every way, and we are perfectly matched for each other.” He pressed his lips to her forehead before staring into her eyes. “Stop diminishing yourself because of what your first husband did to you or made you believe. You deserve every good thing, and if I need to spend the rest of my life convincing you, I will.”

She didn’t answer, for she couldn’t. A tear fell to her cheek. “It has been quite an emotional day.”

“Agreed.” After a quick kiss to her lips, he set her away. “Go upstairs. I will see you in the morning.”

“Bright?”

“Hmm?”

“I love you.” Every action, every word of his spoke volumes and widened the

contrast between him and her first husband.

“I love you too. Nothing will change that.”

“You should probably keep the letter opener.”

“Why? As evidence of murder?”

“No, because it belongs to your family.”

For a few moments, he stared at her. “ You are my family, Mary. Objects from the Stanwick estate don’t matter to me.”

“Oh!” Then she fled to her rooms, for there was only so much one woman could bear in the span of a handful of hours. Once she closed the door behind her, she dissolved into a torrent of tears.

Not long after, her maid came in, no doubt to help her change. “Oh, Mrs. Tomlinson, it’s adorable you’re a watering pot on the eve of your marriage.” Clearly, she misunderstood the reason for the emotion. “It gives me hope for my own prospects.” When she reached Mary’s position, she drew her away from the door. “Come. Let’s make you comfortable. I brought up a tray for you...”

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Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:56 am

October 16. 1819

The Albany,

Mayfair, London

At the seven o'clock hour in the morning, Gabriel stood not so patiently while his valet removed every speck of lint and hair from his tailcoat.

"I believe all is well with the tailcoat, Jameson," he said as he peered into the cheval glass. All traces of personal items and clothing had already been packed into trunks, ready to be taken over to his new home. "I am quite passable already."

"While that is true, Inspector, you are getting married in a few hours. What you wear and how you wear it is a reflection of me." With another sweep of the back of the tailcoat, Jameson nodded and pronounced him finished. "How are the nerves this morning?"

He turned about to regard the valet, the man who'd been his friend since they served in the military together seemingly ages ago. "They are making themselves known quite fiercely, I don't mind saying. The last time I did this, I'd hoped it would last forever and that everything would have been ideal, when it was everything but."

When he'd met Albert Jameson, the man who, it was claimed, had a lucky streak which extended to everyone around him, he'd been in sore need of a friend, for war was miserable and lonely. Those in his regiment were far more relaxed than those who weren't, and thanks to whatever stroke of fortune or star the man had been born

under, those rumors largely remained true.

They'd immediately connected, and a close friendship formed. By the time Gabriel had left the military, Jameson remained behind, but their friendship had only grown and deepened. When the other man finally ended his career as a captain and had been forced to return to England with a busted knee that resulted in the use of a prosthetic and a cane, Gabriel had been all too willing to offer him employment, such as it was.

And they had been contemporaries ever since. Jameson had been with him through the absolute wreck of his first marriage as well as the time when he'd made his career in Bow Street. And during everything in between, he could always rely on the valet to remain steadfast.

"I fully believe this union will be vastly different than your last," the other man said with a grin. He hobbled over to a bureau and took a stickpin from a shallow dish on top. "Merely due to the fact that the women are different."

"This is quite true, my friend." Gabriel submitted to having the sapphire ornament placed in the folds of his cravat, for it had been a gift from Mary for his birthday this year. "Mary is one of a kind." A sliver of doubt went through his person, for not six hours earlier, they'd found the dead body of her former husband's mistress, which placed her as the number one suspect in the case. It was too early in the investigation to have assembled a list of other suspects. "However, I fear this isn't the most ideal start to a wedding," he admitted in a voice graveled with emotion. Briefly, he told the valet what had occurred earlier.

To Jameson's credit, he didn't immediately respond, but his eyebrows rose in surprise. Then a low whistle emanated from him. "You certainly know how to complicate what should be an easy morning."

"I can only be who I am, my friend." He frowned. "I should have stayed last night,

but I didn't. My mind wasn't in a good place."

"You think she is the killer? "

"No, of course not!" Gabriel shook his head. "I just didn't want to be hurt again... not that she would do such a thing, and I supposed I panicked."

"While that is understandable, those fears will never be realized."

"I know. During the course of the interrogation, she told me an emotional, humiliating tale, and if I hadn't already been in love with her, that story would have clenched my regard." He shook his head as his heart squeezed. "In all honesty, we are closer now, and I can't wait to marry her, to protect her." Raising his gaze to his valet's, he sighed. "To give her everything she never had with him ."

"You are a good man, Inspector." For long moments, Jameson stared at him. "Listen, I have known you for many years, and from all I've seen, you are the best version of yourself when Mrs. Tomlinson is around." He offered a grin. "You deserve to have happiness in your life just as much as she does."

"I appreciate that, but there is this case..."

The valet dropped a hand on Gabriel's shoulder. "Put aside murder for a few days, my friend. It can wait. Mrs. Tomlinson needs you more, and unless I miss my guess, you need her as well."

That was the truth, but he also couldn't let a crime go unattended. "I will strike a balance, I promise." Then he grabbed his gloves, top hat, and greatcoat. "Will you come to the ceremony?"

"Of course. I was there for your last wedding, and there is no way I would miss this

one; I have a good feeling about it.” The valet stepped away. “I will ride over with our luggage and other things. After the ceremony, I will unpack in your rooms. There is nothing for you to worry over beyond that.”

“I’m glad to have you with me on this leg of the journey, Jameson.” And he hoped to God his relationship with Mary would survive this patch of rockiness.

No. 10 Orchard Street

Portman Square

Marylebone, London

Two hours later, when Gabriel arrived at Mary’s townhouse—their home—a sense of belonging filled his being, and he couldn’t help his grin as he handed over his outer things.

“Hallo, Davies. Where is Mrs. Tomlinson?” Though he couldn’t wait to see her, he didn’t want to ruin his first glimpse of her in the wedding finery she’d chosen, not even to reassure her—and himself—that all was well between them .

“From what I’ve gathered, she is still attending to her toilette and asked not to be disturbed.”

“Very good. After all, this is a most important day.” The agony and angst from last evening had nearly left his system, and his customary good cheer was slowly returning. He removed his gloves and tucked them partway into his waistcoat pocket. “I don’t suppose I could sneak into the kitchen and steal a few tarts while Cook isn’t looking?”

“That is quite doubtful, Inspector.” The butler chuckled. “She has practically ordered

everyone away who isn't connected to her domain. Last minute details apparently make her quite temperamental."

"I can just imagine, so I guess I'll wait until breakfast."

"It will be worth the wait."

"So will everything scheduled this morning," he said with a wink. "Carry on, Davies, and be sure to let me know when the first guests begin to arrive." With a wave, Gabriel continued upstairs to the third level. The first person he saw in the corridor was Cassandra. "Well, hallo, poppet. Don't you look like a pretty little tulip?" His heart squeezed, for she resembled a young lady. Surely it was too soon for all that. Wasn't she yet a child? No, he wasn't prepared for her to grow up so soon, especially when she hadn't fully acclimated to their household.

Cassandra, as near as they could figure, was eight years old, and even though she'd been in their household for six months, still quite skinny, or perhaps willowy was a more apt term. She did enjoy eating, and now there was color in her cheeks and a brightness in her Arctic blue eyes that hadn't been there before. Her wheat-blond hair was shiny and lustrous, and today it had been braided with those plaits wrapped about her head and pinned like a coronet. A dress of light blue silk covered her lithe frame; a sash about her waist had been fixed in a large bow in the back. Smart matching slippers graced her feet.

Looking at her, one would never know she had previously been an urchin on the streets.

"Are tulips a beautiful flower?" One thing about Cassandra was the fact she always asked questions to learn and satisfy her curiosity about life.

"They truly are." Perhaps this was the perfect time to have a chat with her ahead of

the ceremony. “Why don’t you come with me into the family parlor?”

“Why?” She pulled the rag rabbit he’d given her from the folds of her skirting, and held it close to her chest. “Have I done something wrong? ”

“Of course not. I merely wish to talk with you.” It seemed there was still much work to do with her before she felt fully comfortable.

“All right.”

Once inside the private parlor, Gabriel sat on one of the low sofas. This room, perhaps more than any other in the house, reminded him of Mary, for the shades of blue and mauve were extensions of her personality. When he patted the cushion next to him, Cassandra promptly came over and perched primly on the edge of it beside him.

“Will you attend the nuptial ceremony this morning?”

She smoothed her free hand over her skirting. “Miss Oliver said that I might, since you and Mary are acting as my parents.”

The governess would need to be met with, and soon. “Miss Oliver is wrong in that. We are not acting as your parents; we are your parents. Mary and I love you very much, and we are doing our best to make you comfortable here as our daughter.”

She nodded but watched him with wide eyes. “Miss Oliver also said that it was good she was here for me.”

“Oh, why?”

Her shrug lifted her thin shoulders. “She said once you wed Mary, you won’t have

much time for me, and that I would be lost in the shuffle without her.”

Bloody hell , the woman needed a dressing down like no other. In fact, once he spoke to Mary, he would strongly suggest they sack Miss Oliver and hire someone else.

Squashing the urge to show his ire, Gabriel sighed. “That isn’t true at all, poppet. You will not be lost once Mary and I wed. In fact, we will all finally be a solid family together, a family who supports and cares for each other.”

She watched his face, and he hoped to God she found something encouraging and comforting there. “Do you love Mrs. Tomlinson?” As she spoke, she held her rag rabbit tighter against her side.

“More than anything. It took me a long time to find the woman who was meant for me, but I did, and I am quite happy.” He smiled at her. “She is a lovely person, Cassandra, and she wants nothing more than for us to be a family.” God, it was ludicrous how much he yearned to hear the girl call him “papa” but he would wait until she was ready. “Do you think there will come a time when you might accept her as your mother?”

For long moments, she petted the rabbit’s ears then she moved the stuffed toy into her lap and put a hand on its belly. Already, the ivory animal appeared well-worn. She studied him with wisdom far beyond her years in those eyes. Finally, she shrugged. “I enjoy living here, and my bed is lovely.” When she gifted him with a rare smile, he was nearly bowled over, for it was quite powerful. “I like Mary. She is interesting and smells good.” Her brow furrowed as she frowned. “But mothers leave, Inspector.”

“Pardon?”

A tiny huff came from her. “Mothers decide they don’t want their children and leave them in dark and frightening places. I don’t want Mary to be my mother.”

Tiny cracks went through his heart and brought with them tiny aches. But he kept his expression neutral. “I can understand that.” Yet surprise and a bit of encouragement took hold in his chest. It was the first time the girl had spoken of something hearkening back to her past. “Mary is not like that, though. She is steadfast and true. Never will she leave you. Not ever.”

And neither would she leave him. There was a certain comfort there.

“She brings me a jam tart every morning before breakfast.” The ghost of a smile curved her pale pink lips.

Gabriel grinned, for it was one of Mary’s ways of showing her affection in the hopes the girl would trust her. “What do you want her to be to you?”

“She can be who she is—Mary. That is her name. I am Cassandra to her because that is my name.”

“Right.” Once more, he stifled a sigh. The poor child was in desperate need of love and care and protection. Was she waiting for permission in order to get close to them? What more could they do to convince her she wasn’t in danger and she wasn’t going to be cast off again? “In an odd way, that makes sense.” Daring much, he patted her hand. At least she didn’t pull away. “I know your soul is wounded; I have felt that myself as well for long years, but Mary made me see things in a different way. She patched up the holes in my soul, and she broke through the wall I put around my heart.”

“How?”

It was his turn to shrug. “Simply from being here, for waiting, for hoping, for loving me.”

“Oh.” She didn’t say anything else.

“I hope you will let her do the same for you, but in the meanwhile, please know that you are safe here with us. Nothing will harm you. And if you ever doubt or worry, remember that Mary and I love you so much and want you to have a lovely life with us, so we can be a family.” If he wasn’t careful, he’d show far too much emotion, and that might spook her.

Another handful of heartbeats went by as she assessed him. “Miss Oliver said adults shouldn’t coddle children.”

In that moment, he had nothing good to say about Cassandra’s governess. “That is her opinion, and I shall talk to her about it, but I have never lied to you. Mary and I run our household as we see fit, and we want everyone here to feel welcomed, content, and safe. If being kind to someone makes them feel better, there is no harm.” And damn it all, if he wanted to coddle and pamper and spoil his adopted daughter, that was his right. She’d been deprived of all of it but wouldn’t be from him.

For long moments, she was quiet as she fussed with the rag rabbit’s ears. Finally, Cassandra nodded. “Thank you for taking me in, Inspector. You and Mary make me feel... better.”

And his heart broke all over again, for there was still hope they were getting through to her. In fact, he loved her even more than he had when they’d first taken her in. “I’m glad to hear that.”

She nodded and bestowed a faint smile on him. In that, she resembled an angel. “Inspector?”

“Hmm?”

“May I give you a hug?”

This time moisture did fill his eyes, but he nodded as he blinked it away. “Only if you wish it.” This was also the first time she’d made such an overture.

The girl leaned over, wrapped her delicate arms around his right arm and hung on tight. When it didn’t appear she wanted to move, he dared to slip that arm around her shoulders and scooped her into his side. After a few seconds of holding herself taut and stiff, she relaxed into his hold with a barely audible sigh. Then she burrowed there for a bit before murmuring, “You smell good.”

“Thank you.” They remained like that for a few moments, then the girl stirred, and the moment was broken. “You’d best scoot, poppet. The ceremony will begin soon. Oh, and you might want to tell Mary good luck. She is probably nervous,” he said with a wink. Perhaps she would have a bonding moment with Mary as well.

“I will.” With a half-smile, she scurried from the room as Gabriel trailed after her, and as he watched, she moved along the corridor, pausing before the door to the suite he shared with Mary. Seconds later, she lifted a delicate hand and knocked on the panel. She must have been given permission, for she pressed the latch and then hesitantly went inside.

It took more than a few moments for him to compose himself, for that had been quite the breakthrough, and one he hoped would continue. Afterward, he tugged on the bottom of his tailcoat, brushed a piece of lint from his sleeve, and then made his way to the second level and to the drawing room where some of the guests were assembling.

The first couple his gaze landed upon was his brother and sister-in-law—Viscount and Viscountess Stanwick. In recent months, some of the animosity between him and his brother had cleared, but he still wasn’t fond of the man.

“Hallo, Stanwick. My lady,” he said as he approached them.

They both greeted him. The viscount extended a hand.

“I’m happy for you, brother. You are marrying a fine woman.”

“Thank you. I quite agree.” As he shook his brother’s hand, he caught a twinge of annoyance in the viscountess’ expression. Clearly, she was still jealous over the fact that Mary and Frances indulged in a summer tryst ages ago, before either of them had married. “I’m glad to finally make her mine.”

And serve warning to his brother’s wandering eye that he would not be allowed in a room with her alone ever again.

“It is lovely that you have decided to marry again. I doubted this day would come.”

“As did I.” Gabriel nodded as more guests trickled into the room. “We shall speak later. Make yourselves comfortable.”

For the next few minutes, he personally greeted a few of his acquaintances from Bow Street. There was much good-natured teasing between them, and each one buoyed his spirit. Then Mary’s brother entered the room.

“Good morning, Ambassador Swanson,” he said as he drifted over to the other man who was the English ambassador to Austria.

“Do please call me William.” When the man smiled, he faintly resembled Mary in the eyes and lips. “I am so pleased you are marrying my sister today. Each time I see her, she glows and speaks highly of you.”

Heat went up the back of Gabriel’s neck. “That is good to know. Mary is the best of

all women, and I'm proud to say she'll soon be my wife." He glanced about the room. "Miss Swanson couldn't make it?"

"I'm afraid not. My daughter is facing a couple of exams that she couldn't miss, but she wrote and told me to tell you she would see you both during the Christmastide holidays."

"Ah, well, we look forward to seeing her. My son should be in London then as well."

Eventually, he moved away when an older man and a younger man came into the room with Davies trailing behind.

"Mr. Kirkland, the rector, and his clerk, Mr. Marks."

"Thank you, Davies." Gabriel greeted the two newcomers. "Welcome, welcome. I'm pleased to meet you both and thank you for coming this morning."

The rector was tall and thin with a gray fringe of hair around a bald spot while the clerk was a portly shorter man whose collar points were nearly excessively high.

"I'm glad we can be of service," Mr. Kirkland said with a nod. "It's quite a lovely room. Perhaps we'll conduct the ceremony near the fireplace? The warmth will be most welcome since it's once more raining."

"I'm happy to go wherever you are most comfortable." He and Mary had decided to have the ceremony in this townhouse because they had both been married before and didn't want to have a church ceremony this time around. They'd wanted a private ceremony merely for themselves, and he'd vowed not to ask for the loan of his brother's drawing room.

Then he addressed Mr. Marks. "There is a table set up near the windows for you to

use for the registry and any other documentation you shall need.”

“Thank you.” His deep-set eyes widened. “And we are invited to the wedding breakfast?” As he spoke, the man’s stomach released a loud growl.

“Of course. You both are. Enjoy as much as you’d like.” He waved a hand toward the fireplace as other guests came into the room. “Let’s get you settled.”

As he made desultory conversation with the rector, Cassandra came into the room. Somehow, she’d come upon a small bouquet of roses and lilies, perhaps made from some of the arrangements about the room. She was such an angelic cherub that he couldn’t help but smile at her. When she caught sight of him, the girl gave him a tiny grin and then hurried to perch on a chair nearby.

Seconds later, Gabriel completely lost the ability to speak or draw breath, for Mary was there, pausing ever so slightly in the doorway.

Good heavens, she’s beautiful.

Her gown was of ivory velvet with silver embroidery and seed pearls sewn over the skirting as well as along the bodice. The neckline showed a decent amount of décolletage that had awareness shivering over his person. The long sleeves tapered at the wrist. Silver satin slippers matched the embroidery work and had also been enhanced with pearls, and with each step, they emphasized how petite her feet were. A strand of small pearls was woven into her upswept blonde hair while another rested around her neck, emphasizing how delicate her features truly were.

And she is about to be mine.

Murmurs of appreciation floated through the air, and when Mary reached his location, he finally found his voice.

“There is nothing quite as lovely on the earth this morning as you in that gown.” He reached for one of her hands—she hadn’t worn gloves so the topaz engagement ring he’d given her winked in the candlelight—and brought the back of it to his lips. “Truly, Mary, you outshine every woman in London. ”

A blush of pink stained her cheeks. “Such gammon, Bright,” she whispered, before greeting the rector, and they spoke for a few moments.

He happened to glance at Cassandra, and his heart squeezed, for the girl regarded Mary with wide eyes and just a tiny bit of adoration in those depths that he had hoped she would soon come ‘round to showing affection for Mary. Her governess Miss Oliver had taken a seat toward the rear of the room, and he made a mental note to speak with Mary regarding the woman.

When she transferred her gaze back to him, Gabriel forced a swallow into his suddenly dry throat. “You are quite handsome this morning, and I’m glad.”

“Why?”

“Because after the events of last night, the effect was spoiled for me, but now you are here, and you still wish to wed me.” Her voice caught and she said nothing more, yet her chin trembled.

“Ah, sweeting.” His heart squeezed, for there was nothing he wouldn’t do for this woman. “Marrying you right now is the single most important thing on my schedule.”

Softly, Mr. Kirkland cleared his throat while his clerk handed him a linen-bound copy of the Book of Common Prayer . “Are the two of you ready to begin, or are we waiting on others to arrive?”

He glanced about the room and then met her gaze. “I am more than ready to marry

this beautiful woman.” Then he looked at the rector. “I believe all our guests are here.”

And he was anxious to begin.

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Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:56 am

Mary couldn't stop stealing looks at her soon to be husband. After a relatively sleepless night and more than a few rounds of tears, she was exhausted, both mentally and physically, but Gabriel was as fresh and vital as if he were a younger man.

She brushed a speck of lint on his sleeve. "You are so handsome I could just eat you up." Oh, and he smelled good too. Those scents of sandalwood and citrus threatened to intoxicate her.

His low chuckle had need twisting down her spine. "At least wait until after the ceremony to have your wicked way with me, sweetening."

Heat crashed into her cheeks. If he would tease her, then they were very nearly back to good, weren't they? "You are sure you still wish to marry me?"

"When I make a promise, I always keep it." He put his lips to the shell of her ear. "The only thing you require is a bouquet of flowers. How remiss of me not to have brought you some. You should match the room I've had decorated especially for you."

"It's quite lovely. I absolutely adore the decorations in here." Her pulse quickened, for his teasing sent flutters through her belly. "I fully intend to press some of these flowers to remember this day." And hopefully block out some of the less savory memories besetting her.

"Good idea." Dressed in another tailcoat and black silk breeches—thank goodness they were different from what he'd been wearing the night before—with a waistcoat of gold brocade, he was every inch the handsome second son of a viscount. He stood

with his back ramrod straight, and that military bearing of his past was quite obvious in the posture.

His valet had done a wonderful job arranging Gabriel's hair into some semblance of a popular style, yet even light pomade couldn't tame the curls in that thick brown hair. Slight glints of silver at his temples had marked the passage of time. Each time he glanced at her, he smiled and the delicate skin framing his eyes crinkled, and there was an admirable ease about him, a sure confidence she admired and wished he would impart to her.

When her gaze dropped to the snowy folds of his cravat, she sucked in a quick breath, for he wore the sapphire stickpin she'd given him on his birthday earlier this year. That had to mean something .

"You wore the pin," she whispered and lifted a hand to touch the oval cabochon with a fingertip.

"At Jameson's insistence. It seemed needed for today." As those sensual lips curved into yet another grin, flutters of need went through her lower belly. "Shall we get on with the ceremony? I am most anxious to wed you." There was no denying the excitement in his voice or the intensity in his hazel eyes.

"Yes, I would quite enjoy that." This day had been a long time coming, yet she couldn't help wonder if their relationship had been slightly tainted or shifted after the events of last night. Only time would tell.

He nodded at Mr. Kirkland. "We are ready."

"Very good, Inspector." The man glanced about the room. "If everyone could please settle in? The nuptial couple would like to begin."

A brief wave of sadness crept over Mary, for her parents were both dead, and she would have liked them to see that she was finally happy with the partner she'd chosen on her own.

Gabriel patted her hand that rested in the crook of his elbow. "Not long now, sweeting," he said in a barely audible whisper.

She gave him a small smile. Would he truly mean the words he spoke to her?

The rector opened to a page he wanted in the Book of Common Prayer . No doubt he knew the words by heart, much as she did with her favorite books and fairy stories. She and Gabriel turned toward him as he situated himself in front of the fireplace. Behind them, their guests settled into chairs and sofas.

"Dearly beloved, we are gathered together here in the sight of God, and in the face of this assembly, to join together this Man and this Woman in holy Matrimony; which is an honorable estate, instituted of God in the time of man's innocency, signifying unto us the mystical union that is betwixt Christ and his Church..."

Despite her best efforts, Mary's mind began to drift. Though she was excited to speak her vows, she was also quite apprehensive. The last time she'd done this, it had ended in heartbreak and disaster. That union had been full of broken dreams, disgust, and fear. Yes, Gabriel had given her countless reasons why he was the direct opposite of her first husband, but there was always that tiny worm of doubt at the back of her mind.

Regardless, in mere moments, she would wed the inspector. It was what she'd dreamed of from the moment they'd been engaged last spring, but no matter how hard she tried, the happiness and joy she'd expected wouldn't engulf her fully due to the pall of finding the body of her husband's mistress last night .

How would this reflect on Bright's ability to gain future clients' trust? Would it hinder him from consulting on cases and making his living doing so? Her hard-won confidence plummeted. Never had she felt so low. Perhaps this wasn't a good idea. Indeed, her past could hold him back—

"Mary?" Gabriel softly cleared his throat. He touched a hand to hers, and that tiny connection scattered her frantic and maudlin thoughts. "No woolgathering today of all days." Amusement threaded through the barely audible whisper.

The rector centered his gaze on Gabriel. "Wilt thou have this Woman to thy wedded Wife, to live together after God's ordinance in the holy estate of Matrimony? Wilt thou love her, comfort her, honor, and keep her in sickness and in health; and, forsaking all others, keep thee only unto her, so long as ye both shall live?"

Mary's heartbeat danced in a frantic rhythm. She well-remembered those sacred words from the last time, but now that she knew what they meant, she held her breath as her gaze flew to his face. Would he go through with his promise?

In a clear voice, Gabriel answered, "I will."

A shiver of relief edged down her spine, but there was no time to wonder, for the rector addressed her.

"Wilt thou have this Man to thy wedded Husband, to live together after God's ordinance in the holy estate of Matrimony? Wilt thou obey him, and serve him, love, honor, and keep him in sickness and in health; and, forsaking all others, keep thee only unto him, so long as ye both shall live?"

Obey, serve, and honor. Those words sent a tiny shiver of fear down her spine, for they'd been thrown in her face by Benjamin too many times when he'd accused her of not doing any of that by him. Would Bright become a different sort of man once

they were wed?

When she peered upward into his face, saw the expectant light in his eyes and the slight curve of his lips as if knew a jolly secret, she sighed. He was truly a spectacular man. “I will, for I think I have been waiting for a man like him all my life.” Her answer came out breathless and in a whisper, for tears crowded in her throat.

Then Gabriel was instructed to take her right hand in his right one, and hers shook so badly that he gently squeezed her fingers. Tendrils of calm emanated upward from the point of contact. When her breath came in tiny pants, he leaned into her, put his lips to her ear and whispered, “I promise this will not be a prison like your last. There is nothing I won’t do for you.”

Her heart trembled—she trembled. At the last second, Mary flashed him a grin lest he think she regarded the ceremony with dread. “I’m so happy to marry you,” she whispered back.

The clergyman gave them a look of indulgence. “It is good to see the spirit of love alive and well in a mature couple. Far too often, I preside over these ceremonies with couples far younger than the two of you.”

“This just proves that sometimes, we only get it right the second time ‘round.” Gabriel glanced at the rector. “If I may say a few of my own words to my bride before the actual ceremony proceeds?”

“It is highly unorthodox, but I have no objections. Love is a large subject and frankly a nuptial ceremony should reflect that.” The rector nodded with a smile. “Whenever you are ready, Inspector Bright.”

“Thank you.” When he took her hands in his and their gazes met, awareness prickled over her skin. “I thought long and hard about what I would say to you on this day if I

had the chance.” His grin caused her world to tilt. “Since last December when we first met in the carriage house at that Christmastide house party, we have been chasing each other. Do you remember?”

She nodded. “After your effrontery in kissing me without my permission in the dark?”

“How could I not?” A trace of ruddy color moved up his neck above his cravat. He squeezed her fingers. “Since then, I have chased you because I have never known another woman like you, but the more fulfilling feeling, what gives me the most exquisite joy, is knowing that you have chased me with as much dedication as I have you.” He shrugged but continued to grin. “Perhaps what we have makes no sense to anyone else except us, but as long as that passion burns bright, as long as that willingness to share is present, as long as the need for compromise continues, I have faith that our union will have no choice but to prove spectacular.”

Good heavens, he was the height of romantic!

Already, a sheen of tears filled her eyes. “We have been through more than a few trials on the path to this day,” she said, and even though her voice shook, she needed him to know how she felt, and there was no better way to do that than include them in these vows. “When we met at Christmastide last year, I knew you would change my life, but I had no idea just how much at the time.”

“Just as you have changed mine, sweeting. Turned it completely upside down and tilted it on its ear,” he said in a voice graveled with emotion .

She brushed at a tear that had fallen to her cheek. “I never thought I would meet a man who would treat me as his equal, who would consider me his partner in every aspect of the life we are building together, who would teach me that not all men are bounders.”

“And I will keep doing so until you believe it as truth.”

“I know.” Mary nodded. “You have changed how I view the world as well as my own life; you have changed my perspective, and I have done the same for you. But when I was taken captive by a serial killer this past April, I knew then that you would always be there for me, that you would always take care of me, to protect me and love me, because that is the sort of man you are.” She pressed her trembling lips together. “No, to many people, this relationship doesn’t make sense. We never were part of each other’s worlds, nor did we move in the same circles. Life with you only makes sense to me due to it being messy and confusing and harsh yet beautiful. You bring me joy each time I look at you and find you watching me. For longer than I can remember, you’ve carried my heart, and I couldn’t be more pleased that we are finally marrying today.”

“Aw, Mary, my sweet Mary.” Gabriel squeezed her fingers, and there was suspicious moisture in his eyes. “How you have managed in in ten months to make me a more vulnerable, emotional man, a man who sees life from other perspectives beyond my own, who searches for the whole story around an event instead of seeing it from the stark lines my mind might draw as I investigate a case, I shall never know. But I’m certainly glad that you are a managing sort of baggage.”

Despite the tears and the high emotion of the moment, she gave an unladylike snort of humor. “I can’t help that I’m a woman who knows her own mind, and I knew exactly that I wanted you when I first saw you.”

Mr. Kirkland cleared his throat. “Should we continue with the vows, then? I can’t pronounce you man and wife until we finish,” he said with a grin.

“Yes, of course,” Gabriel said, but he didn’t look away from her.

“Good man.” The rector once more consulted his book. “Inspector Bright, please

repeat after me..." He intoned words that Mary scarcely heard due to the loud pounding of her heart until he said them to her, his hazel eyes locked with hers.

"I, the Honorable Gabriel Henry Robert Bright, take thee Mary Catherine Tomlinson née Swanson to my wedded Wife, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, 'till death us do part." His grin awakened butterflies in her belly but it was the light in his eyes, now more green than brown, that wrapped her in comfort and a bit of calm. "According to God's holy ordinance; and thereto I plight thee my troth."

They were directed to release hands, and Mary was told to then hold Gabriel's right hand with her right one. The clergyman addressed her. "Mrs. Tomlinson, please repeat after me." He gave her the words, and she tumbled them about in her mind, hoping she remembered them all.

"I, Mary Catherine Tomlinson née Swanson, take thee the Honorable Gabriel Henry Robert Bright to my wedded Husband." She paused to swallow and clutch at his hands. "To have and to hold from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love, cherish, and to obey, 'till death us do part, according to God's holy ordinance." Her voice dropped to a whisper, for it was a very emotional morning. "And thereto I give thee my troth." No matter that this day was also slightly terrifying, there was a large part of her that knew he would always have her best interests in mind.

They were instructed to again release their hands. Gabriel gave a silver band embedded with tiny diamonds and sapphires to the clergyman, who then laid it upon his open Book of Common Prayer along with a small leather pouch of coins for payment to the clergyman and his clerk. Then the older man returned the ring to the inspector, who slipped it onto the fourth finger of her left hand, where it nestled snugly against the topaz ring he'd already gifted her with.

“A perfect match,” she breathed as she gazed at the bands together. “I had no idea you would give me another.”

“Why not? I want everything this time ‘round to be different from your first.” He winked. “One is for the engagement and represents our past together, but the new band? That represents our future, and will serve as a reminder to you that we are now a partnership forever.”

The clergyman directed him to repeat another set of words.

Gabriel nodded as he once more held her gaze with his. “With this Ring I thee wed, with my Body I thee worship, and with all my worldly Goods I thee endow.” The dear man’s voice broke, but he gave her the grin that made her feel as if she could fly. “I love you, Mary.”

She was trembling all over. “I love you too, Gabriel.”

The rector continued. “In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen. Now I invite you to pray with me for the newly wedded couple”

Mary knelt before the man when Gabriel did, and she clung to his hand as if he’d suddenly vanish. Briefly, she bowed her head and thanked God for the man at her side, and hoped all would be well as the investigation of Theresa Kessler’s death continued.

At the conclusion of the prayer, she and the inspector stood. The rector announced, “I now pronounce thee husband and wife.”

Polite clapping went about the room from the assembled guests and the handful of servants who lined the back wall.

And then it was over. No longer was she a widow who carried her detestable first husband's name. Now she was Gabriel's Bright's wife, the woman he'd chosen because he considered them equals. She glanced at him, and a tremulous smile curved her lips. "I can't believe we're finally wed."

"Neither can I." He brought her hand to his lips and kissed the back. Warmth skated over her skin. "Well, Mrs. Bright, again I promise to give you the life you've always dreamed about, and I hope the memories we will make together will endeavor to wipe away or at least cover with a veil the horrid ones you've had until now regarding marriage."

Tears gathered in her eyes. "You are so sweet."

The rector smiled at them. "If you could both come and sign the registry, we can make everything official."

"Of course," Mary said and brushed at the residual moisture on her cheeks.

Then Gabriel put a hand to the small of her back and ushered her across the room to where the clerk waited with a book as well as a document. The servants exited the room with waves and smiles at her. Once they'd both signed everything they needed to, he walked toward the open double doors.

"I invite everyone to go across the hall to the dining room where the wedding breakfast will be served." There was a certain relief in his expression as he grinned. "Feel free to also make use of the drawing room and the sideboard of spirits in either location. My wife and I are going to step out for a few moments before we join you for the celebration."

Mary frowned. "Where, then?"

“Just here.” He took her hand and tugged her across the room then through a side door that led into Bright’s study. As soon as they were shielded from prying eyes, he immediately took her into his arms and teased her with a string of gentle kisses that held the promise of wicked things to come. When he lifted his head and found her gaze, he grinned. “Are you happy?”

“I am, of course I am.” She rested her palms on the hard wall of his chest. The gemstones in her rings sparkled against the black of his tailcoat. “However, I’m also wracked with guilt and sadness due to finding Theresa last night. When put against death, happiness doesn’t seem to have a place.”

“That is understandable, but they are both a side of life’s coin.” He touched a fingertip to a curl that persisted in springing out by one temple. “It will be difficult to come to terms with her death, I’d imagine, since it brings up the past once more.”

“Yes.” She nodded, but there was comfort in having him with her. “I’d hoped to put all of it behind me after today.”

“You will be successful, I promise.”

“With your help, of course, but there is something else.”

“Oh?” A hint of apprehension went through his eyes.

“I... couldn’t sleep last night without you, and since I saw that you’d left her reticule upstairs in our rooms, I went through the things inside.”

“That is nothing to be ashamed of. You are my partner in solving cases.” One of his eyebrows rose. “Did you find anything significant?”

She shrugged. “That address in Mayfair scribbled on the scrap of paper? It is where

my husband's sister lives.”

“What?” Shock lined his face. “Why would your husband's mistress have his sister's address in her reticule? It makes no sense.”

“I don't know. It's troubling. And I can't help but feel things are conspiring against me to take away my happiness.” Perhaps she was merely overwrought and that's why the feeling of hopelessness pressed in on her. “Especially after that case in the spring when we were engaged.”

“Ah sweeting. You are my wife now; nothing can hurt you any longer. I won't let it.” He kissed her again with a bit more intensity that had the power to steal her breath and make her knees weak. Once he pulled away, he grinned. “Let us join our guests. I am famished.”

Despite everything, Mary giggled. “When are you not led by your stomach, Bright?”

He wagged his eyebrows, and a wicked glint appeared in his eyes. “When I'm not led by my brain... or my cock I'd imagine.” With a wink, he guided her to the door. “Both of which can't wait to be challenged by you.”

“Oh!” Heat slipped into her cheeks. He was exactly what she needed in her life to prevent becoming too maudlin or falling into obscurity. “Behave, Inspector, lest our guests think we're the height of scandalous.”

“But isn't that how our relationship began?”

When they came into the dining room, Mary waved to Cassandra as the governess came to claim the child for lessons. She was rewarded by a tiny smile and an answering wave from the girl, who was the picture of a genteel upbringing. She looked so pretty.

It was progress.

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Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:56 am

By the time the wedding breakfast ended, and the last guest left the townhouse, it was one o'clock. Mary covered a yawn with her hand, for she'd only slept perhaps two hours in the last twenty-four, but the breakfast had been a lively affair, and it had been lovely to catch up with her brother. She didn't visit as often since he was often out of the country.

"What now?" she asked of him as they climbed the stairs together. What she truly wanted was to soak in a nice, long bath and perhaps finish reading the novel she'd recently acquired from the lending library, take a nap, and then, if she was fortunate and he was willing, they would share a satisfying romp in the sheets—consummate their marriage.

"Well, if you're up for it, I thought we might pay a visit to the boarding house where Miss Kessler lived, perhaps talk to her landlady, make inroads into forming a list of suspects." He wagged his eyebrows. "It's been a bit since we've both been in the field together, and I'm willing to take up the challenge if you are."

Never had he not considered her his partner in everything. "I would be delighted, but first I will need to change my clothes. I'd rather not dirty this gown, and secondly, you need to promise me a visit to a tea house. I have a feeling we'll both need the refresher before too long."

"That can easily be arranged." He opened the door to their shared suite, let her go inside ahead of him, and then followed her, closing the panel behind them. "Ah, Jameson. This is my wife, Mrs. Mary Bright."

Cold disappointment twisted through her belly, for they wouldn't have time to tease

each other during undressing and changing, but she pasted a smile on her lips and nodded at his valet. “I have heard much about you.”

“As I have you, Mrs. Bright.” The man flashed a grin and tightened his grip on the head of his cane. His blond-brown hair had been fashioned into the latest style, and it was obvious he took great care in the clothes that he wore. “Congratulations on your nuptials.”

“Thank you.” When her maid Maggie came into the room with several dresses in her arms, Mary breathed a sigh of relief. “I shall undress in the bedchamber; Bright can have the dressing room.”

Taking the hint, Maggie shooed the men from the room then closed the adjoining door. She turned about with a smile. “You were a lovely bride this morning, Mrs. Bright.”

It would take a bit to acclimate to the new surname. “I felt beautiful.” That was due to her husband’s influence. He told her that all the time, where her first husband rarely said it. “I’m going out with the inspector to work a case, so I’ll need a dress that is plain, sturdy, and won’t show dirt in the event we need to crawl about in the search for clues.”

“You don’t need to do that any longer; you’ve brought him up to scratch, and he is a viscount’s son.” Maggie tsked her tongue as she went through the garments she’d brought into the room. “You are a member of the beau monde now. Why not enjoy that elevation? For the first time in your life, you can be a lady of leisure.”

“As if I know how to be that.” She pointed to a dress of robin egg’s blue lawn. “I’ll wear that one. It’s a wonderful color, and I feel confident when I wear it.”

“Brilliant hues are wonderful on you.” Then she began the task of helping Mary out

of the wedding gown. “Will you and the inspector go on a honeymoon trip?”

“I am not certain.” In fact, she hadn’t thought much about it. Since they brought Cassandra into their family, she liked to remain at the townhouse. Once a day, she visited the girl and a couple of times a week they took tea together .

“That is the true scandal, Mrs. Bright. You need to let that handsome inspector of yours take you away so you can do unspeakable things to each other.” Then she whisked the ivory gown to the bed and laid it carefully down to prevent more wrinkling.

Heat went through Mary’s cheeks. Though she and Gabriel enjoyed a healthy physical relationship, when he didn’t wish to spend the night with her last night, it had shaken her confidence, but that didn’t stop her from waking up this morning thinking about just that. “I will discuss it with him at dinner.” She toed out of her slippers, for she would wear half-boots when she went out on investigation.

“I’m happy for you.” Maggie brought over the blue dress and then helped Mary into the garment. “This always looks lovely on you.”

Mary smoothed her hands along the front of the simple dress. “I think there is an ivory pelisse with the same-colored lining as the dress somewhere.”

“I know the one. I’ll send it and the bonnet down to Davies.”

“Thank you.” She moved behind a painted silk screen to take care of necessary bodily functions.

“Will you be expected back by dinner?”

“That depends on how the investigation goes, but I can tentatively say yes.”

Afterward, she washed her hands in the basin of water and patted a bit of the cool water on her overheated cheeks.

“Shall I set out the new nightwear set you ordered for tonight?”

Mary came out from around the screen. “Yes, please. It will be my wedding night, after all.” Two months ago, she’d ordered the peignoir set of light blue nearly sheer silk lined with thin strips of white rabbit fur. It was a decadent mix of froth and sensuality.

Then the connecting door opened, and Gabriel came into the bedchamber. This was the man she’d fallen in love with, this highly confident inspector clad in buff-colored breeches, barely scuffed boots, cravat done in a simple knot, brown tweed waistcoat, and a jacket of bottle green superfine with his hair in a devil-may-care style, resisting the taming of the pomade he’d used previously.

“Are you decent, Mrs. Bright?”

A thrill twisted down her spine, for she wanted to be anything but. “Well, that all depends on public opinion, doesn’t it?” she couldn’t help but quip, for he was just so charming.

“You know how I feel about gossip.” He winked at Maggie. “I’m going to steal her away from you. We have a case to investigate.”

“Good luck, Inspector.” Maggie shared a speaking glance at Mary, who couldn’t help her own grin .

Perhaps the past would stay buried in the past.

When the closed carriage arrived at the Berwick Street slum, there was already quite

a pungent odor of livestock excrement in the air. It was the prominent smell, and perhaps it was a blessing that it masked all the other foul scents that would ordinarily permeate the surroundings.

“Did you know that the Berwick Street slum is bounded on the north by Cock Court, on the west by New Street, on the south by Husband Street, and on the east by Hopkins Street?”

“I did, actually.” Mary nodded. “This is one of the neighborhoods where I bring bread, blankets, and other supplies.” She glanced out the window at the buildings crowded close to each other. “Remarkably, the district is quite large and comes within Grosvenor Street by a seventh of a mile, so more well-off folks don’t need to walk far to see a completely different way of life.”

One would think it would humble them and usher in change within parliament, but that simply wasn’t the case.

Gabriel frowned as he, too, glanced out the window from his bench. “The good thing—if there is such a thing for these people who reside here—is that the streets are in better condition over, say the Dials due to their proximity to the St. James area.”

“True.” She’d visited this place many a time and in different degrees of weather. Though there were a few streets that had sewer gutters running down the middle, that wasn’t true of all the streets in the slum, which meant far less disease. “One of the better positives here is that the houses are not as crowded and don’t lean over the street blocking the sunlight.”

“It still puts my own life into harsh perspective.”

“I agree. I often wonder what would have become of me if Benjamin hadn’t died when he did. If he’d continued drinking, gambling, and whoring, would we have lost

everything and ended up living in a house somewhere in a neighborhood like this?”

He slid his gaze to hers. Compassion sparkled there. “But that is not what happened. He died, and you escaped that hold.”

“So I would like to hope, yet my past keeps rearing its ugly head.” Then she turned her head and once more contemplated the street as they passed.

There was more carriage and horse traffic in this neighborhood due to its proximity to the fashionable bustle of St. James. As such, there was more apt to be a constable around if a crime was committed. They tended to not want the darker side of life to drift over to the more affluent sections of Mayfair.

“Don’t go there, sweeting. No good comes from dwelling on it.”

“Perhaps.”

People with hand carts sold various items on the pavement in front of the buildings that faced Berwick Street—vegetables, shoes, other foodstuffs, and all manner of used items, which sometimes included “cleaned” sheaths for men to prevent pregnancy. Public houses and taverns dotted more than a few corners, and each one catered to a different demographic.

As the carriage turned on Cock Street to access Husband Street, many of the houses and buildings here had dilapidated, smoky, moldy appearances. Some of the houses had boards over windows that were either broken or missing entirely. And if you were lucky enough to have a broken window, sometimes the owners mended them with paper.

Yet the streets teemed with life, and there was the sound of childish laughter that reached her ears as they continued their journey. As she kept her gaze on the picture

beyond the carriage, Mary sighed. So much hope as well as despair resided here. Some of the houses had a shop front in the street level floor. In these shop fronts, there was often a costermonger or an ironmonger at work. One made a living however and wherever one could.

There was a confusing network of lanes and courts that branched off Berwick Street that were more like narrowed passages with little space between buildings. These streets were often strewn with decayed vegetables. More often than not, Irish was spoken more frequently than English depending on which street or court one happened to visit, but at least there was a sense of community, and everyone here was working toward a common goal—survival and making a better life for themselves and their families. But even more unfortunately, the houses were crowded, sometimes containing as many as three or four families, with rooms no bigger than a closet crammed with far too many beds.

Then the carriage made another turn onto Husband Street, and the odor of livestock grew even more unappealing, for there was a cow house nearby that contained anywhere from ten to thirty cows at the time. A space in the cow house was also given over to the keeping of pigs. Which meant the houses in Husband Street backed up to the cow house and their windows opened out toward it.

A number of shop fronts on the bottom floors of several of the smaller street side buildings offered a wide array of used women's clothing. These garments were pawned by the owners on a regular basis for a few coins to pay for a drink or two at one of the public houses. Sometimes the owners redeemed their clothing, but most of the time, they didn't. At which point, the pawn shop owner could sell those items for his own profit. Or the more shrewd ones sold the clothes for rags or even had them carted off and sold to a paper maker.

That was life in the slums, and there was always a maudlin story as well as someone profiting off them.

“There are some days I am just not in the correct frame of mind to visit these neighborhoods, but I like to remind myself of their existence. It gives me more gratitude for what I have in my own life.” Still, a shiver went down Mary’s spine; there were far worse areas in London than this.

“You are a good woman, and that heart of yours is one of the reasons that drew me to you.” Gabriel leaned over and touched a gloved hand to her knee. “With luck, this errand should go quickly.”

Soon after, the vehicle came to a halt. It rocked as the driver jumped from his perch, and then the door opened, and he put the steps down.

As Gabriel exited the carriage, he spoke to the driver. “We will not be long, Bob. I can’t imagine even being here a half hour, so mind the carriage from thieves.”

“I will, of course. You stay vigilant, Inspector.”

He nodded as he assisted Mary from the conveyance. “Don’t make eye contact with anyone except the landlady, and don’t stop to talk to anyone,” he cautioned her in a low voice as they walked swiftly up to the scuffed and scratched door.

“Don’t worry, Bright. I have taken care of myself without you by my side.” But she smiled to herself. At times she enjoyed his protective instincts.

A harried-looking housekeeper answered their knock, and upon hearing that they wanted to speak with the landlady, she took them to a parlor that hosted threadbare carpets and dusty draperies. The color once upon a time must have been pink but was now a dingy grayish rose from years of use.

Not long afterward, a matronly woman entered the room wearing a dress as dated as the décor. Her salt and pepper brown hair had been scraped back into a severe bun,

but her eyes were bright and sharp, and she looked down her hawk-like nose at them both.

“I’m Mrs. Harris, the owner of this house, and I ain’t got no rooms available, especially for the likes of you. ”

Apparently, she was a no-nonsense businesswoman, but Mary frowned. “We are not here to ask for a room to let. In fact, we are here about one of your tenants.”

“Oh? Who is it?”

It was Gabriel’s turn to frown. “Hallo, Mrs. Harris. I am Inspector Bright, and this is Mrs. Bright. We are here to investigate the murder of Miss Theresa Kessler.”

“That one.” The woman waved a hand and blew out a breath. “She wasn’t a good tenant.”

“You don’t seem sorry to hear that she has been murdered.” He pulled his leatherbound notebook from a pocket of his greatcoat. “Why is that?”

“Always had people visiting.”

“What sort of people?” Mary asked as above them the sounds of an argument broke out.

The landlady shrugged. “Men, mostly even though I don’t allow such goings on. Once a wealthy nob came by looking for her, but she was out. Another time, a midwife came to see her.”

“A midwife? That is odd. Was she with child?”

“How would I know? I rarely talked to her. If you really want to know about her, talk to the gentleman she was servicing. Probably over in Mayfair.”

Mary tamped on the urge to sigh. “Did he ever leave a name?”

“A Lord Someone or other. I never paid attention. Always left a calling card, flashy so as he’d be noticed.”

Gabriel exchanged a speaking glance with Mary. “No doubt it was her last protector. Did Miss Kessler have any friends?”

“Not that I could say. She weren’t that likable of a person.” Mrs. Harris huffed. “Male acquaintances, sure, but female friends? I only saw one come visit a few times.”

What a frustrating interrogation. Mary softly cleared her throat. “Do you remember her name?”

“You ask too many questions.” The other woman screwed up her face, which didn’t help in the way of her looks. “A Miss Gannett, I think. Member of the demimonde, down on her luck daughter of a peer, I seem to remember. Came before that midwife.”

“We shall find her.” Gabriel nodded and scribbled in his notebook. “Might we see Miss Kessler’s room?”

“I already rented it out to someone else.”

“What?” Mary’s eyebrows rose with surprise. “The woman only died last night.”

“But she ain’t been here for a month. Rent’s late and she didn’t pay for this month.”

Gabriel frowned. “Where are her things? ”

“I kept what I wanted. Figured it was the least I could do since she owed me. The rest I threw out. Weren’t worth keeping anyway.”

This line of inquiry had obviously come to an end. There was nothing else they could do. Mary nodded. “Well, thank you for your time, Mrs. Harris. I appreciate it.”

The landlady frowned. “Don’t know why you’re wasting your time with her. Dead is dead, and that one was heading for disaster anyway with her lifestyle. I say good riddance. Just like all the rest of the whores who work the streets here.”

“Everyone means something to someone,” Bright said as he tucked his notebook and pencil back into a pocket. “She deserves justice.”

“Ain’t anyone missing her, I’ll wager. If there were, she wouldn’t have been here.”

Unfortunately, that was a true statement.

With nothing else to do, she and Gabriel left the house and walked back to the carriage. Directly after he handed her into the vehicle, a courier on horseback came over to them in the street and handed him an envelope.

He vaulted into the carriage, and as Bob put up the steps and closed the door, he ripped open the envelope. “Well, damn.”

“What is it?” A sinking feeling took possession of her belly.

“This is from the constable from last night. There has been another death, in the same fashion as Miss Kessler’s.”

“At the opera house?”

“Not exactly. On one of the walkways in Covent Garden.” He tucked the note into a pocket of his great coat. “We need to investigate.”

“But we were going to visit a tea house.” If she was a bit cross, she had every right to be.

“Well, we shall be in that area, and you know I must find out if the death is connected to Miss Kessler’s.”

He was nothing if not thorough.

“Fine, but I will wait in the carriage. I don’t want my wedding day marred by seeing a dead body.”

“Fair enough.” Bright rapped on the roof of the carriage. “Covent Garden.”

After an hour, wherein Mary passed the time by enjoying a quick and much-needed nap, her new husband returned to the vehicle. She woke from her doze when the carriage door slammed closed.

“How bad was it?” she asked after taking one look at his grim expression .

“Bad enough. Killed in the same fashion except the letter opener was replaced with a knife.” He shook his head. “She had no reticule, but tucked into her bosom was this.”

She leaned forward and took a calling card from his gloved fingers. “This is the same man who was Miss Kessler’s last protector.” When she turned the card over, there was a hand drawn image that had been on the other card indicating an address in Brighton.

“Indeed.” Bright huffed. “It seems our work isn’t done. We will need to call on the peer, but only after we make a stop at your former sister-in-law’s home.”

A trace of icy fear shot down her spine while hot annoyance stabbed through her chest. “This isn’t how I thought I’d spend my wedding day, and I’ll wager these investigations will last well into the evening.” Not often did she resent what he did for a living, but today, she most certainly did.

“I know.” With a sigh, Gabriel moved onto her bench and sat beside her. “Sometimes, that can’t be helped.”

“Is the job more important than me? Or perhaps more to the point, are you doing this in response to my being involved with Miss Kessler?”

“You know it isn’t.” There was a hard set to his jaw, and in the gloom of the overcast day, a muscle ticced in his cheek. “This is how it’s always been with us working cases together. We follow the clues until we solve it.”

“But we were just married not three hours ago.” She sighed. “Everything has been a whirlwind, a blur, and my life has been turned upside down.”

“I’m sorry.” He slipped an arm about her shoulders, and she nearly cried from that caring gesture. “I didn’t mean for any of this to happen, but here we are.”

That attention to detail, that determination to continue until he had answers, was one of the reasons she’d fallen in love with him. But it rankled just now. “We haven’t made a mistake in marrying, have we Bright?”

“I don’t think so.” Emotions flitted across his face, one of the most prominent was disappointment. “Only you can answer that for yourself.” Then he caught her chin in his hand, turned her face toward him, and claimed her lips in such a searing kiss that

she was breathless by the end. “It will get better, sweeting. And when have we not managed to mix work and play during cases? So it will be with this.” With a wink, he rapped on the roof, and gave the driver the name of a tea house in the area. “Don’t give up on any of it, Mary, us, life, all of it. There is so much good just waiting there.”

Before she could answer, he kissed her again, and this time, she joyfully gave herself up to his mastery. It was more than she’d had last night, only this time, she was married to him.

And that meant something.

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Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:56 am

Bright frowned as he handed his new wife into the carriage. A desultory rain was falling, and it was a bit chilly coupled with the autumnal breeze, but what he was more concerned about was Mary. Throughout tea, she was uncharacteristically quiet and withdrawn.

Shortly before he joined her, he gave Bob the address for her former sister-in-law, then he planted himself on the bench beside her as the driver put up the steps and closed the door.

“Tell me what’s bothering you, sweetie. I know it’s something because you usually enjoy the tea house.” It made him sad that she couldn’t glean happiness over their new union because of worries over the dead woman.

“It is nothing. I merely need to work through it myself.” She turned her head to the window as the carriage rocked when Bob climbed back up into the box.

“But you needn’t for we are married. What bothers you, bothers me, and I want to help if I can.” When she didn’t answer, he tamped down on the urge to sigh. “Please know that I do not hold the current unfortunate circumstances against you, but the sooner we can solve the case, the sooner we can have time to enjoy our new marriage.”

Was that even something she wanted? Why else would she have asked him if they’d made a mistake?

“While that sounds wonderful, I am having trouble believing you.” She turned her head and looked at him with such sorrow in the blue pools of her eyes that he truly

thought he might drown in them. “Why can’t my past stay buried? Why can’t I move into my future without always having a shadow?”

While he understood her worries—for he’d gone through them himself over the years—he knew nothing he could say would help her until she was ready to just forget and leave it all behind. “Your husband’s mistress is dead. That won’t change. Best square with it.” He didn’t mean it to sound harsh, but she had to know none of this was her fault.

“I know that.” Annoyance threaded through her voice. “But we must go see my sister-in-law. What if she’s part of whatever this is?”

“Then we will find that out in due course.” There were times when he rather thought women should be handled with a gentle touch, not because they were fragile like glass but because they were as delicate as a loaded cannon.

She huffed. “What if she tells you terrible things about me?”

“Aw, sweeting.” Gabriel shrugged. “Then she will; you nor I have control over other people’s opinions, but none of that defines us.” He put a curled index finger beneath her chin and raised her head until their gazes connected. “I know you. Nothing anyone says will change my mind or my feelings. I know you and I love you , so much so that I married you, even after you knew of my horrid luck with that in the past.” His grin felt all too wry. “It was terrifying, but I did it, because of you.”

The shadows in her eyes told him she wasn’t convinced. “Flattery again. You must admit, knowing the woman you just married is embroiled in your most recent case isn’t the best endorsement for your reputation.”

“You let me worry about that, but every word I spoke is the truth.” When her bottom lip trembled, he brushed the pad of his gloved thumb along that plump piece of flesh.

“We have always worked as a team, you and me, and it is no less true now, hmm? Whatever is out there waiting, whatever horrid thing we discover, we will go through the aftermath together, and none of it will change how I feel about you. ”

For long moments, she held his gaze as emotions flitted through her eyes, difficult to read in the gloom made from the rain. Finally, she offered him a tentative smile, and his world tilted sideways. “How is it that you always know just what to say in order to cheer me up?”

“We’re well matched. Did you expect anything less?” Before she could respond, he claimed her lips in a gentle kiss.

Mary made a soft sound of surrender at the back of her throat. She turned more fully into him, slipped a hand up his chest to rest at his nape, and then she kissed him back with her customary enthusiasm, and that need fired his own.

Unfortunately, the ride from the Covent Garden area to Berkeley Square in Mayfair was accomplished in a shorter time than he’d anticipated, for he’d only just settled his wife into his lap and had been preparing to tug down the bodice of her dress.

Bob rapped on the roof. “Arriving, Inspector.”

“Damn and blast,” Gabriel whispered as he peered into Mary’s eyes. Her kiss-swollen lips curved into an amused smile. “We haven’t had much luck when it comes to being alone.”

“No, we haven’t, but I’m certain you will rectify that soon enough.” She rested a gloved hand against his cheek. “And we will definitely revisit this later.”

“Agreed.” With a hefty portion of remorse, he encouraged her off his lap, and by the time Bob opened the carriage door and put down the steps, she sat calmly composed

next to him on the bench, looking for all the world as if nothing had happened... or had almost happened.

For himself, Gabriel was quite thankful for the greatcoat that hid his rampant cockstand. There was something about Mary that made him come undone with need in very little time, but they had a job to do. Personal pleasure and fulfillment would need to wait.

Again.

As they stood in front of an unassuming townhouse, he offered his crooked arm to her. "We can't loiter out here. Sooner or later, a constable will come 'round, and it's raining besides."

"I know." A sigh escaped her as she slipped her hand into the bend of his elbow. "Best get it over with, but I haven't seen this woman for at least five years. Since the graveside service for her boulder of a brother."

"It will be over quickly." Then he proceeded up the short walkway to the red-painted door.

Their knock was answered quickly enough by a butler of indeterminate years, who led them into a rather quaint parlor decorated in shades of ivory and light green .

Anxiety fairly radiated off his wife as she sat beside him, but before he could say anything or even give her a supportive touch, a woman entered the room who was probably in her early forties, perhaps near his own age.

"Inspector Bright?" Her voice was well modulated, which meant she must have learned that touch of culture from whomever she'd married. According to Mary, the woman's brother had been a bit uncouth even if he had been part of the merchant

class.

“Yes.” Springing to his feet, Gabriel cleared his throat. “You have the advantage of me, I’m afraid, for I don’t know your name.” Mary hadn’t been forthcoming regarding that information.

“She is Lady Donovan,” Mary said before the other woman could answer. “Beatrice married a third son of an earl, and as is his right, he chose a courtesy title.”

The woman glanced at her with a frown that quickly vanished behind genuine surprise when recognition was realized. “Mary? My goodness, it’s been an age since I saw you last. You look lovely and so happy.”

As Gabriel watched, his wife gave the other woman a smile that could burn away the rain’s gloom, and his chest tightened. He was so proud of her. “She is my wife.”

Mary nodded and then transferred her smile to him. Love light was noticeable in her eyes. “It is quite a long story, and I was just married this morning, in fact.”

“Then, why the devil—pardon the language—are you here?” Lady Donovan demanded with shock stamped on her face. She waved them both onto the sofa while she dropped into a matching chair. “You should be headed out on your wedding trip.”

Heat sneaked up the back of Gabriel’s neck. “Uh, we unexpectedly stumbled upon a murder investigation that has prevented us from making further nuptial plans.”

“I’m sorry, but what does any of that have to do with me?” She bounced her gaze between them. “I don’t keep company with criminals.”

“Yes, well, it isn’t as simple as that.” As he tugged his notebook and pencil from a pocket in his greatcoat, he sighed. “Last night while attending the opera, we came

upon the dead body of one Miss Theresa Kessler, who was apparently your brother's mistress at one time."

"What?" The lady's eyes rounded. "Theresa is dead?"

"Most definitely," Gabriel said, and made a note that not only did Lady Donovan not know of the fact but she was also real in her shock. "She was stabbed through the heart at the Royal Opera House with a letter opener. "

"Good heavens." Lady Donovan put a hand to her throat. "The last time I saw Theresa was at least three months ago."

"Why, though?" Mary wanted to know. "Your address had been scrawled on a scrap of paper we found in her reticule. Were you and she friends after Ben's death?"

"Not exactly."

One of Mary's eyebrows rose. "What does that mean?"

"I always knew this would come back to haunt me," Lady Donovan muttered with the shake of her head.

"Oh, I completely understand that sentiment," Mary said with sympathy in her tone.

"I am a friend of Lord Carmichael. He was her former protector. They stopped seeing each other a couple of months ago."

It was Gabriel's turn to ask a question. "Why? We had heard they'd fought."

"Oh, they did."

“About?”

Lady Donovan huffed out a breath. “He was outraged that she’d decided on a different path than being mistress to various titled men throughout London.”

He frowned. “What had she planned to do, then? Become an actress?” It would make sense, for if she frequented the theater, it might have been for that.

“Oh, I rather doubt that. Miss Kessler wasn’t that convincing as an actress, and for a woman of her ilk, she was a horrid liar.” The lady bounced her gaze between them. “A few months ago, a man approached her at the theater—she had many friends and acquaintances there who let her borrow gowns, accessories, wigs, and even stage makeup—who found her attractive.”

Mary played with the strings of her reticule. “Did she become his mistress?”

“Not that I know of, but he wished to recruit her.”

“For?” Knots of unease pulled in his gut. This couldn’t be good.

With a quick glance to the open door, Lady Donovan lowered her voice. “To work at a secret pleasure spa in Brighton as essentially a highly paid courtesan. According to Lord Carmichael, the spa opened two months ago and took some of the top... talent in... the sexual arts from London.”

Good God. Did depravity know no bounds? “When did Miss Kessler start there?”

“Nearly five weeks ago, as soon as the midwife gave authorization for her to resume... her usual activities.”

“Why her, though?” Annoyance filled Mary’s voice. “Was she that skilled in the

bedroom arts? Wouldn't a woman like that go after better men than my first husband?
„

Before the conversation could grow heated, Gabriel briefly touched Mary's hand in silent support. "There is every possibility her, uh, skills grew as the years went by as evidenced by her landing Lord Carmichael." He cleared his throat. "It might be why she borrowed wigs from her actor and actress friends, especially if she were made to audition for various, er, parts." Truly, he had no idea what went on in a pleasure spa other than, well, people bringing other people to pleasure, but he could imagine. Then he glanced again at Lady Donovan. "How is Lord Carmichael involved in that?"

"He isn't, but he was hurt by her defection. It's possible he felt more for Theresa than mere lust." The tendons of her neck worked with a hard swallow. "However, when Theresa came to see me, it wasn't due to her decision to go to Brighton."

Gabriel frowned as he scribbled notes. "Then why?"

"She, uh, had nowhere else to turn, for she had given birth to a child just before she'd come to visit me."

Mary looked at him, and there was a trace of tears in her eyes. His heart went out to her, for he knew from her stories that she couldn't conceive and that it had been a sore point between her and Benjamin. "That was why the midwife came to visit her at her boarding house." She snapped her gaze back to Lady Donovan. "Was it Lord Carmichael's?"

"I would have no idea; she swore me to secrecy regarding the babe's existence."

The case had suddenly taken a more complicated turn. "Why did she tell you about the child?"

“Theresa wished to give it up. Said a child didn’t fit into her lifestyle and she didn’t wish for it to ruin the new venture she was about to embark on, and that she knew she couldn’t properly care for it. Perhaps Benjamin had told her at one time that one of the charities I work with was an orphanage in Surrey as well as a home for fallen women with children here in London.” She shrugged. “I gave her both addresses and wished her well. Society isn’t kind to women no matter their status in society who have a child out of wedlock.”

Unexpectedly, Mary launched to her feet. “I’m sorry, but I must go. I simply can’t listen to how my husband’s mistress gave up a child...” A half-stifled sob took the remainder of her words.

“Ah, sweeting.” Gabriel scrambled to his feet. He dropped his notebook and pencil into a pocket of his greatcoat. “I’ll come with you.”

“Wait.” Lady Donovan rose as well. “Mary, I know I only met with you a few times during your marriage, but it wasn’t my fault. My brother never let me have you over or spend time with you. He said it would give you airs.”

Mary snorted. “Typical.”

The other woman nodded. She had tears in her eyes. “My brother wasn’t a good man, I will fully admit that, but at the time, I was a new bride myself and my attention was divided.” A tear fell to her cheek, and she dashed it away. “I always thought you were too good for Benjamin. You weren’t well-matched, and he was a bounder. You didn’t deserve how he’d treated you.” When she clasped her hands, she frowned. “I... I wrote several times but when my letters weren’t answered, I thought you were offended.”

“Oh.” Mary took a few steps toward her and laid a hand on her arm. “I never received your letters; Ben must have taken them and destroyed them.” Her chin quivered as

tears fell to her own cheeks. “That friendship would have meant everything to me... after what I lived through.”

Silence reigned in the room while Gabriel looked on with his chest swelling with pride. She was on her way to healing.

Lady Donovan giggled. “Well, you have a good man now.” She looked at him. “Please take care of her. Mary is a special soul in this world.”

“I intend to. Oh, and one thing more. Where were you last night between seven and eight o’clock?”

“At the Finkle’s rout. You may inquire there, but they can vouch for my attendance.”

“Thank you for your time, Lady Donovan.”

“You are most welcome, and I hope for Theresa’s sake, you find her killer. And I wish to do something kind for her by paying for her burial.”

He nodded. “Inquire at Whitehall. They can direct you to the coroner’s office and give you instructions from there.”

“And Mary, if it is acceptable with you, I would like to remain acquaintances, if not friends. We can write to each other until you are comfortable enough to pay calls.” Her grin was rueful. “I have found life is too short to push away the people who make us feel as if we’re basking in sunshine.”

Another round of tears followed for both women, then Mary quickly passed a calling card to the lady. After the women embraced, he ushered Mary from the house and then into the waiting carriage. Damnation, but this had already been a highly emotional day.

According to his pocket watch, it was nearing the six o'clock hour by the time the carriage pulled up to the curb outside of Lord Carmichael's Hanover Square townhouse. With a kiss to Mary's forehead, he exited the vehicle. It would give her the time she needed to compose herself after that last meeting.

He was taken into the house swiftly but was told Lord Carmichael was on his way out.

"I will wait here, then, for it's important I speak with him." After that, he was obliged to stare down the butler until the man dropped his gaze and said he would fetch the lord. That was fine with him, for he only wished to return to Mary's side and make certain she was doing better than when he'd left her.

Minutes later, a man in the requisite evening dress came into the entryway with the butler trailing behind. The peer wasn't what he'd been expecting. Indeed, he was a full six inches shorter than Gabriel and well on his way to balding with a handful of heroic blond shocks of hair still clinging to his scalp. But his eyes were kind and curiosity filled his countenance.

"I am Lord Carmichael. As my butler told you, I am indeed on my way out. What can I do for you?" He accepted his greatcoat and top hat from the butler, and as he donned them, Gabriel spoke.

"I'm here regarding the murder of a Miss Theresa Kessler."

Some of the color leached from the other man's cheeks. Quickly and with shaking hands, he put on his gloves. "Perhaps we should talk outside. My carriage is already waiting."

With a nod to the butler, Gabriel followed the man out of the townhouse. "I understand she was your mistress."

“Was being the operative word,” the other man bit out as he headed toward his carriage that had parked at the curb behind Gabriel’s. “I haven’t been with her for three months.” Then Lord Carmichael turned to face him with shock in his expression. “She is truly dead?”

“She is. Murdered at the theater at Covent Garden. Your calling card was in her reticule.” Gabriel glanced at the window of his carriage where Mary peered out with round eyes. He winked at her before giving his full attention back to the peer. “Why did you break things off with her?”

The other man shrugged, but the sorrow in his eyes was unmistakable. Liars couldn’t fabricate such emotion. “She said she had a better offer.”

“Another protector, higher in the ton than you?”

“Hardly.” His bark of laughter contained much bitterness. “She told me she was going to work at a pleasure spa in Brighton.”

“Had you ever been to that spa? ”

An angry red flush went up the peer’s neck. “Of course not. I am against such a sinful place.”

“Ah, but taking a mistress is the epitome of moral then?” Gabriel cocked one of his eyebrows as Lord Carmichael sputtered. “Never mind. Did you fight about anything else?”

“We did not. Only that.”

“You were jealous of her lending out her services to others.” It wasn’t a question.

“Of course I was! Wouldn’t you be too if you’d accidentally... er... if you’d fallen in love with your mistress?”

No wonder he had been angry. “That is understandable. Did you tell her of your feelings?”

“I did, in fact, but she said she didn’t believe in love, that it was more trouble than it was worth, that her last protector had shown her that.” His face crumpled into sorrow before he got himself under control once more. “There was no convincing her, and I believe the man recruiting her—and women like her—made it seem as if the pleasure spa would be a leap into fame and fortune.”

That made sense in order to attract enough courtesans for whatever the needs of the spa required. “Yet you were angry enough to kill her to prevent her from doing just that.”

“Of course not!” He shook his head. “I was angry, yes, but I would never kill her. I loved her, even if she didn’t return my regard.”

Gabriel nodded. “Were you aware she’d given birth around the time you broke off your relationship with her?”

“What?” The other man went so pale, Bright feared he might faint. “I had no idea she was with child, and she never mentioned such to me.” He gasped. “Perhaps that was why she’d wished to see me.”

“At the theater?” Now that was odd.

He shook his head. “No, we had an assignation later that night in the gardens.”

“Ah, for something other than sin, was it?” He couldn’t help the comment.

“Reaching, Inspector.”

“Had you had relations with her recently? Surely you would have noticed a change in her appearance.”

“It’s... complicated.” Lord Carmichael heaved out a sigh. “I have been quite busy in banking, and sometimes when we’d come together, we were fully clothed or she, ah, did things to me without—”

“Stop.” Gabriel held up a hand. “I don’t need to hear more.” Already, he’d heard far too much today about many things. “Had she been with anyone else during the past twelve months? ”

“I don’t believe so. She lived in my townhouse more days than she went back to her boarding house.” A look of embarrassment crossed his face. “I’m of an age where companionship was more important to me than vigorous tugging all the time. I merely enjoyed her presence in the evenings.”

In that, he felt a kinship with the other man. “I understand.” But discovering he had a child and wasn’t given the option of deciding its fate was a powerful motive. “You had no idea she was pregnant?”

“I did not.” Hope filled his eyes. “Do you know what happened to the child?”

He shouldn’t say, for it wasn’t his place, but this man deserved to know, and if it would get them both out of the dreadful rain, all the better. “Talk with Lady Donovan. Miss Kessler spoke with her about where to place an unwanted infant. If you are swift about it, there is every possibility the child is still there.” He shrugged. “Perhaps if you wish to either take on the infant or sponsor its care throughout its life, consider that your good deed that might cancel out the other questionable things your soul wrestles with.”

“Thank you. I will.” There was such joy and relief in the other man’s expression, Gabriel couldn’t help but grin.

“Where were you last night between seven and eight-thirty?”

“At my club. Any number of gentlemen can verify that information.”

“Thank you.” Yet he’d been scheduled to meet with Miss Kessler later.

“Good luck with the investigation. Theresa might have been confused about many aspects of life, and her... profession might not have been respectable, but deep down, she was a good person, or at least was trying to be.”

“That is what we all should strive for.” He touched the brim of his hat. “Enjoy your evening.”

Then they parted ways, him to his carriage and Lord Carmichael to his.

“Where to, Inspector?” the driver asked.

Gabriel sighed. “Once more back to the theater. Then we will go home so we can all enjoy dinner.” Then he ducked into the carriage, and while Bob again put up the steps and closed the door, he settled next to Mary. “Suffice it to say, Lord Carmichael fell in love with his mistress, and while she hid her pregnancy from him, he wishes to do right by the child. With the exception of the murder, I believe at least two lives have been changed today.”

She burrowed into his side as he wrapped an arm about her shoulders. “Four, really. Thank you for giving me the gift of a potential friendship with Lady Donovan. I don’t know what I would do without you. ”

“The feeling is mutual.” Gabriel pressed his lips into her hair. “We have one more interrogation in London tonight then we can take dinner together. And we need to have a conversation about changing Cassandra’s governess. I am wildly unhappy with Miss Oliver.”

Oddly enough, she chuckled. “As am I. Even in this, we agree.”

Wasn’t that how it should be after one found and wed their soulmate?

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:56 am

On the ride over to Covent Garden once more, Mary was an emotional mess.

Knowing her first husband's mistress had been pregnant and had then given up her child because she didn't wish to raise it had made her both furious and racked with despair. How was it fair that life would choose to give an undeserving woman a babe and not give the same to a woman who desperately wanted one?

Yes, she had long ago accepted her fate that she would never have a child of her own. Life with Gabriel was perfectly lovely and exciting that she had grown past the longing to have a babe of her own. Now they were parents to eight-year-old Cassandra and though it was trying at times, the potential was there to find fulfillment in that relationship.

“Approaching Covent Garden.”

She glanced at Gabriel through the gathering shadows, for the sun would begin setting soon, and it was already gloomy with rain. “Why are we here again?” It had been a long, emotional day.

“To interview the actor Miss Kessler either had a relationship with or was hoping to.”

“But wouldn't that run at cross purposes to her new career choice at the spa in Brighton? I mean, if she wished to have a relationship with an actor, how could she be a courtesan there at the same time?”

“That is one thing we shall ask our actor turned poet.” There was such fondness in the look he bestowed on her that flutters unexpectedly went through her lower belly.

“Will you be all right going into the opera house so soon after the murder?”

“I think so.” A sigh escaped her. “I didn’t interview Lord Carmichael with you, so I need to do this now.” They were a team, a partnership, and she didn’t want to disappoint him again.

“You don’t have to prove your mettle to me. I’m already hopelessly in love with you.”

That prompted a shaky smile on her part. “What have I done in my life to deserve you for the rest of it?”

His grin was this side of cheeky. “Does it matter? You are stuck with me like a barnacle on the side of a ship’s hull, and we are going to have such fun together. And as soon as I’m able, I am going to claim your body and—”

The carriage door swung open, and Bob put down the steps, interrupting whatever her husband would have said after that.

It was enough to convince her to exit the vehicle after him. The only constant that never changed was him. “I must say, paying calls on so many people has been exhausted.” How could she be expected to function as a lady of the ton now that she’d married the inspector?

“All the more reason to pamper you soon, hmm?” Then he tucked her hand into his crooked elbow and led her toward the Royal Opera House.

“That sounds wonderful.” Merely burrowing into his arms would be heaven at this point. Had anyone ever had such a bizarre wedding day?

In the course of winding through the corridors trying to find the backstage areas, they

happened to come across none other than the personable but forgettable Mr. Dempsey.

“Ah, Mrs. Tomlinson.” Pleasure clung to the surprised greeting as he grinned at Mary. He held a brunette wig in one hand. “Now this would look stunning on you. I do tend to favor brown haired women. My mother had brown hair.” He winked and completely disregarded how chilly his reception was from Bright who stood next to her. “By the by, I’m the wig master for the theater. ”

“Interesting.” But she regarded him as if he were a weird bug she’d come across and couldn’t quite identify. “Uh, Mr. Dempsey, this is Inspector Bright.”

The men stared at each other as if sizing the other up.

In the silence, Gabriel cleared his throat. “We are looking for a Mr. Taylor. He is apparently an actor and was here last night.”

“You must mean Clarence.” Mr. Dempsey cocked his head to one side. “I think he’s backstage rehearsing lines as the play is about to start. Of course, it’s MacBeth again but he is doing the comedy that will follow.”

“Thank you.” Clearly dismissing him, Gabriel turned to her. “Once we finish with Mr. Taylor, we will need to pack our trunks.”

“Why?” She had no idea what he was about.

“We’re going away to Brighton for a few days.”

“What?” Surprise circled through Mary’s chest. “Why?” Had she now been reduced to one-word questions?

“Oh, Brighton!” It seemed the mention of the seaside town sent Mr. Dempsey into the seventh heaven of delight. “I adore Brighton. Go down every summer.” His attention went back to her. “For you, I could make an exception and go down again. Brighton in autumn is lovely if it manages not to rain.”

“Do stop, Mr. Dempsey. The attention is unseemly.” She followed the statement with a frown. “I am married now. Just this morning, in fact.”

“Yes, to me.” Clear possession made itself known in Gabriel’s voice, and she adored it when he acted that way. “I would be careful about what you say from this point forward.”

“Ah.” The other man’s eyebrows went up in surprise. “What might have been.” Then he winked at her, which had Bright growling low in his throat. “Happily?” He retreated when her husband took a step toward him. “Well, Mrs. Tomlinson—”

“Bright,” Gabriel interrupted.

“Bright,” Mr. Dempsey said with a nod but didn’t glance at the inspector. “Perhaps I’ll run into you again. I have a feeling this won’t be our last meeting.”

Cold unease coiled through her belly. “Why?”

He touched his temple with his free hand. “Theater folk know these things. If you wish to have a guide for Brighton, I’d be happy to do it. My mother was from there.” Briefly, he narrowed his eyes but then his expression went back to jovial. “Or so I have been told.”

Bright growled again. Clearly, he was not amused by the antics. “We are investigating the murder of a Miss Kessler who was found last night in one of the corridors. Did you know her?”

Mr. Dempsey screwed up his face. “I don’t think I did, but her name sounds familiar.” He glanced at Mary. “So that was why you ran into me last night, wasn’t it? Was she an actress?”

“No, a prostitute,” Mary said in a soft voice.

“Ah.” The other man shrugged. “That is nearly the same role, isn’t it?” He wiped at a rivulet of perspiration on his forehead. The skin beneath his left eye ticked. “There are rumors of another death that same night only in the gardens.”

“Yes.” Gabriel’s frown was fierce. “We are aware of that.”

Mr. Dempsey nodded. “It is not a safe area as it once was, hmm? Women should be mindful in this day and age. Get themselves into trouble far too much and don’t wish to live with the consequences.”

“Ha!” Mary narrowed her gaze on him. “Or men need to stop themselves from attacking said women, or using them in any way.”

He wiped at the sweat at his temple. “If it was even a man who did it. Many people make up this world. Women are capable of murder too.”

“Of course they are but—”

“This is ridiculous.” Bright drew himself up to his full height. “Where were you last night between seven and eight-thirty, Mr. Dempsey?”

Mary bit back on the urge to huff, for it hadn’t occurred to her to question the man since he was at the periphery of the investigation.

The wig master shrugged. “Around?” When Bright glared, he quickly added, “I was

in the wings backstage while the play was going on. One never knows when there will be a wig emergency.” Again, he held up the wig.

Truly, she thought her new husband would throttle the younger man, but he nodded. “Go fetch Mr. Taylor for us, Mr. Dempsey. Our time is precious.”

“Right.” The other man nodded as he bounced his gaze between them. “Of course.” Then he loped off down the corridor.

“Was that necessary?” she asked of her husband but couldn’t help the beginnings of a smile.

“Yes, it was. That little man was trying to flirt with you.” Though annoyance shadowed his eyes, there was also intense desire there that left her trembling.

“He is odd, I’ll admit, but relatively harmless. Just enthusiastic.” She gazed up at him, and awareness once more shivered over her. “Are we truly going to Brighton?”

“We are. I had been thinking about it for the past hour or so, and since we were married this morning, we might as well mix business with pleasure.” A slow grin curved his sensual mouth. “If we must investigate this secret spa, we should start our honeymoon here. Additionally, it will make you happy to go away together.”

“Oh, it would, but what about Cassandra? I don’t wish to leave her, and I don’t want Miss Oliver to have the whole authority of her for the length of a trip.”

“Not to worry, love. We shall rent a townhouse there for a fortnight and bring both with us. Once the case is solved, you and I can spend time with the girl. As a family on holiday, and we can all enjoy the seaside together.”

“Careful, Inspector. Too much more of that and I might do wicked things to you,” she

said in a barely audible whisper.

Before he could answer, a man came toward them. A slim man with reddish-blond hair and freckles sprinkled over his face. Dressed in costume, Mary couldn't quite place his character.

"I am Mr. Taylor and was told you wished to speak with me?" Each time he spoke, she couldn't stop staring at his mouth, for he wore very dark paint on his lips for the stage.

"Yes." Gabriel nodded and brought forth his ever-present notebook. "I am Inspector Bright, and this is my partner Mrs. Bright." Briefly, he grinned. Perhaps it was a novelty, still, for him to call her that. "We are investigating the murder of a Miss Kessler. How did you know her?"

The other man frowned. "Why do you assume I did?"

Mary huffed. "You'd written her a romantic note, which we found in her reticule."

"Oh." Ruddy color rose up the man's neck. "Yes, well, I did rather fancy her."

"Did she fancy you in return?"

"Unfortunately, she did not, but I continued to try." The light of unrequited love gleamed in his eyes. "I suspected she never thought me good enough, which was saying something since she was no better than a prostitute."

Mary nodded. "You didn't mind what she was?"

"Of course not. Love covers all things and hides all scars."

The simple explanation brought tears to her eyes, for that was the honest truth, and it was a core foundation block to her relationship with the inspector.

Bright scribbled a note on one of his pages. “Did she say why she didn’t want your attentions?”

“Not fully. Just that she had a new business venture presented which would give her a better living and that she needed to concentrate on that. ”

Her husband’s gaze was quite intense as he looked at the younger man. “Where and with whom?”

Mr. Taylor shrugged. “She never said, but she was quite chummy with some nob in the ton . He kept coming ‘round a few times a week hoping to see her while she was in the gardens.”

What he didn’t say was that Theresa met with clients out there and potentially inside the opera house itself. Since she didn’t currently have a protector. “When was the last time you’d seen her around here?”

“About two months ago. She’d said she was leaving for Brighton but would return to London if things didn’t work out. After she left me, she met with that same nob.”

Mary nodded. “Did they argue?”

“No. In fact, she sucked him off in exchange for coin...showing him some of her... skills.”

Oh, dear.

Heat burned in her cheeks as she glanced at Gabriel.

Bright cleared his throat. “Why do you know this?”

Mr. Taylor’s face reddened. “Because I watched from a hidden spot behind a hedgerow.”

Shocked silence reigned in the corridor where they were. Finally, the inspector asked, “Why?”

The younger man shrugged. “Why not? I have needs, same as any man, and if she wouldn’t do those things to me, I could imagine while I took matters in hand.”

At the last second, Mary stopped herself from pointing her gaze at the ceiling. She merely shook her head. Sometimes men were just basic creatures that should be looked upon with great askance. Putting the image of the young man getting his rocks off while watching a sex act from her mind, she asked, “Did Miss Kessler and the man have prior knowledge of each other? Had they been in a relationship?”

“I don’t think so.” Mr. Taylor shook his head. “There wasn’t intimate knowledge between them. They talked to each other as if they were strangers, and what they did in the gardens smacked of a business transaction. He was one of those titled lords. Lord Hindsley or some such.”

“Interesting, so then he wasn’t her former protector.” Bright pulled the calling card for the spa from his pocket and showed the other man. “Was he handing out these cards?”

“Yes, that was him!” The actor peered closely at the card before Gabriel put it away. “That’s all I know, Inspector. I swear it. I’m sad she’s dead, but I had nothing to do with it. You know how it is with women like her. It’s a difficult life.”

“Indeed, it is. ”

Mary waved a hand. “Where were you last night between seven and eight-thirty?”

He frowned. “Where do you think? Here. The comedy started around eight-thirty, and everyone in the first act was due to gather in the wings a half hour prior to curtain.”

Which put him in the crime scene’s vicinity. She glanced at Gabriel, who frowned.

Bright nodded. “Thank you, Mr. Taylor. You may go.” With the shake of his head, he put his notebook and pencil into a pocket of his greatcoat. “It would appear it’s imperative that we chase the investigation to Brighton.”

“So it seems.” Mary hid a yawn behind her hand. “Let’s go home, Bright. This has been an exhausting day, and now we need to add packing to the schedule, and I should talk over our plans with Cassandra.”

He nodded. “I don’t mind telling you that if I come back here, it will be too soon.” When his stomach growled so loudly it sounded like a beast, they both chuckled. “And I want my dinner.”

“Come, then, Inspector. We can’t have your basic needs not being met.” While an hour ago she’d hoped that might have included being bedded by him, currently she was far too tired to couple with him, not even for a celebration.

After taking her hand, he led her through the corridors. Every once in a while, the noise from the stage would filter to their ears. “Please know that I will give you the wedding night that you deserve, but it might not be tonight. I’m a bit knackered.” He turned his head and met her gaze with a smile that held wicked promise. “I wish to be fully cognizant and energetic when I make love to my wife for the first time.”

Flutters went through her heart. “I say it often, but you are quite the romantic, Bright.”

He grunted. “That is saying something when faced with a case like this, one that chips away at any sort of romance.”

At least she wasn’t the only one who felt that way. “It won’t always be like this.” She hoped so, for she wanted to finally put everything from her past behind her.

There was far too much to look forward to.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:56 am

October 18, 1819

Agape Spa

19 Brunswick Square

Brighton and Hove, England

When Gabriel and Mary arrived at the pleasure spa, he had serious doubts as to what the large and quite impressive townhouse hid behind its far too plain facade—with the exception of a glass cupola on the roof that slightly resembled an onion. Set in a proper square on Hove Beach which was a bit removed from Brighton proper where tourists flocked, or where the Regent had set up his residence.

Perhaps that was the reason for the location, but the terraced townhouse in an idyllic ivory color reposed in unassuming splendor amidst the blue backdrop of the sea. In fact, it was large enough to have triple the space of a regular sized townhouse in London. Set back from the shore by nearly two hundred yards, it hosted a decorative wall about the property to give it privacy from the neighbors on either side yet the townhouses here weren't connected. Foliage thrived in an impressive garden area off the rear of the dwelling, and no doubt that oasis opened out onto a private pathway to the beach.

The butler who opened the door had been dressed in proper livery, and by looking at him, one would have no idea what the building held, but the man of indeterminate years led them into a parlor to await a tour guide, for they had only said they were Mr. and Mrs. Bright, a newlywed couple wishing for an escape from the everyday

and that they had been given a calling card. At that point, he'd handed over the card they'd found in Miss Kessler's reticule, but he offered no further explanation.

Best to keep to the truth as they knew it.

He frowned at Mary. "I must say, I'm somewhat disappointed. Thus far, the building seems to be quite ordinary with nothing scandalous in the offing." There was a door at the other side of the small, ordinary parlor, with a small white plaque bearing only a silver drawing of a bunch of grapes, the same image that had been on the calling card.

"Perhaps all the secrets haven't yet been revealed," she said in a low whisper. "But you have to admit, this is thrilling even though I'm already missing Cassandra."

"She will be all right until we solve this case," he hastened to reassure her .

He'd managed to rent a townhouse in Regency Square, which was in Brighton proper, and since October was the height of the social Season at the seashore, he was fortunate to find anything to let. Instead of merely the planned fortnight, Gabriel had gone ahead and taken the property for a full month, for he figured Mary could use an extended period of relaxation and reflection once this case was solved, and they both would need some bonding time with each other as well as Cassandra. What was more, the whole staff at the London townhouse enthusiastically agreed to remove to Brighton for the duration, and it had been quite the feat transporting them and everyone's belongings to the holiday destination.

Had it been an expense? Damnation, yes, but his brother had gifted him with a few hundred pounds as a wedding gift, so most of that coin had gone into this endeavor. He didn't mind for it had made everyone happy, and it allowed him—as well as Mary—some peace of mind while they hopefully wrapped up this case.

“What I am currently concerned with is our inability to ferret out a solid suspect. We have many, and they each have a decent motive for killing Miss Kessler, but none of those motives is quite strong enough. Even if some of them have no clear alibi.”

“Isn’t that how every case is?” She shot him a grin that sent need shivering along his shaft. “People lie, even if they have no reason to, but every time, you manage to solve the case.”

“No, we solve the cases.” Before he could say more, the door with the grapes swung inward, and a woman, probably not more than two and twenty came in and he scrambled to his feet, but that was where anything ordinary ended.

Dressed in a toga-like dress that fell to her ankle, it was made of such a fine lawn that nothing was left to the imagination. Blue embroidery in the Greek style was embroidered along the bottom hem of the garment and a golden circlet lay on her upswept hair as if she were a Grecian goddess. Another slim band of gold rested on her left upper arm. Gold leather sandals were on her feet, whisper soft against the floor.

“Good afternoon. I am Aphrodite. Welcome to the Agape Pleasure Spa.”

Gabriel tried not to gawk at her, but he didn’t know where to focus his gaze except on her face, especially while his wife stood at his side. Not that he wanted to gape at this woman’s form. He was a happily married man.

This is going to prove difficult.

“Hallo. Your name is Aphrodite?”

She nodded and gave him a disarming smile. “Not my real name, of course. Everyone who works here has assumed a name from the Greek pantheon.”

“Ah.” Which would make identification next to impossible. “I am Mr. Bright, and this is my wife.” Under no circumstances did she need to know they were investigating two deaths.

“I know, and I have been told by the founder of this spa that you are newly married?” Her voice was melodious, and she smelled of honeysuckle.

“Yes.” Mary nodded. It was clear from her rigid posture that she was either jealous or threatened by the younger woman, or annoyed at him for looking. Possibly all three. “We are looking to put some... adventure into our relationship and were told this was where to come to accomplish that.”

“It absolutely is.” Aphrodite nodded and smiled at her, but her gaze slid back to him. She blatantly raked her bright green gaze up and down his body. “Your luggage has already been delivered into your suite, and we have given you one of the six on the ground floor. Since our dress code focuses more on comfort and temptation, there is a toga for you both, and a pair of Turkish trousers for Mr. Bright should you wish to utilize them.”

“Ah.” Mary frowned. “Will we be expected to wear those clothes while exploring the spa?”

“Of course not.” The younger woman smiled at her again. “It might take a couple of days, but once you see other guests in the attire, you’ll wish to wear it as well. Everything goes more easier when there is less clothing to manipulate.” Her laughter was like a tinkling bell. “However, only at our traditional dinners do we expect you to wear the traditional, proper clothing of society. We don’t view the human body as a scandal nor what we do with it a sin.”

“It is good to keep an open mind.” Gabriel cleared his throat. “And the non-traditional dinners?” To his credit, he’d become rather skilled in keeping his gaze on

a spot above her left shoulder.

“Every other night, you are invited to share in the feast of Dionysus-Bacchus—the god of wine, plant life, indulgence, revelry, folly, and wild passion, where anything is allowed and nothing is declared scandalous. That will be put on tonight, in fact.” She smiled and ushered them through the door that she’d come in. “Togas are required to attend. As is sitting and eating with other people who aren’t your spouses.”

Mary stifled a sound. “I think for the time being I will stick with my husband.”

“That is your choice, of course, but don’t be surprised if after a couple of days here, you change your mind. There is plenty to occupy both the mind and the body. ”

Once the door closed behind them, Gabriel and Mary followed their host through various corridors. As they walked the halls, they passed people wearing clothing much like Aphrodite’s, and to be honest, even for his semi-progressive mind, he was shocked. Hardened nipples and erect shafts were apparently the order of the day. When he glanced at Mary, her rounded eyes and the faint blush in her cheeks told him she was struggling to accept this world they’d inadvertently entered.

“When you explore the facilities, the gardens, or the seashore, you may wear whatever clothing you feel most comfortable in. After midnight when the weather is fair, sea bathing in the nude is highly encouraged. It is quite invigorating.”

He refused to think about that. “How many suites does the spa feature?”

“Twelve. Six on the ground floor and six on the third. On that level, there is also the reception area where you came in as well as a library, and a room devoted for clinic purposes in the event guests or anyone else falls ill. On the second level there is the main dining room, a study, a billiards room. On the fourth level is where the staff sleep.”

“How far out do you book reservations?” he couldn’t help but ask.

Her tinkling laughter sounded again as she paused before an oak door featuring carvings of Greek gods and goddesses frolicking naked lakeside. “One can only gain entry here if they have a card such as the one you surrendered upon arriving. To the outside world, this townhouse is merely the folly of a wealthy but eccentric earl.”

So far, with the exception of the costumes and the rather raucous sounding dinner, nothing was so disturbing as hinted about. “What about the services the spa provides?”

“Oh, I know you are going to be quite the favorite here, Mr. Bright, for you are clever and curious,” Aphrodite said as she pressed the door latch and swung the panel inward. “Please, come in and I will explain the rest.”

As he and Mary came into the large room that resembled something from a book of Grecian tales, their guide spoke again.

“Each suite here at Agape has two unique features—a garden grotto and a spa pool set into the floor.” She pointed out said feature as she walked them through the suite.

All around were low tables with cushions and pillows scattered about the tiled floor as if they’d entered a mythological place. Instead of a proper four-poster bed, there was a low pallet dressed in sumptuous fabrics in rich colors. A hint of steam curled up from the water in the spa pool, with a set of marble steps leading down into it .

“In your garden grotto, though there is copious plant life, the walls are all made of glass, which not only helps the plants to grow but also gives a couple a level of adventure and excitement. Your neighbors on all sides will be able to see within your grotto between the plants. There is a panel that slides open in the event you would like to experiment with your neighbors.”

It was at that point Gabriel began to think going undercover had been a huge mistake. “Ah,” was all he could think to say.

Taking the word as encouragement, Aphrodite moved to one of the walls of the suite. She tugged open a satin drapery to reveal glass windows that began midway up the wall. “Every suite has viewing windows into their neighbor’s rooms, so if you are shy, you can watch couples have intercourse and they can watch you. When you grow bolder in the pursuit of passion and pleasure, you are more than welcome to form a menage a trois or even trade partners. There is no wrong way to find pleasure and fulfillment here.”

“Oh, dear heavens,” Mary whispered.

Gabriel’s throat went dry, for on the other side of the wall, a couple was, indeed, wasting no time in having relations. With each other, thank goodness, but still. “What an... interesting concept.”

“It is. Here at Agape, we believe everyone is entitled to all the love and affection available to us. From everywhere.” Aphrodite drew the curtain closed, and he breathed a sigh of relief. She pointed to a set of what appeared to be restraints made from braided cloth that hung in one corner of the room. “If you are feeling particularly dominant or submissive and wish to explore that world, please feel free to make use of the restraints. They can be raised or lowered by the pulley system on the wall.”

He had seen many things in his life as a Bow Street principal officer and as an investigator, but this was beyond anything he could have fathomed. “How... fascinating.”

“I think so, and it is one of my favorite forms of entertainment and release.” She gave him a wink. “Lord Copperfield is the director of the spa; he was one of the founders,

and it is his vision that guests leave here with a greater appreciation for each other and open minds regarding pleasure.”

From the near-rabid adoration in the woman’s voice, it was clear she’d been “touched” by the peer’s “vision” more than she wanted to admit. “If possible, I would like to meet with the director when it is convenient or not.”

“I will put in the request.”

Then Aphrodite went through the other, more mundane features of the suite such as the washbasin and chamber pot behind a decorated screen in one corner of the room, the wardrobe where they could unpack, the small adjoining sitting room should they wish to occupy “proper” furniture or entertain other guests without bringing sexual relations into the conversation, and an array of foodstuffs and spirits spread out on a low table near the spa pool. A couple of vases of hothouse flowers provided pops of color in an otherwise bland, marble-based room. The curtains and cushions were of muted blue hues.

“You can immediately begin settling in, and as you can see, your spa clothing is laid out for you on the side of the bed. Please ring if you have questions about the spa or need amenities. That would be the blue bell pull.” Her gaze wandered back to him. “Only use the red one if either of you have enhanced needs you wish to have met here in your suite by either a member of the spa’s staff or another guest.” Then she winked as she bit her bottom lip. “For the time being, I will leave you here. Good afternoon.”

Gabriel nodded. “Thank you for the information.”

“Oh, Aphrodite?” Mary called as the woman reached the corridor door.

“Yes?”

“What is the room on the right used for?”

A slow, sensuous smile curved the younger woman’s lips. “Once-a- week orgies that are held every Friday afternoon and go well into the night. They are quite popular.” Then she left the suite, softly closing the door behind her.

“This, uh, wasn’t exactly what I thought it would be,” Mary admitted as she walked about the room, removing her bonnet and gloves as she went.

“My sentiments exactly.” His brain didn’t know how to process everything they’d been told let alone saw. In some distraction, he removed his greatcoat and top hat, dumping them on a low table. Next, he yanked off his gloves as well as his jacket of green superfine. They landed on the same table. “At least it’s only Tuesday.”

“Thank goodness.” When Mary extricated herself from her pelisse, she draped it over the back of a chair, she then drifted toward the garden grotto room. “Can you believe people pay the exorbitant cost associated with staying here?”

“Those costs go well beyond the coin.” He couldn’t imagine cheating on his wife let alone doing such intimate things with someone else’s wife... or another woman found beneath this roof, whatever her designation.

“In the event you wondered, I am not interested in any of the entertainments here, though I might try sea bathing... in the daylight hours. And I certainly don’t wish to wear a di aphanous garment such as dear Aphrodite modeled.”

Interest shivered along his shaft. “I don’t know, you might look quite arresting in such a thing if you were to don it for me.” As he glanced about their suite, he grinned. For the first time since he’d wed Mary, he had dedicated time alone with her, and he was damned randy.

After dinner on their wedding night, she'd fallen asleep, and he didn't wish to disturb her. The following two days had been busy with packing and such, so they hadn't had time to have a conversation let alone even attempt a quick coupling.

"Do hush, Bright." She opened the glass door and moved into the private—or not so private—garden grotto. "It is quite heated and moist out here, but with all the potted plants and flowers, it's lovely."

Bloody hell. Why did she need to say those specific words?

Tossing caution to the wind, he followed his wife out into the private garden. "Mary?" When she turned to face him, Gabriel pulled her roughly into his arms and then claimed her lips with his. Dear God, it had been so long—seemingly—that desire careened through his form like a drunken seagull.

"Oh!" Mary's utterance against his lips sent electric pulses through his blood. She peered up at him and smiled. "Now that is the man I've dreamed of and remembered."

"Ha. Shall I continue in this den of iniquity?"

"Most certainly."

"Good." His chest tightened with appreciation while his prick hardened in anticipation. With a half growl half chuckle, he slipped an arm about her waist and hauled her firmly against his body. When her eyebrows rose, he claimed her lips again, and as she rested her palms on his chest with a tiny sigh, he clasped his free hand to the enticing curve of her hip merely to hold her closer. Finally, alone with his wife and there was nothing to interrupt them.

Exactly what he'd been wanting since he'd spoken vows to her.

Her teasing lips were as soft as a rose petal and just as inviting. And, minx that his wife was, she returned his kiss with a skill of her own. Mary's fingers curled into his lapel the longer he teased the seam of her lips with the tip of his tongue, but she never opened for him. Oh, he was familiar with this tactic; she wanted him to work for that reward. Very well, he would wait her out. Besides, he was content to move over her mouth, licking and giving gentle nibbles to the corners as he primed her desire.

They had the whole afternoon ahead of them .

Minutes passed as they gave and took from that embrace. Hands went exploring. Tongues and lips became involved in the fun as various pieces of clothing were removed. Garments fell to the stone floor unheeded. Heat rose in his blood, and desire hardened his shaft. Never had he wanted her more.

“Mary...”

With a parting nip to his bottom lip, she pulled away and moved out of his arms. Her breathing had accelerated. Love lined her expression, but need darkened her eyes—the same emotions that rocked him to his soul. Desire caused his pulse to pound in his ears. When she eased her gaze down the length of his body to linger at the bulge between his thighs, he stifled a groan. His member pulsed with need as her highly addictive lips curved into a knowing smile as she met his gaze once more.

“Come inside, Bright.” Grabbing his hand, she easily tugged him back into their suite and then made certain to draw the satin drapes across the glass panels and door. “I am not in the mood to share your body with anyone else and I don't want anyone watching me do unspeakable things to you.”

He couldn't contain his grin, for when Mary was in an amorous mood, there was no stopping her. “In this, I quite agree, but for right now, it will be me doing wicked things to you .” And he intended to fully draw out this coupling until they both

couldn't stand the teasing any longer.

It was time to consummate and consecrate his long-awaited marriage.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:56 am

“Since we have been given a rather scandalous suite, let us make use of it at least somewhat,” Gabriel said against Mary’s lips as he continued to kiss her as well as work at removing the remainder of her clothing.

“Where to start?” She shoved her hands beneath his lawn shirt, and the instant her fingers touched his skin, he swore it seared his chest.

“The pool. I’ll wager it’s heated thermally.” Seconds later, he wrenched the shirt up and off his body while she did the same with her shift. He temporarily lost the ability to breathe when gazing upon her nearly naked body. Those dark pink nipples were pebbled and practically begging for his attention, and as his gaze landed at the thatch of blonde curls at the apex of thighs, his mouth watered, and his shaft tightened. “Dear God, you are delectable.”

“Well, the sooner you disrobe fully, the sooner you can explore further, Inspector,” his wife said with a wink as she toed off her slippers. Then, turning her back to him, she bent over to manipulate the beribboned garters, looked with provocation over her shoulder at him, and proceeded to remove her silk stockings.

“Where did you learn such seduction skills?” If he wasn’t careful, he’d shoot his wad prematurely. He hopped on one foot while attempting to remove the opposite boot, which only resulted in him tumbling onto one of the sumptuous divans.

Mary giggled. She removed the pins from her hair and let them fall to the floor. The pings they made as they hit the marble were like fairy bells. “Perhaps I’ve spent too much time around you.” While he pulled off his first boot, she moved around the furniture toward the pool and then slowly descended the four wide marble steps into

the water. “Oooh, it’s lovely and slightly warm.”

Bloody hell. Gabriel nearly died a painfully erotic death as he yanked off his second boot, for she waded into the water and kept going until the surface covered her breasts.

“I’ll say this about the spa. As questionable and scandalous as it is, no expense has been spared in the building of this place.” Then she dunked beneath the water line. Seconds later, she resurfaced and slicked back her drenched hair, which only served to give him a tantalizing peek of her breasts .

“To what end, though? It has to be about more than finding pleasure in any number of unorthodox ways.” After pulling off his breeches and his socks, he hurried through the trail of clothes and the furniture dotting the floor to join her in the pool. Immediately, the warmth of the water seeped into his body and bones, and it was indeed wonderful. “What is the founder of this place receiving over and above having his prick serviced whenever he wants it?”

Mary shrugged as she drifted closer to him. When she reached his location, she laid a wet palm against his skin. “Perhaps it’s the money. We didn’t pay for this suite because we had a card, but what do you guess a stay in one of these suites costs?”

“I don’t know, but how does he gain other business if he doesn’t charge people who have a card?” He dropped his hands on her shoulders and peered into her eyes. “Are the clients who have a card required to bring another couple to the spa?”

“Is that the mystery you want to concentrate on while we’re here in a thermal pool without a stitch of clothing on? I honestly don’t think the reason for the spa matters.”

“You’re right, of course.” Gently, he urged his hands up her slender neck to cup her cheeks, then he kissed her as if he had all the time in the world.

Mary slipped her hands over his shoulders to twine about them. As she layered herself against him and returned his regard, his erection brushed her hip. “Tease me, Bright. I want to come undone spectacularly.”

“I have wanted to do nothing except that ever since I spoke my vows to you, but this case and life had other ideas.” Ignoring his own need, Gabriel turned her about so that she was in his arms with her backside to his front.

“Isn’t this position how we began this week?” She wriggled her rear end, and that provocative movement jostled his hard shaft.

Pleasure-tipped pain twisted down his spine. It was going to prove difficult to ignore how much he wanted to bury himself in her honeyed heat, but he wouldn’t join with her until he’d encouraged her to fall over that edge at least once. “You know, wife, we should do something with that tart mouth,” he couldn’t help but quip then he urged his lips down the side of her neck.

“Oh, I rather think we should.” She put a hand to his hip and her fingers brushed his erect length. “I can do a few things with my tongue and lips with that impressive piece of equipment you are sporting.” The suggestion came out in a sing song voice, and damn was he glad the curtains were drawn over all the glass panels throughout the room .

“Later, I promise. I am ready to explode, but for now, I am chasing giving you pleasure.” As he spoke, he took her breasts in his hands, and once more he was glad for that fullness that made such an act so pleasing. The odd combination of the air on his wet skin coupled with the warmth of her against him made him grin. God, he needed this interlude.

“Mmm.” She put her hands over his, guiding him. “I have missed you, missed us like this.”

“I have too.” The more Gabriel squeezed and massaged those globes, the more she moved restlessly against him, but when he brushed the pads of his thumbs over her nipples, she gasped, and her fingers tightened on his. “It is almost that we’ve lived a lifetime since we wed, but it has only been days ago,” he whispered and continued to tease her breasts.

“Sometimes it is like that when working a case,” Mary panted out between soft moans. “On a case you are not even going to see a payment on.”

For a few seconds, he continued to strum his fingers over those hardened tips. “There are times when the coin doesn’t matter, and one should do the right thing.” Then he applied himself to teasing and torturing her nipples all the more. Could he send her flying merely from stimulating her breasts?

“You are a good man, Gabriel.” She gasped when he pinched one turgid tip, and as he rolled that bud from root to tip, she cried out and shook in his hold.

“I try.” He rolled her nipples and manipulated her nipples with his fingers then caressed one hand down her torso. “But never think my cases are more important to me than you.” He was nearly lost in her, drunk on her. The longer he worried her nipples, the more she stirred restlessly in his hold. “Lean into that bliss, Mary. Fall for me.” Knowing that he would soon have his mouth on not only her nipples but between her thighs left him gasping and his chest tight with anticipation.

Not wanting further conversation, Gabriel put a hand to her cheek, nudged her head about so he could kiss her while with his other hand, he continued to roll and pinch one of her nipples until she was gasping for breath. They remained locked like that together, for the embrace was incredibly enjoyable for both of them.

How the devil had he been fortunate enough to win this remarkable woman?

“Dear lord, you must leave off,” she gasped out. “I’m going to melt.”

“That is exactly what I want you to do.” With a chuckle, Gabriel eased a hand down her torso to urge his fingers between her thighs. As those digits slid along her folds, Mary trembled in his arms. “As many times as you can stand. ”

“Gabriel, I—” Her words ended on a squeal as he brought that swollen pearl out of hiding and rubbed his fingertips over it. “Dear heavens, you know just where to touch me for maximum impact.”

“Because I know you as a woman, not just as a bed mate.” While he continued to bedevil that button at the center of her pleasure, he continued to pluck and roll her nipple in the hopes she would break soon.

Perhaps it had been the fact the tension between them had been building over the past handful of days since they’d spoken vows or perhaps their teasing had seen her primed, or perhaps it was the overall attitude of the spa, but Mary finally fell into a release, but it wasn’t nearly as spectacular as he’d wanted.

And it certainly didn’t speak to his prowess, especially if any of the neighbors were currently listening in their own rooms.

Yes, it was a matter of pride.

“Now that you are relaxed, we’ll move to the next stage of my seduction.” But first, he turned her in his arms and spent copious minutes kissing her because he could—because he loved her. Then he moved her to the side of the pool. The thought occurred to him that he could claim her in the pool against the wall, but he really didn’t fancy that and wanted a more tactile experience.

Mary looked up at him while sliding a hand down his chest. “There is wicked

scheming in your eyes. What are you about?”

“I’m not finished loving you yet.” He tangled his fingers in her wet hair, tugged until her chin went up and he kissed her lips.

“I should hope not.” When she brushed her fingertips along his hardened length, he sucked in a breath. “This is quite tempting, Inspector. I need to explore.” Gently, she wrapped her fingers about his girth and then gave him a few strokes that would surely drive him mad before too long.

“Not today, for it won’t take much for me to embarrass myself, and when I come, it will be with you—in you—for nothing else is acceptable.” Knowing exactly what he wanted to do, he grasped her hips, lifted her upward, and then set her arse on the lip of the pool. “This coupling is to celebrate our wedding.”

Surprise jumped into her eyes as he urged her backward and encouraged her legs to part. “What are you doing?”

“Tasting you, pleasuring you, sending you over before we move to a different location.”

“Are you bragging about your skill, Bright?” Mary trembled, probably with anticipation, for even being out of the water, it wasn’t all that cold in the room. “Men who are good in bed don’t need such claims. ”

How much did he adore her tart mouth and teasing, especially now that she had seemed to put the maudlin feelings for her first husband’s mistress behind her? “I rather think I am.” Gabriel grinned, and for fleeting seconds, he fell in love with her all over again. “But you can make that assessment after you hit release a second time.” As he spoke, he glided his fingers along her flesh made slick from his teasing, back and forth, to prep her. “Shall we begin?” Before she could utter a response, he

reacquainted himself with the swollen pearl hidden in those folds.

“Oh!” She shivered as she reclined backward on her elbows. “I am never ready for this; it’s just so scandalous but feels so lovely.”

“Quite fitting for where we are, hmm?” With each pass of his fingers, her trembling increased, as did her moans of approval. “I... oooh...”

“Speechless already?” Over and over, he worked that tiny bundle of nerves, and when her moans grew louder, he grinned. “Enjoying that, are you?” It was the height of erotic, giving his wife pleasure.

My wife. Never had he taken such joy in two little words.

“Do hush,” she managed to gasp out as she tried to wriggle into a more upright position. When he wouldn’t let her, she huffed. “Bright...”

“To the feast, then?”

“What do you think, Inspector?” A knowing light lit her eyes, but it was that little quirk of a smile that became the beginning of his undoing.

He adored it when she used his title, but he wanted—needed—to hear her say his name. Loudly. “Very well.” Then he gripped her inner thighs and splayed her open. “My sweet Mary, you are perfection throughout.”

“Such gammon.”

“The truth, and you should know that by now. I tell you it quite often.” The second he put his mouth to her button, she squeaked. He chuckled, for it was so rewarding to make love to her.

“Merciful heavens.” Mary caught her bottom lip briefly between her teeth as he employed his lips and tongue to her most sensitive, private parts. “This... You...” Her breath came in pants, and with each nibble, every nip, all the swipes and strokes of his tongue, her eyes closed and her head lolled onto a shoulder.

Every so often, Gabriel would peek up at her before continuing his wicked work. Her thighs trembled at either side of her head. Her body shook as he suckled that slippery nubbin. Tears fell to her cheeks, but he had no worries that he was hurting her, for Mary often cried during coupling sessions. It was one of the ways tension rid itself from her form.

When she touched one of her nipples, rolled it to help enhance the pleasure he’d already given her, he nearly shot his wad, for it was the height of erotic to see her assist in bringing herself pleasure. Yet she wasn’t quite as needy as he’d like. He kept on with his work, meant to toss her over the edge, yet she hovered there, waiting, her pulse fluttering wildly in her neck, her cheeks pinkened with stimulation.

“Please leave off! It’s too much.”

“Sweeting, I know you can go the distance. We play at this regularly.” Humming softly, he kept her poised on the razor’s edge, pinning her there with every penetrating stroke of his tongue, each calculated nibble, every round of suction on that swollen button until she squirmed on that lip of the spa pool. One of her hands went to his head. She furrowed her fingers into his hair, perhaps to shove him away but also to hold him to her tighter, guide him to exactly where she needed him.

And it was bloody brilliant, for he adored how she lived life to the fullest.

“Oh, oh, oh...” Her body shook, but instead of him letting her squirm away, he gripped her thighs tighter.

“Hold. Almost there.” It was vital to concentrate on her. Otherwise, his pulsing shaft would take all his attention, and he’d be damned if he’d ruin this moment prematurely.

Her back arched, which put her deeper into his care. “I am going to break.”

“That is the purpose of this exercise.” He followed the comment with a particularly strong bit of suction.

“Ah! Gabriel!” Mary shattered in spectacular fashion with a half-muffled. “Dear God that was intense.”

“I’m not done.” Bright glanced up, but her eyes were closed, and he’d wager she was only half-cognizant. “Show me how much your body wants me, sweeting. Come for me again.”

“You don’t play fair,” she whispered and gasped while he continued to worry her swollen nubbin.

“No, I don’t, but then, I adore playing your body and bringing you to bliss. Watching you fall into pleasure? I live for those moments.” When he inserted two fingers, pumping them in and out of her convulsing passage, she bucked against his hand. “Mmm, Mary, how much do you want me?” As he spoke, he twisted those digits in order to massage a spot on her spasming flesh he knew from past experience would send her flying.

“Ga-bri-el!” The word was long and drawn out in a keening wail that would probably embarrass her after the fact, but to him it was sweet music. “Oh, dear heavens, that was... There are no words.” Her thighs trembled, while over and over contractions squeezed around his fingers still deep inside her.

With a grin, he withdrew those digits and pulled away. She could do nothing else but collapse backward, apparently boneless.

“Mmm, liked that, did you?” Every time with Mary made him feel as if he could conquer the world.

“I have no more strength.”

“That is too bad, for I’m not done with you yet, Mrs. Bright, and I’m going to need you over on that divan.” Then he dipped beneath the water line merely to help take the edge off the desire roaring through his veins. By the time he came up for air and climbed out of the pool, his wife had relocated to the indicated piece of furniture.

She watched him with half-closed eyes as she reclined backward. “There is no wonder in mind why you receive so many looks from women here. Every one of them is undressing you with their eyes and they think about being bedded by you.”

With a snort, he slicked back his hair and then joined her on the divan. “I don’t know why. I’m ordinary and old.”

“You are not, on either count.” As his arms came around her, she drew a hand down his body and curled her fingers around his painfully erect shaft. “You are easy on the eyes, intelligent, respectful, and the best man I have ever met.”

Unexpectedly, moisture rose into his eyes. He claimed her mouth in a gentle kiss, but her touch, every squeeze she gave his stones, threatened to send him over the brink. Shifting his position, Gabriel caught her in the cage of his arms, keeping the bulk of his weight on his elbows while he settled between her splayed legs. “Let me love you, sweeting. Right now, I want to consummate our union and show you how much I adore you.”

She frowned, but she released her hold on his equipage. “You show me that every day that goes by.” When she met his eyes, his heart trembled. “I think I’ve known that from the first.”

“Truly?” His voice was hoarse and ragged from strain. It wouldn’t be long until his control snapped.

“Yes. There is no one for me but you.”

“I feel the same way, and now you are mine. Exclusively mine, and I will throttle any man who tries to take that away.” Emotional, he set out to kiss her senseless. When they both paused for air, he said, “I want to experience everything with you, Mary, all the raw and messy emotions because we both deserve a second chance when it comes to marriage, especially a union built in honesty. ”

“We do, indeed.” Such love reflected in her eyes that he nearly became lost in it.

“What the devil did I ever do right that the gods gave me you?” Pressed into her embrace, with her fingers furrowing through the hair at his nape and her body soft and pliant beneath his, the sensation of falling assailed him. Loving this woman had been an adventure unto itself, and he hoped it never ended. He kissed her with all the ease of familiarity, but nothing about this coupling was familiar; everything was new, exciting, safe—because they were married.

Her fingers glanced along his shoulders. “Perhaps it’s not about checks or balances but more about needing a challenge, a catalyst to bring about change.” When she nipped a line of feather-weighted kisses beneath his jaw, need shivered over him. “You and I build each other up. We support each other. Beyond that, we are partners in everything.”

“As it should be.” He had all he’d ever wanted, and he’d found it this petite, blonde

wonder who knew her own mind and possessed a tart mouth. Gabriel trailed his lips along the column of her throat and the soft skin called to him. He continued over her collarbones then took a pert nipple into his mouth, spent copious moments teasing that bud to the best of his ability. When Mary moaned her pleasure, he switched his attention to the other tip. God, but he couldn't have enough of her lush body—of her. Everything about her teased or challenged, and in turn, all of it aroused him. Eventually, he returned to her lips and endeavored to introduce himself to her all over again.

As her husband and the man who would do anything to protect her—love her.

“Gabriel...” She danced her fingers along his shoulders, swept them over his chest to rake through the mat of hair there. The muscles in his gut clenched; his shaft pulsed with urgency. “I love you.”

“I love you too.” It was so different this time ‘round that it was almost laughable. Perhaps he had to suffer through his disastrous first marriage in order to arrive at this one.

He kissed her again, for her lips were all too addicting, made love to her mouth, hoped that he would always keep her happy, live up to her expectations. With a knee between hers, he splayed her thighs. “This will not be the only time you and I come together during our stay here.” His hold on control was slipping; he needed to join with her body. The tip of his length glanced over her opening, and he sucked in a breath, for he already knew how wet she was, and it had nothing to do with being in the pool.

“I certainly hope not,” she said softly, and when she flashed a smile, he was completely lost in her. “I’m going to need much, much more of from my husband, since this is our honeymoon.”

“Part of it, at least, but I can’t wait until we’re back with our little girl... as a family.” Gabriel took possession of her mouth once more and at the same time, he thrust into her honeyed heat. Oh, she felt all too marvelous, like being welcomed home to a place he’d no idea existed before he’d met her. A sigh of contentment left his lips. Never had he been as happy as he was right now. “Damn.”

“No matter how often you bed me, I always adore this moment.” Mary adjusted beneath him, pulling him to her as she wrapped herself around him. He fit all too perfectly in the cradle of her hips, and she held him there, shielded from the world, wanted for who he was with no judgment about his past or his failures, merely supporting him as she’d done from the first. Buried deep inside her warmth, he knew he’d found the perfect wife for him.

“Gabriel? What’s wrong?” Concern furrowed her smooth brow while she canted her hips, which sent him in deeper.

But he didn’t move. He couldn’t. Not when it felt all too good being joined like this. “Nothing. Everything is just right.” He held her gaze and grinned. “Perfect.”

They communed without words, for none were needed. She would always be there to help and support him no matter what he faced, and he vowed to do the same for her. Being partners with a woman in every aspect of life was a beautiful thing. While she held onto him with her arms looped about his shoulders, he pushed into her heat with slow, measured precision, wishing to draw the act out for as long as he could. Logically, he knew that wasn’t possible, for he was well and truly primed to explode. Deeper and deeper he plunged until they were one, joined far greater than just the mere press of bodies.

“Yes!” As her cries of enjoyment came faster, Mary dug her fingernails into his back, moved her hands down his spine. She clutched his arse cheeks, holding him impossibly closer, her hips moving in time to his. Sweat and the residual water from

the pool had their skin gliding against each other; they exchanged pants of breath.

Everything shared.

With every thrust, every stroke, tingling sensation raced up his member and settled into his stones. Release wasn't far off. "Damn, I'm nearly gone." And they had barely gotten started.

"Then make it count, Bright. We can go slowly the next time." She gave him such a sultry, inviting look that his control wavered, and he increased his rhythm. "Or perhaps I'll coerce you into those restraints."

Would he ever not adore her?

Over and over, he claimed her body, rocking them both, leaving her with no doubt as to how he felt about her. Perhaps wanting to join their souls, he drove deep into her core, stroking in and out in the hopes he would be all she ever needed, that he would never disappoint her, that she would forget the horror of her first marriage. She met his gaze, held his head between her palms, her expression reassuring, and he knew they would be all right. Then the urgency riding him changed into voracious hunger and undeniable need. With a ragged moan, Gabriel continued to thrust, his hands on her hips holding her steady as he claimed her.

Cherished her.

"Please say that you love me as I do you."

"Never doubt that." She put a hand between them in order to worry the nubbin at her center, and it gave him a sense of pride that she felt comfortable enough to seek her own pleasure. "Yes, oh I do!" Her moans blended with his and she held him.

He grinned as he labored to keep himself together. “Say my name, sweeting. Shout it and make our neighbors jealous because I belong solely to you.” Perhaps it was vanity, but he didn’t care, and he pumped into her more powerfully than before.

His sweet Mary didn’t disappoint. “Ack! Gabriel!” When she shattered, she didn’t do so quietly. Oh, no. His wife, always surprising, screamed as she fell into release. Whether it was for theatrical effect or because she truly felt uninhibited, he didn’t know. Neither did he care, for it was beautiful. She whispered his name over and over like a prayer, and as her core contracted around his length, he uttered a curse and pushed through those waves.

But the moment was gone... he was gone.

All too soon he surrendered to the vortex of pleasure he’d created with her. A heated tide of bliss washed over him so intensely he caught his breath and gave himself over to it. Loath to have the exquisite coupling end, he thrust once more to prolong the act, but he was done. As his pulse pounded in his temples and roared in his ears, and his length pulsed deep inside her, he collapsed on top of her, wrapping her in his arms.

Minutes, perhaps hours later when he came back to himself and Mary stirred, he rolled off her and onto his side to contemplate her. “I think we both needed that connection, that release.”

“Agreed, and it was splendid.” Her smile held an exhausted edge as she laid a hand on his chest. “Truly, I have the best husband.”

“You do, indeed.” With a wink, he leaned over and pressed a kiss to her forehead. “But then, I have the best wife, and she is every inch the investigator that I am.”

She laid a palm to his cheek. Before she could say anything, her stomach issued a loud growl. “We should probably make inroads into that luncheon they’ve provided

for us.”

“I could eat.” The spread did look inviting—fresh fruit, nuts, cheeses, cold cuts, bread, honey and jams, and plenty of choices of wines, meads, and other spirits. “Afterward, I want to make use of that pool for a bit of a bath.”

“Now that sounds like a good plan. After that?”

He shrugged. “We’ll do some exploring around the townhouse and grounds, perhaps even try to win an audience with the founder of the spa.”

“I did say I wanted adventure with you.” With a wink, she climbed over him and made sure certain various interesting portions of her body brushed against his. “Thank you for keeping your word about that, husband.”

Never was that word as sweet as it was when she said it, and his heart squeezed. “I would do anything for you, Mary. Trust me on that.”

She stared down at him after gaining her footing. “My dear Bright, I trust you implicitly.”

“Shall we attend dinner?” He heaved himself to his feet and wandered toward the sumptuous pallet that would serve as their bed. “Are you that daring?”

“Absolutely not, on both counts.” A giggle escaped her. “I have no desire to take part in that crazy hedonistic revelry, but I wouldn’t mind having a picnic dinner on the seashore with you. I’ve never been to Brighton, so everything is new for me.”

He couldn’t wait to show it to her, and share the sunset. They had a lifetime to experience everything together. This was only the beginning.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:56 am

Mary was uncommonly happy as she and Gabriel wandered the corridors of the spa. With her hand in his and the scent of him wafting to her nose with each step, she sighed in contentment.

After they'd finally consummated their marriage, they'd enjoyed the generous luncheon that the spa had provided, and once their bellies were full, he had cajoled her into the pool to relax in the slightly warm spring water that apparently seeped upward through the floor, for the suites on the first level had been built over the springs. The kitchens had been erected in a different wing since a basement hadn't been possible so close to the sea.

They'd cavorted a bit in the water where its depth was a few inches below Mary's height then sat on the marble steps and talked about everything that wasn't case related. They'd even discussed replacing Cassandra's governess with someone more suitable, perhaps adding a couple of tutors in whatever subjects she was most interested in.

Following that, they'd both bathed with finely milled French soap left in the suite that smelled like a lemon grove. Once they were properly refreshed, they'd dressed in their proper, non-scandalous clothing and set out to explore.

One thing was certain: she had needed those releases he'd given to her, for they had cleared the blockages and cobwebs from her brain, and she was ready to focus on the case.

"Where shall we go, sweeting?" He brought her hand to his lips and kissed the back. "We haven't plans until the dinner hour." Of which he promised to partake in the

gardens and after they'd watch the sunset.

"Let us walk the shore. I ache to feel the breeze in my hair and the sand between my toes, and what better time to do it than now, with a handsome inspector by my side?" Oh, he was an attentive lover, but best of all, with that session, they'd connected once more, and though their current case was maudlin and linked to her past, the hopelessness she'd once felt had faded.

All due to this larger-than-life man who hadn't consigned her feelings and emotions to those of a hysterical woman who had no control.

"That sounds like a lovely way to pass the time. "

As they winded their way through the corridors, they passed couples as well as people by themselves who were dressed in the recommended scandalous garb. Though he nodded politely at them, his gaze never lingered on the women, and some of them were quite striking in the nearly sheer togas.

"Why do you never stare at the women? I wouldn't be jealous if you wished to appreciate a beautiful woman, even if she is half-clothed."

"Why does my eye need to wander?" He shrugged. "I have found everything I have ever needed in you." When he turned his head to glance at her, there was nothing but honesty and affection in his hazel eyes. "Other men might find themselves tempted in a place like this, but they were never strong to begin with. They were never committed, which is no doubt why they are here. There is only one woman beneath this roof who tempts me beyond reason."

Warmth went through her chest as her heart trembled. "Pretty words, Inspector."

"True words, Mrs. Bright." He winked. "It was a hard road to convince you to trust

me, that I wasn't like other men you'd known, and an even more difficult path to encourage you to marry me, but nothing was sweeter than hearing you recite vows to me."

Was it possible to love a man more than she did right now? Mary blinked away the tears that wanted to well in her eyes. "That means much to me, for you didn't wish to marry again when I met you."

"You changed my mind on that as well as many other things." His expression sobered. "My last marriage left a bitter taste in my mouth and soured me from trusting women, but then you came along, and my world tilted."

She nodded. "The right person makes the difference." Would this union need attention and work to keep it as amazing as it had started? Of course it would. Everything worth doing required effort, but they would do it together.

By now, they'd gained the outdoor gardens at the rear of the townhouse. A woman around her age entered from the direction of the seashore, slightly harried and definitely windblown. What was more, she had the same sort of look in her eye that Theresa used to have when she thought she was trapped in her lot in life.

"Good afternoon." Mary greeted her with what she hoped was a welcoming smile. "I am Mrs. Bright. I don't know that I've seen you around today."

"Oh. Miss Brannett." She shook wrinkles out of her plain brown skirting as well as brushed some of the sand from her clothing. "I am just coming in to work and like to walk the shore beforehand."

Ah, that explained why she wasn't in the "uniform" of the other ladies here. "What type of work do you do?" When she glanced at Bright and slightly widened her eyes, hoping he understood to give them a bit of privacy, she returned her attention back to

the other woman.

A blush stained Miss Brannett's cheeks. "My official position is a courtesan." She shrugged as Bright moved away to apparently find immense interest in one of the potted ferns. "Sometimes, male guests at the spa don't wish to fraternize with couples or couple with someone else's wife."

Now that was interesting. "Do you live here?"

"No." She shook her head. "I live in a boarding house on the other side of Brighton. The rent is decent so it's not as big of a struggle as being in London, and with the Season at its height right now, there is a good amount of business."

Though she didn't appear embarrassed at what she did for a living, Mary frowned. "I'll take your word for it. I knew a woman who'd come to work here doing the same thing you are. Did you know her? A Miss Theresa Kessler."

The other woman nodded. "I knew of her, but neither of us had been here long enough to become close friends. In fact, I haven't seen her around for a while."

"I heard she died," Mary continued. She didn't want to tell the woman Theresa had been murdered. There were still other questions to ask.

Miss Brannett's eyes rounded. "She's dead?"

"So I've heard." Mary nodded. "Do you know why she was back in London when she had employment out here?"

"Last week, she was talking to someone in the corridor. She said she'd made a mistake in coming here to work, and it had cost her the most important man in her life, that she had a meeting with him and hoped to make everything right between

them.”

One of Mary’s eyebrows lifted. That must have been Lord Carmichael. “Did she mention who?”

“No.” Miss Brannett shook her head. “But from what I heard, she fancied herself in love and it was a surprise, I guess, and she really wanted to get back to him.”

Good for her, and it made this story all the more tragic. “No one here hated her enough that they might track her to London and kill her?”

Miss Brannett glanced sharply at her. “I don’t think so, but then I don’t have much time for gossiping. Lord Mickelson makes sure we are all kept busy. To his way of thinking, if we have time to talk, we’re not managing our time wisely, because there are always men to entertain. ”

“Which means they continue to come back and spend money.”

The other woman shrugged. “I have to go. My shift is coming up.”

“Well, it was lovely to meet you.” Mary waved her off then she caught up to Bright. He’d sat upon a wrought iron bench nestled in the midst of green shrubberies. “Did you hear that?”

“I did.” With a wicked twinkle in his eyes, he pulled her down onto his lap so that her legs hung off the side of his. When she squealed, he grinned. “While I am glad a woman like Miss Kessler finally realized she was in love and with a decent chap like Lord Carmichael, I can’t help think it the height of disappointing that someone cut her life short to prevent her from hearing those words said to her or being able to say them to someone.”

“Agreed, and that is why it’s important to say such things to people while you have the chance.” Even though it was scandalous to sit in a public place on a man’s lap—even if that man was her husband—Mary slipped a hand to his nape, peered into his face, and then kissed his lips. When she was done, she whispered, “I love you, Gabriel. Never think I don’t.”

“I love you as well, sweet Mary.” He stole another kiss before leaning his forehead against hers. “What now?”

“To be honest, we need to speak with Lord Mickelson. As the founder of this spa, he should concern himself with everyone who works here, no matter the capacity, and he just doesn’t.” Hot annoyance stabbed through her chest. “I don’t care if a woman is a mistress, a courtesan, or a whore, she deserves respect.”

“Or let us go one step further and say all women deserve respect because when that happens, women will have the chance to change the world.” He nuzzled his nose into the crook of her shoulder. “Starting with you.”

“Do stop, Bright.” But she adored his playfulness as well as the feel of his strong arms around her. “We do need to find out if someone here hated Theresa enough to follow her to London and kill her.”

“And you think it might have been Lord Mickelson?”

“Not necessarily, but someone did.” She laid her head on his shoulder. “Perhaps I should wear my toga-style dress when we interview him.”

“Absolutely not. I am the only man allowed to see your body.”

She chuckled, for he was charming in his possessiveness. “The toga is a covering.”

“That you can see through, and if your curves are on display, you will not be wearing said dress.” Determination lit his eyes, but he softened the words with a few feather weighted kisses beneath her jaw. “You are mine. ”

She blew out a breath. “It might help our cause.”

“It won’t. Though men are visual creatures, seeing too much flesh too many times a day renders a man desensitized to the wonder of it.” Gabriel licked and nibbled the side of her neck. “So if you track him to earth dressed in everyday clothing, perhaps he will pay more attention. There are times when the imagination is fired by not being able to see the enticing bits.”

“I’ve never thought about such things before, but perhaps you are correct.” As she spoke, Mary furrowed her fingers through the hair at his nape. “I think you are quite attractive when you wear your evening attire.”

“Ah, see?” When he gave her that grin meant especially for her, flutters went through her lower belly.

A few other guests came into the gardens, but none of them glanced their way, since their bench was hidden by the greenery.

She dropped her voice. “What if I promise to bring you to bliss orally later if you let me interview Lord Mickelson in my toga dress?”

For long moments, Gabriel considered that, but he finally shook his head. “I won’t budge from my stance regarding you wearing scandalous attire in front of the men here. However, I will accompany you to Lord Mickelson’s study and encourage him to tell us what we need to know if he proves too stubborn for you.”

“Why?”

“Because we are partners, and I would rather not put you in a position where things could grow out of hand all too quickly.”

That prompted a smile. “I rather doubt the founder of the spa would do anything to jeopardize his position or put this place into the interest of the press.”

“It doesn’t matter. Where you go, I go.”

“You are a good man, Bright.” She laid a palm against his cheek. “We will need an excuse as to why we are wandering about in our everyday clothing.”

He shrugged then slipped his fingers about her wrists and gently caught them behind her back. “We’ll tell him we’re on the way to some erotic adventure or another. It’s not like there aren’t far too many of those around, and that we intend to stop by our suite to change before that. Surely, he won’t argue with that.”

“True. I also wish to try and befriend some of the maids, ask around about Theresa.” The barely there pressure of his fingers at her wrists as restraints sent fires of need into her blood. He’d never done that before; perhaps he was being influenced by this place. “As I suspected, courtesans aren’t housed at this property. There is simply not enough room for everyone. So if they were forced to rent rooms at a boarding house, that exposed them to more men in the community. And since the Season has become quite popular in Brighton, there is every possibility they took side clients in order to make ends meet.”

“And that means there was the chance that they could find a protector through those meetings, which would remove their need to work at the pleasure spa.”

She nodded, happy that he’d managed to follow along with her line of thought. “Exactly. In which case, Lord Mickelson would have motive if the skilled courtesans he’d recruited from London were to leave their positions here.”

A grin curved his sensual lips as he released her wrists. "I adore how your mind works." Then he framed her face with his hands and set out to apparently kiss her senseless. As he let left off merely so she could breathe, a couple of men loitered in their area. "It's but one reason I love you." He frowned at them. "Sorry, gentlemen, but if you think I am sharing this woman or letting anyone watch more than that kiss, you are sadly mistaken. I am a one-woman man, and I am also quite possessive of her."

A thrill went down her spine while she slipped off his lap. Oh, she certainly had her fill of her husband yet, but they needed to attend to business first. The sooner they could solve this case, the sooner they could get back to their own holiday.

"Come, Mr. Bright," she said with a fleeting glance at the two men who glanced at each other with knowing grins. "I have a few things you need to do for me," she said, and made certain she included a double-entendre merely for their audience. When she took his hand and tugged him to his feet, she hoped those men watched them retreat, because there was only one man in this spa she was interested in.

In all the ways that mattered.

They didn't find Lord Mickelson in the study, but eventually, after Bright used his charm on various female members of the staff, they found him in an office at the front of the townhouse that looked like the usual residence to anyone visiting off the street. It was where he probably met with his man-of-affairs, perhaps a bookkeeper, or various other members of society needed to help the business function, but they didn't need to know of the scandals hidden behind the walls.

And because he was in that particular office, he was dressed as any other gentleman of the beau monde , and from the looks of it, had an exquisite tailor as well as a knowledgeable valet, both of whom probably enjoyed sending him out in the world in the latest styles. His golden hair was arranged just so; his collar points the same, and

he held himself as though he was better than everyone else, which was instantly off-putting for her.

“Ah, Mr. and Mrs. Bright. What can I do for you both?” As he spoke, Lord Mickelson came around his large cherrywood desk and then sat on the corner of it. “It is highly irregular that any of the spa’s guests ask to meet with me; most don’t know who I am.”

Before Mary could formulate her first question, Gabriel cleared his throat.

“How many calling cards would you say you gave out prior to opening this spa?”

The peer shrugged. “I didn’t keep count. Why does it matter?”

“Of those cards, how many did you give to women you hoped would work for you in this spa as highly paid courtesans?”

A startled expression crossed Lord Mickelson’s handsome face. He crossed his arms at his chest. “What makes you believe there are courtesans here?”

She snorted. “We aren’t your usual people who swallow whatever lies are handed to us, my lord.” With a slight grin of her own, she continued. “In fact, we are here because of a Miss Theresa Kessler.”

“Ah yes. She didn’t stay here long before she told me the position isn’t what she wanted for her life.” He shook his head. “A pity, that, for she was quite skilled.” Then he blew out a breath. “She never explicitly came out and told me she quit, but she hasn’t shown up for her shifts in about a week.”

Bright cleared his throat. “That is because she is dead, Lord Mickelson. She was murdered at the Royal Opera House a few nights ago.”

“I see, and that is why you are truly here.” Annoyance flashed in his blue eyes. “You aren’t truly a married couple.”

Mary smiled. “Oh, but we are. In fact, we married the morning following finding Miss Kessler’s body.” She folded her hands in her lap. “In fact, as we work this case, we are beginning our honeymoon.” There was no shame in the admission.

“A rather risqué place to start a union.” Then he glanced at her, truly looked at her with a frown. “Why are you not wearing the suggested clothing?”

“Because I still have free will, my lord. And, despite what everyone here apparently believes, bodies and the worship thereof, should remain sacred between a married couple.” There were other things she could have said, but there was no point. This man built the spa for a reason that was still unknown.

Bright stood and moved to stand behind her chair. “Where were you the evening of the fifteenth, Lord Mickelson? ”

He scoffed. “Are you accusing me of killing Miss Kessler?”

“I am.”

“Now I know why your name is familiar. You used to work with Bow Street.”

“I did. But that doesn’t answer my question.”

The peer grinned. He relaxed and slid off the corner of his desk. “I was here, of course. The fifteenth was last Friday, and that meant the spa hosted an orgy on the top floor. I attended that event as I always do, but feel free to verify my story with my staff.”

Mary frowned. “Did it create a hardship when Miss Kessler decided not to work here any longer?”

“I wasn’t pleased, of course, but as to a hardship? Hardly. Do you know how many women are in London, desperate to make some sort of coin?” When neither of them answered, Lord Mickelson began to pace. “Most of the courtesans who are on staff are quite happy here. This is the only world they know, and at least here, they are cared for.” He rubbed a hand along the side of his face. “The one thing we didn’t take into account was the side effect of sex on demand.”

“Disease?” she couldn’t help asking.

“Of course not. Our women undergo medical examinations weekly.”

“What about the men you let in here as guests?” she couldn’t help but persist. “If a man wishes to cheat on his wife by coming here, there is a good possibility that he already has a disease, which could be passed on to others here.”

“We thought about that but have chosen to trust our male clients.”

She snorted. “Yet you don’t trust your courtesans. Do you know how ridiculous—” Bright’s hand on her shoulder cut off her words.

“What is the side effect issue, Lord Mickelson?”

“Pregnancy. Over sixty percent of our first round of courtesans had fallen pregnant in the three months that we have been open. That is not acceptable, of course.”

“Due to fear for their health?” Mary wanted to know.

“No, because our male guests here don’t wish to be serviced or play about with

women who are increasing. Hysterical tears are not conducive to sexual stamina.” He went back around the side of his desk and resumed his seat. “If they wish to continue working here, they either must find a way to rid themselves of the pregnancy, or come back once they have given the child away. We don’t want women here who have distractions at home.”

Those were chilling words, indeed, and gave him huge motive to kill Theresa .

“Ah, and that is how you are making your coin, by providing an expensive brothel for men who have the means for you to keep the secret.” Hot anger surged through her chest. She scrambled to her feet while Gabriel murmured a few words meant to soothe. “You care nothing for these women at all. You merely want them healthy to continue to bring in your clients.”

The peer looked at her with an impassive expression. “This is a business, Mrs. Bright. As the founder and proprietor, I am well within my rights to do whatever I want. Additionally, every person on the staff here signs a contract that outlines the rules and restrictions. Miss Kessler was in violation of said contract, for she hid her pregnancy. It is not my fault we had to remind her of that before she turned in her resignation.”

Interesting, and made him seem even more guilty.

Her husband cleared his throat as he steered her toward the door. “Thank you for your time, Lord Mickelson.”

“I think that since you have arrived under false pretenses, you and your wife will need to leave by teatime tomorrow, Mr. Bright. I’m sure you will understand.”

“Of course. We shall pack our belongings and be ready in good time.” Then, before she could find parting words, he ushered her out of the study. With a finger to his lips, he implored her not to talk until they’d gone through the corridors and then

exited the townhouse through the front door. Then he faced her, held her gaze with his. “Out of all our suspects, he is the most likely to have done away with Miss Kessler.”

She nodded. “I think so too, but why kill her and not the other women who’d become pregnant? What was it about Theresa that demanded murder?”

“I don’t know, but you can be damned sure we’ll find out.” He took her hand and led her down the short path. “Meanwhile, let us take a walk, since we have been unceremoniously and prematurely kicked out.”

A giggle escaped her. “At least we’ll be able to start our holiday sooner.”

“True, but I’d hoped to solve the case before then so we can truly enjoy it.”

Though she agreed, Mary said nothing. Why was this case so maddening?

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Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:56 am

October 19, 1819

Agape Spa

19 Brunswick Square

Brighton and Hove, England

In the hour before Dawn, Gabriel sneaked out of his suite without waking Mary.

Clad only in breeches, he followed the path down to the seashore and then offered up a silent prayer of thanks, for none of the other guests from the spa were on the lonely stretch of beach. As of yet, the shore birds hadn't awoken. It was just him and the sea—a good place to contemplate his case and cogitate upon it.

But trying to make sense of everything he and Mary had learned during the course of the investigation only made things more cloudy in his mind. The case had many suspects, many motives, but one person didn't stand out from the rest. It was maddening, and yes, he wasn't being paid to solve this, but it didn't matter.

Everyone deserved justice, even a woman of ill repute; because she'd been alive, she mattered. To someone.

As the cool breeze of the morning tickled through the mat of hair on his chest and riffled through the hair on his head, Gabriel shivered. There was something to be said for Brighton. Already, he felt more relaxed than he'd ever been, and though the case stymied him just now, he was content, happy even. Never did he think such a state

would be his merely due to marriage, yet here he was, thrilled to wake up each day and start anew.

“Is there anything more exciting than a half-clothed, windblown man walking the shore?”

He grinned and turned to greet Mary as she came toward him. “I couldn’t say, but seeing you in just your shift is quite arresting for me.” The shift wasn’t nearly as scandalous as the toga-style dress she was given yesterday, but for him, she could be in sackcloth and ashes, and he would still find her attractive.

“Charming as always, Inspector.” When she smiled, need shivered through his shaft. “When I woke and didn’t find you next to me, I worried.”

“That wasn’t my intention; just couldn’t sleep.”

She nodded. “I brought a basket of breakfast foods with a couple of jugs of tea, which should remain fairly hot for a bit.” She gestured back toward a blanket she’d spread out over the sand about twenty feet from their current location, and her unbound hair danced in the breeze. “I thought you might enjoy breaking your fast out here since we’ve been unceremoniously asked to leave the spa by afternoon.”

“There is that.” Not able to bite back his chuckle, Gabriel snaked an arm about her waist and reeled her into his arms. “I won’t say I am sad about that.” Then, because he could, he kissed her at his leisure, for there was no one around in the rapidly lightening darkness as the sun prepared to rise.

As always, he was soon lost in that kiss, to the softness of her lips, to the heat of her beneath his fingertips. Her hair teased him, and when he tangled his fingers into those tresses and eased her head slightly back, it only deepened the embrace.

Eventually, he eased back else they would both prove exhibitionists right there on the beach. “I believe you have managed to thoroughly captivate me.”

She snorted. “Because of this spa?”

“Perish the thought. The location doesn’t matter; you are the reason. Always.”

“Gammon.” But a faint blush stained her cheeks.

“Come. Let us walk the shore while we can then we’ll partake of breakfast.” He took her hand and threaded their fingers together. “I’ve been out here thinking about our case.”

“It’s quite the puzzle.”

“Indeed. On the surface, there is no rhyme or reason for any of it. The two deaths are connected except for what the women did to earn coin.”

“Do you think someone is targeting lightskirts?”

“It’s a possibility, of course, yet neither of the women were sexually assaulted prior to their deaths. And if that were so, we would have heard about more deaths in the same vein throughout London, but nothing of the sort followed the second.”

“Perhaps the killer had other commitments?”

“It is a theory but unlikely. Perhaps he is connected to the theater.”

“Should we go back and interview more people?”

Gabriel frowned. “I will consider it, especially that odd Mr. Dempsey. I wasn’t

satisfied with some of his answers. Or that actor fellow, Mr. Taylor. He seemed a bit too dodgy for me. Or her landlady who was owed a month's rent. ”

“Agreed. If I were a wagering woman, I'd put my money on Lord Mickelson. He's the type who doesn't respect any sort of life.”

“This is true. He left a bad taste in my mouth after we interviewed him.”

Mary squeezed his fingers. “What's bothering you about the case. I can almost see your mind working through it.”

“You know me well, sweeting.” There was a certain comfort that came with that. “Why did Miss Kessler go back to the theater if she'd already been working here for some weeks?”

“I thought we'd already established that.”

“No, it was an educated guess on your part,” he said and tweaked her nose.

She giggled. “All right, but now that guess should be considered fact. Theresa had fallen in love with Lord Carmichael. That was why she returned to London, and that was why she wanted to meet with him the night she was killed. She wanted to confess everything to him.”

It was weak and naught but conjecture. “After she'd already given up her baby? Their baby? How did she think that conversation would end?”

“Just because she was a courtesan didn't mean she didn't have hope or wasn't a romantic, Bright.” Mary shrugged and eyed him askance, and he adored that she continued to challenge him. “Women are complex creatures.”

“That they are.” He shrugged.

She held onto his hand more tightly as they turned about to go back toward the blanket. “Sometimes people deny being in love for a variety of reasons. Class difference is but one of them. Perhaps she was embarrassed at what she was.”

“Yet if, as you said, she had hope, she had to have known that Lord Carmichael fancied her. From his own admission, he’d said he’d told her.” He blew out a breath. “If they would have made a couple, would he have married her?” It was certainly a possibility, for if he followed through with Mary’s former sister-in-law, he would track down his child and no doubt take the steps to raise it.

“Stranger things have happened, but when you think about it, the whole thing is so sad.”

“Why?”

“Lord Carmichael loved her. He’d told her that but was rejected. Then Theresa gave up her child and blindly came to use her skills here. Only then did she realize that she loved him.” A sigh escaped her. “No doubt she hadn’t understood how bearing a child would affect her thoughts and mind. Perhaps because of that, or because the child resembled Lord Carmichael, she finally knew the truth of what her heart was trying to tell her all along. Lord knows my first husband had never treated her as lovely as the peer did.”

“And before they could admit their feelings to each other, she was killed.” It was a horrible story no matter how one looked at it. “Which leads us back around to why? None of this is related to anything.”

“Perhaps not, but I’ve been around you long enough to know that everything is connected. You just need to search harder for the clue. Perhaps that seemingly

innocuous thing we've overlooked will come to light soon." They walked in silence for a bit before she spoke again. "We have one more person to speak with."

"Who?"

"The woman who runs the clinic here. If she knew of Theresa's condition, would she have sent her back to London to have the child?"

"Why not? I rather doubt they have the wherewithal at this spa to take care of something as large as a birth. And if the mother died during that labor? The coroner would be called, and the spa would no longer remain secret."

"Unless they disposed of the body..."

"Argh! It's maddening." What was he missing in regard to this case? "You are correct, though. Miss Kessler's friend said pregnancy was an issue, and the founder said the same thing was an unwanted side effect." When he glanced at Mary, he made a face. "Too many women finding themselves increasing and then suddenly unemployed would be fodder for gossip. Clients would become disgruntled. Whispered on dits would happen. It would cause scandal of a different sort for the spa, especially if the pool of available women were to drastically diminish."

Mary huffed. "Yet none of this is seen as a crime, when it absolutely is. These poor women are treated like rubbish without thought."

"Agreed. It's a horrid practice that persists not only throughout England but everywhere else." He scratched at the stubble on his cheek with his free hand. "Remarkably, none of these women were jealous of Miss Kessler. They all lived the same life. She had nothing of value in hers, so therefore, none of them probably wanted her dead."

“Unless you count jealousy as a strong motive,” Mary was quick to point out. “Theresa had a man who loved her, and one who she loved back. He was also a peer and solid financially. Many women would kill for that.”

Gabriel snorted. “Except there was no guarantee he would choose one of those women to replace her. Hell, I rather doubted he even knew the women who worked here, but I can look into it.”

“It should be an easy enough line of inquiry. ”

He nodded. “Ah, Mary. It is saddening to know there are men in the world who think nothing of using women for their own pleasure or gain and then discard them once they are tired of them.”

“Or the women grow older as people do or are with child and therefore considered no longer attractive or useful.”

“It makes me despair for the future. When will mindsets change? When will society change so this no longer needs to happen?”

“That way of thinking is what makes you different from other men, Bright, and I so appreciate your forward thinking.” She sighed. “Perhaps Lord Mickelson had Theresa killed because she’d been pregnant after all. Especially if she was a favorite among his clients. Loss of income is a powerful motive as well.”

While warm pleasure filled his chest, Gabriel shook his head. “Then he would need to kill other women in the same position. That would make too many unexplainable bodies, and a person couldn’t dump women in the ocean. Eventually they’d wash ashore too near the secret spa. Neither could they be dumped into a field. The smell would attract people and wildlife.”

“Which would ensure the spa wouldn’t remain a secret. The things that go on under that roof would certainly result in multiple arrests, scandal, and country wide embarrassment.”

“To say nothing of being a nightmare for the courts to sort out. I would imagine dignitaries, high ranking members of the beau monde , and even judges have frequented the spa.” It really was a coil.

“Additionally, there is the second woman killed in Covent Garden on the same night that Theresa was killed. What do you know of her?” She glanced at him. “You visited that scene by yourself.”

“Right.” Then he smacked his forehead and cursed himself. “I’d completely forgotten in the hustle and bustle. The coroner sent me a missive that arrived right before we left London. I only read it this morning when I came across it in my luggage.”

“And?”

“It was a summary of his examination of that woman. Lower economic status. Alone in the world. Not immediately identifiable. Might have been an actress because she’d been wearing a wig with a trace of stage makeup on her cheek and hand. Stabbed through the heart with an ordinary kitchen knife. No signs of abuse, sexual or otherwise, but she had given birth once before. When she was murdered, she was about six months along in a pregnancy. As a result of the murder, the babe was born prematurely and died in the morgue.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.” Mary took a few moments to compose herself. Then she gasped and grasped his hand tighter. “Do you think pregnancies are the driving force behind the murders?”

It was an angle he’d never thought to explore. “How though? And why? Surely it

can't be the same man impregnating the women."

"Of course not. That would mean Lord Carmichael is a serial killer. He didn't give off that air." She glanced at home with a wry grin. "A man in love doesn't kill others."

"You are adorable." And sometimes it was that faith in humanity he craved, to let him remember why he did what he did. "Then we're back to Lord Mickelson. If too many of his courtesans are pregnant, he loses clients. And it can't be an easy task to keep finding courtesans who are willing to move to Brighton without accommodations."

Mary frowned. "Why kill the ones who are skilled, then? Many would come back to the spa after giving birth, for most couldn't afford to raise a child by themselves or even wish to risk the scandal. Besides, the woman killed at Covent Garden had never been to the spa."

"So we assume, but she did have a card among her possessions."

"It is maddening." She sighed. "But my overwhelming feeling is sadness."

"I understand that." Bringing her hand to his lips, he kissed the back. "It would seem we've come full circle regarding my thoughts on the case. And we've come to no new conclusions."

She tugged him toward the blanket. "Then have tea with me. We can ponder further." A frown curved her lips downward. "For what it's worth, I'm sorry I can't give you a child."

"Ah sweeting." After releasing her hand, he slipped an arm about her waist. "We have been over this before. I don't need that to have happiness or contentment. I have

you; I have Henry, and now we both have Cassandra. Whether you believe me or not, that girl is coming to love you.”

“I certainly hope that is true.” There was so much sadness in her eyes that his heart squeezed. “Between you working cases as a consultant which sometimes don’t end as you would hope and Cassandra being standoffish, life is taking its toll.”

By the time they arrived at his blanket, they were still alone with only the shore birds. Sun just barely peeking up. He fell to his knees and then tugged her down in front of him. “This job...” Searching for words, Gabriel shook his head. “This oath I have put upon myself to protect London and its residents, it is not the most important thing in my life. I need you to know this.”

“Oh? ”

“You are the most important person in my life. Cassandra is too.” With a sigh, he cupped her cheek. “The life we have together is equally important. Always. Please never think otherwise.” Months ago, it would have been difficult for him to admit these feelings, but the longer he was with Mary, the easier it became to voice them, to show them. “Thank you for the life you are sharing with me, building for us.”

Moisture sprang into her eyes. “That means everything to me—you do.”

Awareness and emotions settled over him, and not knowing what else to say, Gabriel kissed her, encouraged her down on her back, then covered her body with his while seeking to deepen the embrace. Minutes went by before he spoke again. “I fancy something sweet before breakfast, I think.”

“Rogue!” She smacked his shoulder. “Here? Where people can see what we’re doing?”

“No?” Wishing to further tease her, Gabriel nuzzled the crook of her shoulder. “I don’t mind if you don’t.” Oh, that was a blatant lie, but he wanted to hear her protest.

“I do mind!” She stared up at him in horror. “I don’t want anyone but you looking at me. That sort of thing is special, sacred.”

“I know.” He grinned and kissed her again. Then he pulled back to peer into her face. “Very well. We’ll have breakfast and enjoy the cool air then return to our room.”

“Or...” One of her blonde eyebrows rose.

“Yes?” What was she about?

A wicked light danced in the blue pools of her eyes. “If you sit with your back facing the spa as if you are contemplating the sea, I wouldn’t mind giving you a bit of excitement to add spice to your morning.” As she spoke, she let one of her hands drift between them to cup his burgeoning erection.

He snorted even as her touch threatened to see him come undone. “That act isn’t special?”

“Not nearly so as a coupling, and I do owe you in retaliation for what you did yesterday.” When she stroked her hand against his shaft, need shuddered through him.

“You know you enjoyed that.” Dear God, where was a distraction?

“I did.” She pressed a line of feather-weighted kisses beneath his jaw. “Do you give permission?”

How adorable was his wife? “No.” Shaking his head, he removed her hand from his

person. "Relations between us are for us to enjoy for ourselves. We'll have breakfast and tea then return to our rooms where we will both find bliss... privately." So saying, he kissed her again, went so far as to worry a nipple into a hard bud with the pad of his thumb before he rolled off her with a grin. As he sat up, he said, "It is good talking to you. It helps to clear my mind." Even if he was now randy as hell.

"So would something else but apparently you're prudish." Clearly, from her mock-pout and the annoyance in her tone, she was a bit miffed.

Unable to help it, Gabriel laughed, and it felt good to do so. "Poor Mary," he said in a soft, singsong voice. "She can't do unspeakable things to her husband in public."

"Do shut up, Bright." But she grinned, and after digging around in the basket, she threw a sweet bun at him, which he caught and took a bite of.

In that moment as the sun rose while they shared tea and breakfast, his inability to solve the case didn't matter, for the most important aspect was spending time with his wife.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:56 am

Later that afternoon

“Are you certain you will be comfortable by yourself while I speak to a few guests in the billiards room and perhaps the library?” The concern in Gabriel’s voice was clear. “We are leaving here in an hour. I won’t have another chance.”

And he was adorable. Mary laid a hand on his arm. “Go. I shall be fine. There is the remainder of the packing to attend to, and then I might wait for you in the gardens. No matter that this spa is an abomination, the gardens relax me.”

“It looks like rain, though.”

“I like the rain, and there might be enough vegetation and trees there I’ll be shielded from the precipitation.”

“Very well.” When he cupped her cheek and briefly brushed his lips against hers, she sighed. “I shouldn’t be long, and chances are, since it’s the middle of the day, there won’t be many people in there.”

She nodded. “The rain probably will have kept everyone indoors, which means the third-floor exhibition rooms will be in full use.” When they exchanged a glance, she shivered, and not in a delicious way. “Did you send a messenger to have the carriage readied?”

“I did.” The inspector ran the pad of his thumb along her bottom lip. “I asked that they come for us in an hour. By the time we reach our rented townhouse, we can take an early tea.”

After breakfast at the shore, they'd returned to their suite, and she'd been true to her word in that she'd brought him to shivering pleasure with her mouth. However, he'd surprised her, and instead of letting her finish him, he'd claimed her body on one of the groupings of pillows in the room. With the creative positioning of a few, the coupling had been quite outstanding, and she'd not been quiet regarding her enthusiasm.

Now, once again garbed with proper clothing and finished toilettes, they were a couple ready to step out into society. If she were honest, she was glad they'd leave the spa soon. "I am anxious to see Cassandra, to walk the shore with her, to be the mother she expects."

"I don't know if she expects much, but I agree with you in principle." He took a pair of kid gloves in hand. "Well, I should go. If luck is with me, I might glean some last bits that might throw new light on this investigation."

"I doubt you'll see Lord Mickelson around. He'll be scarce until we leave."

Gabriel snorted. "Somehow, I wouldn't put it past him to have us escorted from the premises with luggage searched for scandalous notes."

"Oh, and Gabriel?"

"Hmm?"

"Be advised that the billiards table has probably been used for more than the game it was built for." As he paled, she winked.

No sooner had he left the suite and Mary tucked a few more pieces of clothing into a trunk than there was a knock on the panel. When she opened it, a female worker from the spa handed her a sealed envelope.

“One of the guests who arrived this morning asked me to deliver this note to you, Mrs. Bright,” the young red-haired woman said with a quick smile. “I hope you had a pleasant stay here at Agape.”

“Thank you. I did.” She took the ivory envelope from the young woman’s hand. “It was quite an eye-opening experience, but honestly, the hot springs pool was lovely.” That wasn’t a falsehood. She would miss that feature when they returned to London.

The other woman nodded. “Well, enjoy your afternoon. ”

“Oh, and one more thing.”

“Yes?” She looked at Mary with bright eyes and a perky bosom that would have made her slightly jealous if she weren’t secure in the knowledge that Gabriel adored her.

“Is the midwife or someone else down in the clinic at this hour?”

“I’m afraid not. She only works in the morning hours. Are you quite well?”

Well, drat. “Yes. Very. I merely had a question for her.” When the young woman moved off down the corridor, Mary closed the door then pulled the missive from the envelope.

Dear Mrs. Bright,

When we last spoke, you made Brighton sound like a good idea, and since I missed it, I decided to come for a visit. It was quite a surprise to find you are staying at this same spa. Please come to the back garden at three o’clock so we can catch up.

It will be well worth your time.

Yours,

Mr. Dempsey

With a frown, she laid the note down on a table. After picking up her reticule, she pulled the small, enamel snuffbox out and flipped open the side with the clock. It was nearly three. What the devil would Mr. Dempsey want with her, and here? For that matter, was he a regular client?

While surprise rose in her chest, a trace of fear twisted down her spine. At least the garden was somewhere she was comfortable with, and at any given time, there were people passing in and out of it. In the instances that she was alone, it wouldn't be that way for long.

She would speak with him and remain strictly formal—an investigator to a potential suspect—send him politely but firmly on his way, and then she would immediately find Gabriel. Huffing with annoyance that the man had the gall to follow her to Brighton, Mary put the snuffbox back into her reticule and left the purse on the table next to the note.

It took very little time to make her way to the garden, for it was just a matter of following the corridors. With the reminder to herself that in under an hour, she and her husband would have their luggage loaded into the traveling coach and then settle into the rented townhouse, she moved quickly enough that her skirting whispered as the fabric twisted about her ankles.

Upon reaching the garden, she was dismayed to see that he was the only one there.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Dempsey. Why are you here?” If it was blunt and abrupt, she couldn't help it. Something about this meeting didn't feel right, and she had been with Gabriel long enough to be wary of instinct.

“Ah, Mrs. Bright. How wonderful to see you again.” Mr. Dempsey came toward her in an unthreatening manner, but he’d brought a brunette wig with him, much like he’d had the last time she’d seen him. “Where is the inspector?”

“He is otherwise occupied.”

“Good. His presence is not needed for this meeting.” As a guest at the spa, he hadn’t yet donned the Turkish-style trousers the men were encouraged to wear. And the knot of his cravat had been loosened as if he were nervous.

She crossed her arms at her chest and frowned. “Why did you wish to talk with me?”

Instead of answering her question, he held out the wig and asked one of his own. “Will you put on the wig?”

“I will not. If you won’t tell me why you are here, then I shall ask that you leave.”

The skin beneath his left eye ticced. “I am a guest at this spa, Mrs. Bright. I decide when my time is finished here.” A certain hardness had entered his expression as he curled his fingers into the wig.

“Then go enjoy yourself.” A few raindrops filtered through the foliage to spatter upon her cheeks.

“Not until you agree to come with me.”

“Again, I will not. In fact, my husband and I are leaving in less than an hour.”

“I’m afraid those plans will need to change.”

Cold warning curled through her gut. “No.” Mary shook her head. “I’m going to find

my husband.” When she attempted to leave the garden, Mr. Dempsey stepped into her path. “I can’t let you leave, Mrs. Bright. You remind me of my mother, but your hair is all wrong, just like that other woman.”

She shook her head and retreated as far as she could before a potted fern halted further movement. “What other woman?” Despite herself, she wanted to hear what he had to say. Was he the person they’d been looking for this whole time?

“The one at Covent Garden.”

“What about her?” Would he confess, and if he did, could she get to Gabriel without losing their killer?

Mr. Dempsey shrugged. “I made her wear a wig before I killed her.” He combed the fingers of his free hand through the tresses of the wig. “Didn’t like her blonde hair. It wasn’t right.”

“Right for what?” But more importantly, why? She gawked at him. “ You killed that woman in the garden?”

“I had to.”

“Why?” Not once had they thought this man involved in the investigation. He hadn’t been connected to Theresa or her world with the exception of being in the theatre the same night she’d been there.

“I care because she didn’t.” His eyes glittered with mad fervor. “I stabbed her in the heart for an immediate death. It was better that way.”

Icy fingers of fear wrapped around Mary’s spine. I have to get to Bright. “What are you talking about?” Perhaps if she kept him in conversation, her husband would come

looking for her. When Mr. Dempsey didn't answer, she tried again. "So you said you killed the woman in Covent Garden, but did you kill Miss Kessler in the opera house?"

Why wouldn't another guest come into the gardens? Usually, it was a bustling place of activity and conversation. "Yes. I didn't have time to take that letter opener. It was pretty. My mother would have liked it."

She stared at him and his wig as an inkling of knowledge grew in her brain. A cold sweat broke out on her forehead and plastered her shift to her back. "Ah, where is your mother? Did you bring her with you?"

"Of course not!" The wig master regarded her as if she were the insane one. "She is in her grave where she belongs." Another few raindrops splashed onto her cheeks and head. Mr. Dempsey took advantage of her shock and crept closer. "Are you appalled or proud, Mrs. Bright, for I killed them all."

Dear heavens.

Hiding her trembling hands in the folds of her skirting, Mary cleared her throat. "All? How many?" Once more, she tried to make her way to the door that led back into the townhouse by ducking beneath the boughs of a tree and moving through the fronds of a potted palm, but Mr. Dempsey anticipated her again.

He moved fully into her path, dropped his free hand on her shoulder, and dug his fingers hard into her shoulder. She hadn't realized how strong he was before, and it was quite upsetting. "Do you mean how many I have killed merely this month or over the past year?" His eyes darkened and were dilated. "Or do you wish to know the number since I first began?"

"Oh, God. What have you done, Mr. Dempsey?" There was so much horror clinging

to the inquiry that fear for her own safety pushed through the shock.

“Don’t be afraid, Mrs. Bright. I plan to tell you everything, because you and I have connected, but it won’t be here where any of the poor lost souls can come upon us.” He tsked his tongue. “I shall take care of them later.”

Gooseflesh popped along her arms as icy fingers of fear played her spine. “I am not going anywhere with you.” As she spoke, she tried to wrench her arm from his hold. “Let me go.” When that didn’t work, she kicked at his shins, but it didn’t do any good through his boots. “Help!”

He frowned. “I wish you hadn’t done that. I don’t like it when women prove difficult.”

Before she could shield herself or even move away, he swung out with his free hand curled into a fist that caught her on the temple. Pain exploded through her head, rendering her off balance. “Stop...” Darkness encroached at the sides of her vision. Seconds later, he jammed the brunette wig onto her head. When she nearly crumpled into a faint, he picked her up in his arms. “No...” She shook her head, and the darkness crept closer, rendering her temporarily disoriented.

“Don’t worry, Mrs. Bright. All your suffering will be over soon. That I can promise you.”

Trapped in the groggy haze she’d been plunged into, Mary drifted in and out of consciousness as Mr. Dempsey carried her through the corridors of the spa and then up to a room on the third floor. If he wanted to kill her, why would he choose to bring her inside the townhouse instead of do it outside where he could easily dispose of her afterward?

By the time she finally came to enough to recognize what was happening, Mr.

Dempsey had fit her wrists into a set of cloth-covered restraints in the corner of the room. How the devil he'd done it, she had no idea, for she'd been dead weight for a bit of that time. He must have used the pulley system to lower the restraints enough that he slipped her wrists into them then he'd hoisted her upright so that her toes were nearly off the floor.

Blinking, Mary glanced about the room. A horrid tasting rag had been tied about her head which cut across her mouth, so it was difficult to talk clearly. "Why?" Even that one word query sounded strange.

And why was there the odd scent of burning wood in the air?

Mr. Dempsey circled her, and good heavens, he held a knife in his hand. "What do you mean, why? Isn't it obvious?"

Clearly not. Her patience with this whole case was rapidly evaporating. "Why did you do any of it?" Of course, speaking that verbally didn't sound as sophisticated due to the gag.

His eyes glittered with disturbing madness. A flush burned in his cheeks as he leered at her. "I am carrying out a mission from God."

That gave her pause. Would God truly tell someone to go out and kill countless women? Despite herself, she was curious in a morbid sort of way. "I beg your pardon?"

A huff came from him, as if he was vastly disappointed she was so dull. "I am ridding England of women who have committed the ultimate sin."

Unfortunately, that didn't clear up the confusion. "What do you mean?" Dear Lord, what had the rag in her mouth been used for? It was going to make her retch before

too long.

“Women who are of loose morals. Women like Miss Kessler who bed men for coin.”

As her husband would say, bloody hell! Despite the gravity of the situation, Mary snorted. “There are many women who work at that profession, and they are from all classes. Who are you to say what is right or wrong for their lives? And I rather think God wouldn’t order you to kill anyone.” Although, she supposed things like that could be interpreted in more than one way by those whose minds had been touched.

He glowered at her. “I am doing what I can, Mrs. Bright, but I have narrowed down the pool and therefore have parameters in which I work.”

Did she even want to know? As icy fear twisted down her spine, she asked, “Oh?”

“It’s genius, truly.” He nodded with a vigor that terrified her. “The women I am putting out of their misery are the ones who have borne a child or children and have then gone on to abandon said children because they don’t wish to be mothers.” The grin he flashed her was positively gruesome. “Do you know how contemptible a crime that is? Children need their mothers, Mrs. Bright. It’s not right that babies are abandoned and then the woman goes on to live their lives as if nothing happened.”

Why did no one come down the corridor and peer into the window? In his zeal, Mr. Dempsey hadn’t pulled the draperies closed.

All of it was too much to digest, and while she could understand why he was upset, there were many different reasons why such a thing would happen. “Some women have no choice, Mr. Dempsey. If a woman is abandoned by her protector or husband, if funding is taken away, there is often no way for her to care for a child. Isn’t it better that the child has a chance elsewhere?”

“No!” He lashed out with the knife. The tip tore a slash in her skirting, and he laughed when she gasped. “A child belongs with its mother.”

Why she felt compelled to argue, she couldn't fathom, but if she kept him talking, perhaps Gabriel would somehow know she was in trouble. “Some women don't have the wherewithal to be nurturing.”

“That is no excuse!” When he lashed out with the blade again, she whimpered, for the tip caught her forearm. A thin line of blood welled from the scratch .

Everything came into clear focus. She was at the mercy of a madman. “Some women have too many children. They simply can't afford to raise another one even if they are happily married and their husband makes a good living.” As tears filled her eyes, she continued despite the gag in her mouth. “Additionally, pregnancy alters a woman's mind. At times, not for the better.”

Mr. Dempsey glared at her as he continued to circle her. “They should have thought about that before they spread their legs to their men.” Then he slashed at her again with the knife.

The thin shallow nicks and scratches she'd already received stung as if she'd been attacked by bees. A tear fell to her cheek. How long would it be before he tired of the conversation and simply plunged the blade into her heart as he'd done all the others? “Why do you care about a woman who you don't even know? It makes no difference to you whether she keeps or gives away her baby.”

“I need to teach them all a lesson.” This time when he slashed at her, the tip of the knife scratched the skin above her right breast. More pain followed. “My mother gave me up on my first birthday.”

That explained more than a few things. “While that is sad and unfortunate, it doesn't

give you the right to kill other women in the same situation.”

“I don’t want any other child to know they weren’t wanted. No one deserves that.”

Oddly, there was some truth in those words of madness, but that didn’t pardon him. “Not all children given to orphanages and institutions were unwanted. Sometimes people are just not capable of caring for a child as they should be cared for.”

“None of that matters! Stop trying to sway me to your demented side!” Two more lashes were given to her, catching her on the hip and left forearm. Specks of foam formed at the corners of his mouth. “Eventually, I found out who my mother was. It took me more than a few years to track her in London, but I did it because I wanted her to know how wrong she’d been. When I found her, I killed her. To make it right.”

“How is any of that right? Killing anyone is wrong!” She shook with fear. Tears fell freely to her cheeks. Surely this wasn’t how she would die. Perhaps if she played to whatever was left of his humanity? “None of this has anything to do with me. Please let me go.” When she threw her desperate gaze to the windows, her heart plummeted, for there were no curious witnesses.

“No!” He clenched his free hand into a fist. “You have given up a child. That is why there is sadness in your eyes, why you are so drawn to this case. That is why you are here. ”

Perhaps this was the break she’d been waiting for. “No.” Mary shook her head and turned herself by her toes until she could meet his gaze. “I was never able to conceive. That is why I am saddened.” Openly crying now from both fear and sorrow, she let the tears fall. It was oddly cathartic. “I knew Miss Kessler. It makes me sad she is dead.”

“How did you know her?” For whatever reason, he paused in his bid to apparently cut

her to ribbons before he killed her.

“She was my first husband’s mistress.” It was incredibly difficult to talk with the gag in her mouth. “We had a history, a thin friendship. She didn’t deserve to die.”

“Yes, she did! Every one of those women did!” Mr. Dempsey slashed at her with the knife. This time it was her ribcage that received the brunt of his ire, and that cut was deeper, for it burned with pain.

“No! Don’t you see?” It was difficult enough to talk with the gag, even more so with her tears. “There is always a story, and you in your demented imagination never wanted to hear. The world isn’t made up of just black and white.”

A bell rang in the corridor. Seconds later, a female worker in the diaphanous toga dress called for everyone to evacuate the building due to a fire.

Did that mean the building was on fire or just a room? The fear she already grappled with turned into something more panic filled. Her gaze found his. “Please let me go. This has nothing to do with me.” Which was worse? To die by stabbing or by a fire where she couldn’t get away?

He moistened his lips, but there was fear in his eyes. “I can’t do that. You remind me of my mother.”

“Oh.” Then it all made sense. For whatever reason his brain couldn’t make sense of him being abandoned by the woman who’d birthed him. He’d seen it as an affront. That was why he made his victims wear the brunette wig so they would look like her, and he would think of her when he stabbed them. “Where is your father?”

“I never had one. My mother was an actress, and obviously a whore. It’s how I became interested in the theater; she was always there, doing men’s bidding. It’s

where I found her. I watched her for a few years before deciding on my course of action.”

The man needed help and perhaps to be locked in an institution. “Why didn’t you talk to her, try to forge a relationship after you went to the trouble of finding her? You could have been happy, perhaps.”

A mask of hate twisted over his face. “She didn’t deserve to know me after what she did. ”

“You are still worthy of love, you know.” That was what he was missing in his life. Would it have made a difference if he’d let himself be loved long ago? Perhaps they would never know; he was too far gone. Now he was a murderer. There would be no life for him once the authorities caught up to him.

Slowly, he shook his head. “I must keep going. I have to make them know the error of their ways.” He lifted the hand holding the knife. “You and the inspector should have left well enough alone. Why do you care about the life of a prostitute?”

“Because, as my husband says, every life matters. Even yours, Mr. Dempsey.”

His Adam’s apple bobbed with a hard swallow. “There are times when I believe I am beyond help, Mrs. Bright, so I need to continue on until someone stops me.”

But would that happen after he killed her? She couldn’t take her gaze from the knife’s blade and tried her best to swing away from the madman.

Oh, Gabriel, please help!

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Since there hadn't been guests in the billiards room, Gabriel had drifted into the library. One could tell much about someone by the books he kept, and in the case of Lord Mickelson as the owner of the townhouse turned spa, the answer was not much indeed.

He rather suspected the peer had purchased random books from scattered sources merely to fill the shelves in the room, instead of curating a collection that made sense. The volumes in the room were merely showpieces, much like bric-a-brac, with no intellectual value. But as he perused the shelves, his mind kept going back over the aspects of the case that didn't cohesively fit together, much like the book collection, until something Cassandra had said to him fairly screamed at him to take another look.

They had been speaking about Mary and how he had encouraged her to accept Mary as her mother .

"I like Mary. She is interesting and smells good." Her brow had furrowed as she'd frowned. He remembered in that moment hoping she would learn to smile more, or at least feel free enough to enjoy her childhood now that she could. "But mothers leave, Inspector."

"Pardon?" At the time, he'd not understood.

A tiny huff had come from her as if she couldn't believe he was that dense. "Mothers decide they don't want their children and leave them in dark and frightening places. I don't want Mary to be my mother."

“I can understand that.” It was the first time the girl had spoken of something hearkening back to her past. “Mary is not like that, though. She is steadfast and true. Never will she leave you. Not ever.”

Mothers leave.

He clutched a hand to his chest as everything slipped into place like pieces of a puzzle. Dear God. It wasn't the fact the dead women were prostitutes. Neither was it the fact they had been pregnant out of wedlock. That wasn't the connection. The key was that each of the women had given the babes away that had incensed the murderer.

Who had killed women with brown hair.

Who was obsessed with wigs and had tried to cajole Mary into wearing one that day. Because she reminded him of his mother, and he favored women with brunette coloring. He'd practically bragged about it that day at the theater when they'd gone there to question the actor, Mr. Taylor. Beyond that, he'd had that damned eye tic and had been sweating.

Bloody, bloody hell. I should have paid more attention.

“I know who the killer is,” he said to no one except himself. It was the damned wig master, and if he'd guessed correctly, he had Mary in his sights. “We need to leave here immediately.” For the killer had already been informed they were headed to Brighton.

Gabriel bolted from the room and tore through the corridors. As he ran, he nearly crashed into a female spa worker who continued to ring a handbell as she called for everyone to evacuate the spa.

“I beg your pardon. What is happening? Why do we need to evacuate?” Cold foreboding went through his gut, for the answer couldn’t be good.

She looked at him with a smile, but there was also a trace of fear in her eyes. “One of the guests in an exhibition room knocked over a candelabra, which then caught draperies and bedding on fire. The couple hadn’t been aware as they were otherwise engaged, but afterward, the room was nearly engulfed by the time they informed us.” She shrugged. “The fire raged too quickly; the staff could do nothing about it.”

Damnation.

“Did someone call for the fire brigade? ”

“I would have no idea, Mr. Bright.”

Of course not, because they weren’t exactly organized here, nor were they equipped for a crisis. “I need to find my wife. Do you know where she is?”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Bright, but Lord Mickelson is asking that all guests move immediately outside. You will need to come with me.”

When she reached out for him, he sprang away. “I refuse to go anywhere without Mary.” Fear twisted down his spine. “Once I locate her, we will evacuate.”

Since she’d said she would wait for him in the public gardens, he ran downstairs to the lower level first. Though there were a few guests passing through on their way toward the path that led to the beach, his wife was not among them. Cursing beneath his breath, Gabriel sprinted through the corridors until he reached their suite.

The trunk and the two bags they’d brought waited near the door, but there was no sign of Mary. Nearly frantic and with panic pulsing through his veins, he scanned the

room. When his gaze fell onto her reticule that rested on a small table, he rushed over to it.

Then he read the damning note left beside it, and his heart sank into the pit of his stomach. Dear God, the killer is here, and he's requested a meeting with Mary. Yet Gabriel had already been in the gardens. Neither of them had been there. So where were they?

Once more, he rushed into the corridor. A few guests in varying degrees of undress were running about in an effort to find the exits, but he went against the stream of foot traffic in favor of gaining the second level. He had just been in the library there, but he popped in and out of all the rooms anyway.

"Mary?"

There was no answer from his wife.

At the end of that corridor near the stairs, he pulled aside a maid. "I am looking for my wife. Have you seen Mrs. Bright recently?" If he sounded or looked half-crazed, that was because he was desperate to find her. Already smoke was filling the corridors. The acrid scent of it was heavy in the air.

"I'm not sure, Mr. Bright." Fear reflected on the young woman's face. "I thought I saw someone with her description go into one of the public exhibition rooms on the third floor with a man I didn't recognize, but she had dark hair and was unconscious. The man was carrying her."

Dear God.

His chest tightened. "A man? Do you know who he was?"

She shrugged and edged away, clearly wanting to evacuate the building. “He could have been a newly arrived guest. I’m sorry, Mr. Bright.”

“Don’t worry about it. Get to safety.” More frantic now than he’d been minutes before, Gabriel tore up the stairs. A group of guests came down at the same time, and he was obliged to fight through them as he climbed to the third floor.

A glance along the corridor confirmed one of his worst fears. The fire raged in the far section of the third floor and was steadily burning everything in its path. Every beat of his heart demanded that he locate his wife, for he’d meant what he’d said: he wouldn’t leave this place without her.

With methodical steadiness, Gabriel burst into every single room along the corridors. Most were unoccupied. One room held a couple rushing about trying to pack their belongings. He ordered them to leave their things behind and evacuate. Lives were more important, then he continued his quest to find Mary. On the opposite side of the house on that level, in one of the room was a female brunette fitted into the ceiling restraints with a gag tied about her head and between her lips. That damned Mr. Dempsey from the theater circled her with a knife in his hand. A sick feeling began in Gabriel’s gut, for he suspected the woman with brown hair was Mary, but he couldn’t be certain at this distance.

Yet he recognized that form anywhere.

The damned man hadn’t bothered to lock the door, so Gabriel pressed the latch, and seconds later crashed into the room. “What the devil is going on in here?” Smoke filled the air, and his eyes watered because of it.

Mr. Dempsey jumped in surprise. Hate and demented fervor glittered in his eyes. “This doesn’t concern you, Inspector.”

“Like hell it doesn’t.” He peered more closely at the woman, and his chest tightened with shock. Knife slashes decorated her arms and torso. Her clothes were stained with faint blood, which meant she hadn’t been stabbed too deeply, and he recognized the dress as the one his wife had been wearing earlier. As she turned about, dangling on her toes, recognition dawned in the blue pools of her eyes, and she tugged at her restraints.

“Gabriel!” Though the word was muffled, there was no mistaking her voice, her features. She grew quite animated in her quest to be free or to reach him, but both were useless endeavors, for Mr. Dempsey and his knife stood between them.

“Mary!” With narrowed eyes and hot rage rising in his chest, Gabriel faced the madman. “Let her go.”

“I can’t do that, Inspector. She must die.” Then the wig master sprang at him with the knife leading the way .

“Damn it all to hell.” Forced to engage the man when they all should be evacuating the burning spa, Gabriel dodged the slashes of the knife the best he could. While Mary dangled from the ceiling and cried out warnings through the gag, he battled Mr. Dempsey for control of the blade.

“They all must die, Inspector. There is no other choice.”

Not having the faintest clue what the man referred to, he could fill in the missing bits enough to realize what drove him. “Your days of killing women are over, Dempsey. I’ll see you in Newgate before the day is out.”

If they all managed to survive the damned fire.

“No!” Mr. Dempsey slashed with the knife, catching Gabriel on the side of the neck.

Thankfully, only the tip of the blade broke the skin, but it hurt all the same. “Women here are prostitutes, whores, those who work in the sex trade, who enjoy intercourse. They are unclean and from the devil.” The wig master panted, circling around him and slashing out as the mood struck. “When they become with child, they favor sex more than being a mother, which make them abandon their children.”

“That is not for you to decide or judge.” Gabriel didn’t care about the whys or wherefores; time was of the essence, and they all needed to leave the townhouse. “And if you think you are an emissary of God, then let him hand down a final fate, but this damned place is on fire. We must go.”

The other man shook his head. “Not until my mission is completed.”

“With that flawed logic, your mission will never be complete if you wish to kill every woman who has ever given up a child regardless of the reason.” He glared at the wig master. “Killing my wife will gain you nothing, and as a former Bow Street inspector, I can’t let you continue on this path. There is no future for you, Mr. Dempsey. You are a murderer and will pay for your crimes.”

The madness in the other man’s eyes grew. “I must keep going, for the children.”

“And what then?” Mary asked around the gag as she fought for purchase on the floor with her toes. “Frighten women into keeping babies they can’t care for? Making lives miserable for all involved?” Her words were mumbled and hard to follow.

“I am making things right!” Mr. Dempsey lashed out with the knife. The tip caught her cheek, leaving a thin ribbon of blood behind.

“Your thinking is warped. If you wish to make a difference, help by doing something good for the orphanages or petition parliament for change.” A haze of rage dropped over Gabriel’s vision. The man would pay for every mark he’d given Mary, and now

that he could see a bruise forming on the side of her face, he was even more adamant to have this man arrested.

“Stay back!” Mr. Dempsey lunged at Gabriel when he would have grabbed the man’s hand. “I’ll kill you too, Inspector. Why couldn’t you leave well enough alone?”

“And let you continue your reign of terror? I am not that sort of man.”

Mary huffed. She spoke through the gag, but it was her eyes that spoke to what was on her heart as she looked at her captor. “The woman you killed in the theatre. That Miss Kessler? She was in love with her protector and he with her.” Tears filled her eyes and spilled onto her cheeks. “I fully believe that after they met in the gardens that night, he would have asked her to marry him, convince her to give up the scandalous life she was living. They would have retrieved their child to be a family.” Even garbled due to the rag stuffed in her mouth, the speech was quite eloquent.

“What?” Shock registered in his expression as well as his voice. “They were in love?”

This was the opening Gabriel had been hoping for. “We believe that they were, but you killed her, and that romance ended. We can only hope Lord Carmichael will find his child.”

The knife dipped slightly. “They loved each other?” Apparently, the man didn’t believe it or couldn’t fathom that a courtesan was capable of such.

“Yes, and in your misguided fervor, you took that from them.” Gabriel’s muscles tensed, for he was done with this Drury Lane farce. “That child will never have a chance to meet his mother because of you .” Then he sprang at the man.

They grappled with each other for possession of the knife while Mary made panicked

sounds. Outside in the corridor, noise of the approaching fire reached his ears, and cold fear shot down his spine. If they didn't get out now, they might not have another chance.

In that distraction, Mr. Dempsey slashed at him. The blade's tip cut along the side of Gabriel's neck and another tore through his shirt to slice his chest.

"Bright!" Of course it was Mary who gave him the help he needed. She swung, and the momentum of her weight carried her to their location. With her feet, she knocked into Mr. Dempsey enough that it rendered him off balance.

With a grunt, Gabriel took hold of the madman's arm, twisted it enough that the blade fell from his fingers. It clattered against the marble. Then he delivered a hard punch to Mr. Dempsey's jaw that sent him reeling, but a blow to his gut had the man falling to his arse on the floor. "We are done here, and you are under arrest, Mr. Dempsey," he said between winded pants.

"No!" Though the man winced in pain, he picked himself up from the floor. "You can't stop me in my mission. I'm doing God's work." Then, with a glance brimming with hatred at Mary, he fled into the corridor.

"The cases get crazier with each one." It wasn't worth it to him to go after the killer, for there were more pressing matters. On his way to reach Mary, Gabriel kicked the knife away. As soon as he freed her from the restraints and yanked off the gag, she fell into his arms.

It was one of the sweetest moments in his life. "Are you all right?" Though he wanted to inspect her for injuries, all he did for a few seconds was hold her.

"More or less, but I'm frightened." Fear quaked in her voice. "Is it true there is a fire?"

“Yes.” And it was the only thing driving him. “We must go. Everyone else has evacuated, and the fire is raging out of control.” Then he couldn’t stand it. He gathered her even closer, quickly kissed her, then rested his forehead to hers so he could peer into her eyes. “When I figured it out, I feared the worst.”

“It was horrible, but I knew you would come.” Her hand resting on his chest trembled. “Your heart is pounding.”

Finally, he allowed himself a tiny grin. “Sweeting, my heart has been pounding since the day I met you, and it hasn’t stopped.”

“Oh?” She looked at him with moisture-spiked lashes and his world tilted.

He nodded. “Somehow, you have managed to lead me on a merry chase, and I have willingly followed. Let us hope our marriage will never stop being exciting or full of adventure.”

“Ha.” Briefly, she kissed his lips. “It could stand to be a bit less exciting than tonight.”

Though they both laughed, it was a shaky affair.

“Come. We need to evacuate.” Then he took her hand and led her from the horrible scene of her torture.

Except, it wasn’t that easy, for as they fought their way toward the stairs, the fire was licking along the walls.

“This isn’t good,” Mary whispered as she clung to his hand.

“Try not to think about it.” As quickly and carefully as he could, he guided her down

the stairs to the second level landing. Here, the flames were more intense, and the corridors were shrouded with heavy, acrid smoke. His heart sank. “We need some sort of covering else we’ll not make it to the ground level and safety.” Already, his breathing was labored .

She gasped and then coughed. “The drapes in the drawing room?”

“Might as well. There will be no salvaging this building,” he said as he led her into the darker smoke along the corridor. “It’s too far from help or even a fire brigade even though the sea is close.”

She coughed again but didn’t comment, but she helped him yank down the curtains. “What now?”

“Wrap it about yourself. I’ll do the same.” Once that was accomplished, he moved to a table where a vase of flowers rested. Then after tossing away the flowers, he dumped the water over her head. “The dampness might help with keeping the fire from us for a bit.” Seconds later, he grabbed a second vase and did the same thing to himself. “Ready?”

“Yes.” Fear shadowed her eyes. “I’m frightened, Gabriel. What if we don’t—”

“Don’t think it. Don’t even say it.” Though he was terrified as well, he tucked the emotion away in an effort to prove strong for her. With a hand on her shoulder, he peered into her eyes through the gathering smoke. “I will protect you until the last. You are my heart and my most exciting adventure, and we are going to survive this together.”

“I know.” She clutched his hand.

“Stay as low as you can in the corridor and stairs. It will help with breathing,” he

cautioned while they left the drawing room.

Immediately, the heat of the fire pressed in on him. The smoke was horrid, and though he tried his best to walk and crouch at the same time, breathing became more difficult.

Navigating to the staircase proved a frightening endeavor, but not as much as plunging down the stairs while the walls burned. Thankfully, the marble treads didn't burn, but falling debris and the ever-present smoke made progress difficult. He clung to her hand as tightly as she did to his, and that touch became a lifeline of sorts.

Though they'd reached the ground level, Gabriel quickly became disoriented. Fire raged all around them. Beams from the ceiling and sections of the walls fell into their path, which forced them to find a different way through. Unidentified things crashed to the floor all around them. And through it all, the fire glowed an eerie orange through the thick dark smoke.

"If we don't get out of the house soon, it will collapse upon us." Where the devil were the doors? He couldn't remember after all the twists and turns they'd had to take due to the falling debris.

"We'll do our best." She squeezed his hand, and that reenergized his resolve. "But we are together. "

"Right."

With every step, breathing became more labored. His lungs ached. His muscles hurt. But he kept going, step by step. At some point, the damp drapery slipped from his shoulders; he couldn't go back for it. In the eerie darkness, Gabriel tripped over a burning piece of timber. He fell to one knee, but Mary tugged on his hand, grounding him. After quickly scrambling to his feet, they continued as best they could.

When he discerned a bright light that was different from the glow of the fire, he cried out, hoping that it was the entrance to the common gardens at the rear of the townhouse.

With victory within their grasp, he concentrated on that, but then Mary collapsed.

“Go ahead, Bright.” Her voice was graveled. A coughing gag took hold of her. “It hurts... to breathe... to move.” She tried to shove him away as she sank more fully to the floor. “Go and know... I... love you.”

“I’m not leaving you behind.” Shoving away the fear and sorrow, pushing it deep down in his chest, Gabriel gathered her into his arms and picked her up. He staggered, got his bearings, and then continued along the burning corridor with his gaze focused on the bright light. For the moment, he ignored the pain in his lungs and chest, ignored how the burning embers in the air landed on his sleeves and the drapery still protecting Mary’s form.

Finally, he came upon the door that led to the gardens, and as soon as he shoved it open with a hip, he stumbled outside. There was no time to rejoice, for he was far too close to the burning building for his liking, so he kept putting one foot in front of the other, followed the path to the shore.

When his stamina gave out somewhere on the beach, he uttered a soft cry of gratitude as he collapsed onto the sand. The gentle rain cooled his overheated skin but it wasn’t enough to help put out the fire. People had gathered a bit away the area from where he and Mary were. They stood about in varying degrees of shock and dismay as they watched the demise of the Agape Spa.

While sucking in the relatively cleaner air given off by the sea, he rested his back against a large boulder. Then he hauled Mary into his lap. Ripping off the smoldering drapery, he gently tapped her cheek. “Mary?” He turned her face toward his, tapped

her cheek again until her eyes fluttered and she looked groggily at him. What if she'd inhaled too much of the poisoned smoke? "Mary, can you hear me?"

Please, sweeting, I can't lose you now.

"I... I..." Soot streaked her face. Parts of the horrid wig smoked from the fire. He wrenched it from her head and tossed it away, but it seemed both of them were none the worse for wear .

"Breathe, love, breathe in the clean air," he softly encouraged as he wiped away some of the soot and ash from her skin. "We are by the sea and safe." He cupped her cheek, slid his hand to her neck as he peered down into her face. Then the hold on his control slipped, and tears wet his cheeks as reaction set in. "It's over. We're safe." By all rights, they shouldn't have survived either the knife-wielding maniac or the burning townhouse, but somehow, they did. "We're safe." It bore repeating.

For a long time, they sat there watching the ever-moving waves of the sea while fluffy white clouds scudded across the gray skies. In the background, the fire raged. The whole townhouse was engulfed in the flames, and the sound of the building collapsing onto itself reached his ears. It took several moments, but Mary's breath became less labored, and his lungs ceased to burn with each inhalation.

Eventually, he stirred. "I'm damned grateful we're alive, though all our luggage and clothing is gone. On the other hand, as soon as the traveling coach arrives, we can simply leave." It hurt to laugh, so he cut the sound off short.

"But we are not gone, and you are the most valuable thing anyway." She leaned in and kissed his lips. The faint taste of smoke and blood made itself known on his tongue, but damn if that wasn't the sweetest kiss he'd ever received. "Thank you, Gabriel, for saving my life—again. Thank you for everything, for this life you have given me and the future therein."

“It is my honor and my privilege.” Moisture rose into his eyes, for they had very nearly lost each other.

She snorted, touched her fingertips to his hair and brushed debris away. “It might sound wicked, but I hope Mr. Dempsey has perished in the fire. Men like him shouldn’t be allowed to roam free to continue their evil ways.”

Silently, he agreed, and he nodded. “Once the fire is out and settled, and the authorities go through the wreckage, only then will we know, but if killings start again, I will go after him.”

“I know you will because you are a good man.” With a sigh, she rested her head on his shoulder. “Theresa finally has had justice, but I feel so sad for her. I like to think there was a lovely future finally in store for her.”

“At least her pain, confusion, and struggle are over.” Gabriel held his wife closer, for she was his everything. “Has this helped to put the past to rest for you?”

“Oddly yes.” Mary lifted her head to meet his gaze. “The spa burning down is like my past going to ashes as well. There is no way back and neither do I wish to visit any longer.”

“Good.” With a grim grin, he held her closer. “There is nothing more to do than go to the townhouse we’ve rented and enjoy the remainder of our holiday with Cassandra.” Frankly, that sounded like heaven just now. “I’ll leave that direction with the authorities when they arrive for updates.”

“Yes, let us do that.” Mary held him close as well. “I want to keep my loved ones with me right now after everything. This case has made me see I am truly a fortunate woman.”

“I agree with that statement, and I feel the same every morning.

At the end of the day, that was the most important thing to keep in mind. When a man realized what it was that he valued, he would do anything to keep it close and sacred. A happy and content future was priceless, and the more hard-won it was, the more valuable he considered it.

There was nothing comparable to it in the world.

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Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:56 am

October 22, 1819

Tilbury House

Brighton, England

Mary sighed as she watched the movement of the waves. It was so calming and relaxing here in Brighton, and it was the perfect place to recuperate from the ordeal of three days ago.

After she and Gabriel had escaped from the burning remains of the Agape spa, a fire brigade had finally arrived, but there had been little they could do. The structure had been fully engulfed ten minutes after she and Gabriel escaped, and that was the end.

For the past three days, she'd spent time in bed to rest from her injuries. None of them were horribly severe, and thank goodness, neither were her husband's, but the mental wounds would take more time to heal. And reflecting upon Theresa's life made her all the more grateful for her own. She had everything she needed when her family was near, and that would never have happened without meeting the inspector last December.

It seemed so far away, but alternately it still felt as if that affair had just happened.

"Mary?"

The sound of Cassandra's voice and her light touch on Mary's arm yanked her from her thoughts. "Hmm?" For as long as she'd been sitting on a blanket spread on the

sand watching the sea, the girl had been by her side, sitting quietly, and that was a vast improvement.

“Why do some of the gulls run away from the waves when they wash up on the shore and then run back after it as it goes away?”

Mary smiled. “The surf deposits tiny little creatures on the sand that the birds eat, so they are constantly searching for a meal.” She laughed, and oddly, it felt wonderful to do so. “And perhaps they don’t enjoy getting their legs wet.”

The girl flashed a rare, genuine smile. “Does it hurt when you put your legs into the sea?”

“It does not. Sometimes it feels... refreshing, but you must be careful lest sharp edges of shells poke at your feet.” In all the time they’d been at the seashore, the girl hadn’t wished to walk at the water’s edge. “If you want to experiment, I’ll go with you.”

Her light blue eyes focused on the sea and the sand. Slowly, she shook her head. “I will try tomorrow.”

“Whenever you’re ready, I’ll be there.” Mary glanced at the girl. Her straw boater hat had blown off her head and now hung at her back, kept in place by the black ribbon. The sun on the single braid of her platinum blonde hair rendered it nearly white. “How are you enjoying your holiday so far?”

“The sea is so... big,” the girl said in a low voice filled with awe. “And loud.”

“But it is also beautiful, mysterious. It reminds me that everything will turn out as it should if we believe in ourselves.”

“I wonder what it feels like to be on a boat.” Cassandra drew her knees to her chin and wrapped her arms about her legs. “Do you think sailors are frightened on the

water?”

“Sometimes, until the sea and travel upon it becomes familiar. It’s like anything else.” She patted Cassandra’s shoulder. “There is no shame in being afraid. I often feel that way. Sometimes, it helps us to see what is truly important in life.”

For long moments, the girl remained quiet. “I haven’t been afraid since I came to live with you and Inspector Bright.”

“That’s wonderful. I’m glad you feel safe with us.” She smiled as the girl glanced at her. “The inspector makes me feel safe too.” Then her mind bounced to what she wanted their home life to be like once they returned to London. “When we return to Town, Inspector Bright and I will interview candidates for your new governess.”

Cassandra nodded. “What happened to Miss Oliver? She hasn’t taken breakfast with me for a couple of days.”

“I’m afraid Miss Oliver gave her notice. She left for a better position.” Which had been a relief in many ways, and they’d all parted on amicable terms. “Hopefully, your next governess will be more suited to you and what you need in an education.” And would be more respectful of the lifestyle they lived.

“Will we still have outings in Hyde Park?”

“Do you like that?”

“Yes!” The girl nodded with enthusiasm. “But I... I like them more when you and the inspector go too.”

Her heart squeezed. This was the first conversation with Cassandra that was more than just empty pleasantries. “We absolutely will because we’re a family.”

“A family.” There was a bit of awe in the girl’s utterance.

Another collection of moments went by in silence, but this time, the girl watched Mary’s face. “Mr. Davies said you and Inspector Bright fought through a fire to come back to me. Is that true?”

“Yes.” She forced down a hard swallow to keep tears at bay. “We did. Even fought a horrid man who didn’t like families. Who didn’t love anyone, it seemed.” If she never heard the name of Dempsey again, it would be too soon.

The fire investigator who’d gone through the charred ruins of the spa just yesterday found a few bodies of people who hadn’t gotten out. One of which was intact in a pool of a room on the lower level. He died of smoke inhalation but when Bright had gone over to help with the identification of the bodies, he confirmed the one in the pool had indeed been that of Mr. Dempsey.

Of course, everyone involved in that day had breathed a sigh of relief. It was truly over. At least the reign of that particular madman.

There would always be another to take his place, and there was no shortage of crime in London or England, for that matter.

Cassandra held her gaze. Questions shadowed her light blue eyes. “Did the inspector solve the case and get the bad man?”

Oh, dear. What to tell her? Perhaps sticking to the truth as much as possible was best. “He did. The inspector rescued me from a horrible situation and then we escaped from the fire. The bad man died. Now the people he killed can rest in peace.”

“Oh. ”

More silence grew between them as the shore birds frolicked and continued their

antics in avoiding the waves.

“Mary?”

“Hmm?”

Cassandra sighed. She straightened out her legs. “Do you think Inspector Bright would like it if I call him papa? I would really like to have a papa even if Miss Oliver told me I never would because I was a street urchin.”

Again, Mary was so grateful the governess was gone. She nodded as her heart trembled and her chest tightened. “The inspector will be wonderfully happy with that, I think.” Why couldn’t the girl feel that comfortable with her? Despite battling tears, she smiled. “He is a lovely father, and I can’t wait for you to meet his son Henry at Christmastide.”

Goodness, but that was only two months off. Time truly did fly.

Cassandra put a delicate little hand over one of Mary’s. “Do you think I may call you mama?”

“What?” The whispered inquiry seemed overly loud, even amidst nature.

The girl nodded. “I have watched the families since we have been in Brighton, and... I want parents too.” Her eyes were overly bright with tears. “Might I call you mama? I would very much like to have a mother again.” She bit her bottom lip. “And... I trust you. I know you won’t leave.”

It was as if the heavens parted and God himself shone light upon her. A wave of happiness crashed into Mary so large that tears rose in her eyes and then fell to her cheeks. “Of course you can, dear girl. I will always be that to you. And no, I will never leave you, because you are far too precious to me.” On impulse, she wrapped

her arms around Cassandra and hugged her. After a few moments' hesitation, the girl hugged her back, and Mary wept silently.

In that moment, she was exquisitely happy. In fact, she hadn't known such a love existed, and it was... life changing.

She pressed her lips to the top of Cassandra's head. "Nothing bad will happen to you while you are in the care of the inspector and me. I can promise you that."

"I know that." It was a simple affirmation, but it made Mary feel as if she could fly.

"We are going to have so much fun together."

"I know that too." This time, a smile was definite in the words. "Might we go tell the inspector now? Is he still working?"

He had paperwork to write up regarding Mr. Dempsey as well as the secret spa and the demise of both, which he would give to the men in charge of the situation .

"I think in this case, he would be delighted to have a break." She pulled away to peer into the girl's face. "Shall I come with you?"

"Yes!" Cassandra sprang to her feet. "And then might we take tea together? I'm starving."

Mary couldn't help but laugh. "Of course we can." It had taken a long time, but one of her dreams was finally coming true.

I am a mother.

Later that night

When Gabriel came into the bedchamber they shared, Mary set aside the book she'd been reading and rested it on the nightstand by the candleholder.

"Have you closed out the case?"

"I have." At some point after dinner, he'd removed his jacket, collar, cuffs, and cravat. Luckily, they hadn't brought all the clothing from their holiday to the spa, so they both still had a few things to wear. What they didn't, they'd ordered from a local modiste, since they would remain in Brighton for the next three weeks. "And I don't mind telling you that I'm glad the paperwork is done. Tomorrow, I will deliver it to the constable as well as the fire chief. If Bow Street is hired on behalf of the two people who died, they shall have a copy as well. I have no more part in it."

"That is good to know. Now you can enjoy what's left of your holiday."

"True, as well as our honeymoon," he said in a low voice as he perched on the side of the bed. "I find myself filled with restlessness tonight. What of you?"

Sometimes, he was so obvious, but she adored him. "Why, Inspector Bright, are you propositioning me?"

"Perish the thought, Mrs. Bright. I am simply asking my wife if she would enjoy being with her husband carnally tonight." He waggled his eyebrows until she couldn't help laughing.

"When it comes to you and exploring your delicious body, I am always in the mood for bed sport." As awareness tingled over her, the carriage-style clock on the bureau across the room chimed the midnight hour. "I have missed you in that regard." Since they'd left the spa, they hadn't been together intimately, for there was too much to do and a bit of a recovery was needed for them both.

"I have missed you as well." Then he stood and offered her a hand. "Let me help you

undress.”

“Only if I am afforded the same reward by undressing you.” It was one of her favorite things to do, and as each piece of clothing came off his wonderfully hard body, it fired her excitement.

“I can’t guarantee anything, for seeing you nude is quite distracting.” As soon as he tugged her from the bed and into his arms, he kissed her. “You have no idea how much I love you,” he whispered against her lips as he manipulated the tie that kept her lace-lined robe in light blue lawn closed.

“Actually, I can well imagine it’s as much as I love you.” It took very little time for her to relieve him of his waistcoat. It fell to the floor with nary a whisper. Then she pulled his shirt tails from the waist of his breeches. Seconds later, Mary had pushed the garment off his body, and sighed, for the sight of his wide chest was enough to render her temporarily speechless.

“Mmm, I suppose we will discover who is telling the truth in mere moments.” As he removed the robe from her person, Bright kissed her with such intensity she wondered how long she would last before she pushed him to the bed.

She sighed as he tugged the matching nightgown from her body, and when the cool ambient air wafted over her skin, her nipples tightened. “Don’t make me wait, Inspector. If this is still our honeymoon, I haven’t had nearly enough of you in the capacity of my husband.”

There hadn’t been enough time to acclimate to that knowledge, and she smiled.

“That is not my intention. I’ll return in a twinkling.” While he stepped away to remove his boots and breeches, she watched him as carnal hunger circled through her insides. Once he was as naked as she, Gabriel returned to her, spun her about so that her back was to his front. “Ah, Mary. It seems as if we must always fight to be with

each other, and perhaps that is what marriage should be. The willingness of both parties to support and help their partner, so the victories are that much sweeter.”

“I think so too.” Tears filled her eyes, for he knew just how to comfort her, how to support her, how to talk to her with logic to counteract her tendency to look at things from an emotional perspective, but above all, he understood her. “And I will always take up that fight.”

“So will I.” Seconds later, he put his hands on her shoulders, kneading and massaging the tension from the muscles there. “And now you are truly a mother.”

“It’s an incredible dream realized, all thanks to you.”

“Mmm, perhaps.” He nuzzled the crook of her shoulder, slid his hands to her breasts.

The warmth of his fingers on her skin was a pleasing contrast to the slight chill in the air. “Without you, I would still be keeping house for my brother.” She shivered as he lightly danced his fingertips over her breasts, teasing her as if he had all the time in the world, circling her nipples until she thought she might go mad if he didn’t fully touch her.

“A noble enough life, but I’m glad you decided to throw your lot in with mine.” The deep timbre of voice against the shell of her ear tickled through her chest. “Life has never been the same since, and I have adored every moment of it with you.”

“Oh.” The word dissolved into a moan, for she agreed with that assessment. Her back arched of its own accord, which put her breasts more firmly into his hands, and she moaned.

“So desperate.” A chuckle followed, which only loosed more tingles in her lower belly. With his palms, he caressed those buds, teased and tormented until pleasure zipped between them and her core. “And so beautiful.” His words coupled with his

actions sent need pulsing between her thighs. “I will never have enough of you, even when I’m an old, old man.”

“I believe you, and I understand how you feel.” She wanted him to take her in a firmer grip, but he never did. The man continued to tease her breasts with the lightest of touches, apparently in a bid to drive her insane. “Gabriel, please...” The words came out on a dreamy whisper as he continued to bring her to the brink of pleasure through her breasts alone. “This is lovely.”

“Only lovely?” He chuckled, but the insistent press of his aroused length against her arse betrayed how much he was enjoying this as well. “Then obviously I’m not teasing you enough or correctly.” With his lips at her nape, he caressed her breasts, her nipples all over again, in a never-ending cycle, and this time, the friction and heat from his skin, the callouses on his fingers, the crisp hair of his chest against her back, the insistent prod of his erect shaft at her hip all worked to add another layer of sensation to the play.

“Stop talking and send my flying, Bright.” Mary’s eyes shuttered closed and once more her back arched. Need throbbed through her core; her breath came in shallow pants. Blissful tingles danced over her skin. Fires replaced her blood. Good heavens, she was nearly at that edge, hovering, waiting, teetering, seconds away from finding bliss, and yet held back. “More,” she gasped out and lifted a hand to wrap around his nape, encourage his head closer to hers. “You know what I like.

“I do, but I like watching you in the throes of pleasure, and I can’t help but imagine sliding my shaft deep into your hot, wet passage.” Each word of that suggestive whisper worked to hurtle her closer to that edge, and he’d barely done anything to bring her to that state. “It has always been like that between us, that connection, that attraction. ”

“That mutual respect and love.” Then his hand was between her thighs, and every thought in her head flew out away.

He furrowed his fingers through her curls while the other hand he kept at her breast, rolling a nipple, plucking it. “Tell me what you want tonight.” As he strummed those talented digits along her flesh, she whimpered.

Unable to form words, Mary put a hand over his guiding him to where she needed him, and straightaway he found her swollen button, encouraged it out of hiding, and then applied friction to that nubbin as if that was his only purpose in life. “Oh, Gabriel...” Shivery sensations raced along her spine, pushed into every nerve ending. Every time they were together, he barely needed to touch her before she was lost. Still, she held his fingers to her pearl, clutched his nape with her other hand. He kissed her neck but didn’t leave off with his frenzied friction, glided his lips over her cheek, and when he bit her earlobe, streaks of need slammed through her core to heighten the feelings already crashing through her body.

“My sweet Mary.” The warmth of his breath drifted over her cheek.

Slightly crazed, she wriggled against him. The hard ridge of his arousal pressed against her arse. “I’m nearly there...” Words proved too much for her. If he didn’t finish her, she’d melt into a puddle at his feet.

“Exactly where I want you. There are many other wicked things I want to do to you tonight.” The cheeky man pinched her nipple, rolled that hardened tip. The pleasure-pain sent her hurtling toward that glimmering edge. His chuckle was all too satisfied as he increased the pressure... everywhere. “Let me see you come undone.”

“You have seen it many times.”

“And I adore it.” His lips grazed her skin. “It makes me want you even more.”

Those words made her shatter, and the more she shivered into it, the greater the wave of ecstasy smacked into her, carried her into that sparkling world where sound and light didn’t exist. “Gabriel!” Mary screamed out her pleasure, for the moment

forgetting they were in a rented townhouse and that Cassandra slept in a room just down the corridor from their location. She held his hand tighter to her button while contractions pulsed through her core.

“So beautiful,” he murmured and once more dragged his lips down the side of her throat.

“Wicked man.” After a few blissful moments, she came back to herself with only enough strength to slump against him. “How do you manage to send me flying so quickly?” Residual shivers danced through her body as he tightened his arms around her .

“Because we were always meant to find each other.” Gabriel nuzzled the crook of her shoulder again. “But I’m not nearly done with you.” He tugged her into his arms, turned her about to face him, and claimed her lips in a series of gentle kisses that left her reeling and as weak-kneed as if she were naught but a debutante experiencing her first embrace.

Lost in a haze of passion, Mary trailed her fingers down his chest, that glorious expanse of naked flesh with its mat of coarse dark brown hair. There was so much she adored about him, about his body, that it would take her days to explain to someone. “Perhaps I should tease you tonight until you cry mercy.” She edged her hand downward, traced his hard arousal with her fingers then watching him the whole time, she cupped his equipage. “Should I bring you to the brink with my mouth or fingers?”

“Damnation.” He gave in to a shiver as his eyes darkened with the same intense desire that coursed through her veins. “Neither, for that isn’t what this night is about.” After a brief kiss, he continued. “However, if we were at home, I would devour you with my mouth.” Before she could respond, he licked and sucked her nipples, and this time, the wicked man cupped a hand between her thighs, and once more he teased her swollen button with his fingers. The approach was different than before, but it drove

her just as wild.

Throbbing need pulsed in her core, for she had always wondered what being pleased thusly might feel like. “Oh, you must stop.”

“Is that truly what you want?” When he waggled his eyebrows and she shook her head, he grinned and renewed his efforts with increased friction and speed.

All too soon, the pressure building within her broke apart. The need to shatter became too much. With another cry, she gave herself over to the sensation of falling, of pinwheeling, of floating. “Gabriel, please, I need you inside me.”

“And that is exactly where I most wish to be in this moment.” With a satisfied chuckle, he urged her onto the four-poster bed, and when she wriggled into a comfortable position, he followed her down.

Her limbs shook from the paces he’d put her through, and it was the most pleasant of sensations, and as she looped her arms about his wide shoulders, Mary pressed kisses to the side of his neck, his chest, beneath his jaw. Knowing this man had upended her life and continued to do so still managed to boggle her mind, but building a family—a life—together with him made her feel so much contentment it surprised her. Never had she experienced such a thing with her last husband.

“Woolgathering, sweeting? While I’m trying to give you bliss?” The warmth of his breath skated over her cheek as he fit the wide tip of his length to her opening, and she gasped anew, for he was quite large, and it always took her by surprise.

“No. Merely thinking about us together.” She wriggled into a more comfortable position. “I adore this moment.” One of the things she adored about intercourse was talking intimately with a partner, in both inspiration and teasing. “And I—oh!” The ability to form words fell right out of her brain, for he flexed his hips and speared into her, penetrating her as deep as he could go. She hung onto him, truly amazed yet

again at how well they fit together.

“Damn but you feel so good, so welcoming and warm,” he whispered, and there was both admiration and smugness in his voice. “I love you, Mary.” He met her gaze as he briefly pressed his forehead to hers. “There is nothing more to say.”

“I quite agree.” She bumped her hips with his. Shivers of enjoyment went through her lower belly, for the movement only served to send him deeper. “I love you too.”

“I’ll never have enough of you, in all the ways that matter.” Holding the bulk of his weight on his forearm, Gabriel put his other hand beneath her thigh, urged her leg up to curl about his waist, and then he slowly, oh so slowly, stroked in and out of her body.

Teasing, always teasing, and it was the most glorious thing every time they came together. It took next to no time to find a rhythm, for they had long ago perfected this sort of erotic dance together, and soon soft gasps and moans filled the air. The scrape of his chest hair over her sensitized nipples added sweet friction to the act, and with each new thrust, her world trembled and rocked on its foundation.

His strokes grew faster, harder, went deeper, made more of a connection, and while he moved, she took his hand and put it between their heaving bodies, for she needed additional stimulation to fall over that edge once more. The wonderful man took the hint. He worried that nubbin for all he was worth, and when she gasped and her body stiffened, he claimed her lips, took her scream into himself as she shattered for the third time that night.

That’s how good, how loving, he was.

Twice more, her husband thrust into her body, then he too, went over the edge to join her in that sweet release. “Dear God.” A grunt followed as he ground his hips into hers while his shaft pulsed. “That was all too satisfying.” Then he collapsed into her

form, trapping her between the hard wall of his body and the soft, mattress tick. “But then, it always is with you.”

“Indeed, it was.” For long moments, while their breathing returned to normal, Mary held him close. His sandalwood and orange scent teased her nose, and lying there with him while still so intimately joined left her feeling needed and cherished. “You always surprise me.”

Gabriel lifted his head, and his grin in the candlelight tugged an answering one from her. “You doubt my skill?”

“Of course not. I am constantly amazed we are still so feverish about each other after being together for almost a year.”

“The partner makes all the difference, sweeting.” He rolled onto his side and took her with him. “For the first time in recent memory, I am happy. I feel as if I have accomplished every goal I’ve set for myself.”

“What of your work?”

“It will always be there, and I will always find cases to occupy my attention, but the time building a family won’t.”

“You are a romantic, Bright.” With a tiny sigh, she rested her head on his chest as he slung his arm about her hip.

“Perhaps where you are concerned, but then, it must have worked, for I won you.” While he spoke, he drew idle patterns on her hip with a fingertip, and every pass over her skin sent frissons of renewed need through her insides. “And now, Cassandra has trusted us enough that we can truly be parents together.”

Tears sprang to her eyes. “I never thought it possible.”

“I knew she would come ‘round, just as I know you will be a wonderful mother.” His chuckle tickled through her chest. “Ah, Mary, I might just burst from pride regarding you.”

“Do hush. I have done nothing.”

“You know that’s not true. Everything about you has changed everything about me, and I have done the same for you.” When he slipped his hand to her bottom and gave that cheek a squeeze, she squealed in surprise. “That is the foundation of a good marriage.”

She couldn’t help but smile. “I can’t wait to see where we will all go from here.”

Truly, it didn’t matter, because she’d found everything she’d ever wanted—a man who supported her in whatever she chose to do, the chance to be a mother, a marriage that wasn’t a chore. Anything else at this point was merely icing on a favorite cake.

And he was right. The partner made all the difference. At times, one had to suffer through the horrible in order to grasp the amazing.

The End