



The Temptation of Reverend Francis Brody (Scandalous Daughters of Duke Street #1)

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Category: Historical

Description: A love that defies Societys rules

Actress Clarissa Bartlett craves fame and fortune on the stage. After years of struggle since she left the Duke Street Orphanage, she's achieved theatre acclaim at Covent Garden. When her aunt takes a wealthy lover and decides it's time for Clarissa to take one too, Clarissa turns to the only man she trusts, the earnest Reverend Francis Brody, her total opposite.

Francis ministers to the Covent Garden parish while he awaits a promised living in Hampshire, and avoids Miss Fanny Hodges, the woman everyone thinks he will marry. When the beautiful Clarissa seeks his help to avoid an unwanted liaison, he can't refuse her safety in his bachelor rooms. Suddenly, his ordered and respectable life is thrown into chaos.

As their enemies unite to destroy their reputations and their careers, Francis offers Clarissa protection in a marriage of convenience. Soon, they're finding it hard to resist their attraction to each other and starting to believe they may be a match made in heaven...until their hopes for a future together are shattered.

Will they find a way to be together when so many forces are tearing them apart?

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The Regent Theatre in Covent Garden vibrated with excitement. The Reverend Francis Brody waited in stillness, a rock amidst the churning waters of the impatient crowd. He adjusted his wire reading glasses on his face and scanned the playbill again. Tonight's performance was a burletta featuring a newly popular leading lady whom he had not met.

Offering pastoral care to the cast of the current comic opera, was part and parcel of Francis's work as temporary curate of Saint Paul's Parish, Covent Garden, for his employer, Reverend Randolph. Attending the theatre to see their performances was not, but he found it a good way to better understand their lives by watching them work.

Around him seethed a restless crowd of fashionable young blades and less congenial men. Primed with alcohol and high spirits, the audience waited impatiently for the much-lauded performance of the latest star of the stage—the 'delectable' Miss Clarissa Bartlett. The theatre pulsed with a thousand conversations, laughter, and music from its orchestra.

The air of the pit, thick with the smells of perfumes, colognes and sweat, combined with the alcohol-laced breathes of many, assaulted his nose. The heat of myriad candles burning in candelabras sent a trickle of perspiration slithering between his shoulder blades.

Above him, ascended tiers of decorated boxes on three sides of the theatre. They accommodated the more genteel and wealthy patrons, who found the crush of the

excitable pit not to their taste. The upper galleries seated the less affluent and only filled halfway through the evening, after the admission price was lowered. High above the audience soared an ornate ceiling.

Francis's older brother, William, a former cavalry officer whose face had set into harsh lines during long years of war service, stood at his side. William leaned in and shouted something in his ear. The hubbub of more than a thousand voices drowned out his words. Francis shook his head to show he didn't understand. William shrugged his shoulders and tapped the face of the fob watch in his hand.

Moments later, the orchestra, hidden in its pit before the stage, commenced a rousing overture, demanding the crowd's attention for the start of the play. Slowly the audience took their seats and quietened in readiness. Francis folded his reading glasses into their case ready to gaze upon the proclaimed beauty.

Newfangled gas lights flared in the wings, illuminating the stage. The curtain rose to reveal a Grecian scene. Francis held his breath.

The narrator stepped forward and recited his spiel as a prelude to the performance. His voice faded away. With a sweep of his arm towards center stage he disappeared into the wing.

And there she was—Miss Clarissa Bartlett.

At the first sight of the young actress, the young bucks in the pit roared with delight and applauded.

Miss Bartlett didn't disappoint at all, dressed as she was in diaphanous Grecian robes that clung to her lithe limbs. A circlet of gold caught up her fair tresses. Her face was a vision of loveliness to rival the Greek goddess, Aphrodite.

Good lord! Francis's eyes widened at the sight of her, and his body reacted in a way that he, as a man of the cloth...an engaged gentlemen to boot, would prefer it didn't. He slipped a finger under his white muslin cravat and tugged it away from the heated skin of his neck. Miss Bartlett was a soul of his parish for whom he had a duty of care. His response was wholly unsuitable!

Francis glanced at William. Even his brother's grim face had relaxed into admiration. The pit vibrated with tense energy, excitement, and undoubted sexual arousal.

Why did women willingly expose themselves to the eyes and appetites of such men as these? It wasn't the first time Francis has wondered this and he still didn't have a good answer.

The actresses whom he had asked had laughed in his face and advised him to go preach somewhere else and to leave them to earn their livings in the best way they knew. He despaired they did not seek a better, safer, way of life until it was almost too late and their path had turned to sorrow. Then he offered assistance if they wished it, not condemnation.

The leading lady's performance quickly met with the audience's approval. Francis laughed along with the rest of the audience at the comedy. Beside him, William's rich baritone peeled forth too.

However, as the comic opera progressed Francis became disturbed by the innuendos and ribald comments made by the young bucks around him about the actress on her every appearance on stage. It showed their admiration for her looks, but also a lack of respect for the woman herself.

At the play's conclusion, cat calls, whistles and hurrahs greeted Miss Bartlett's repeated curtain calls. What Francis had not expected was to be both entranced by Clarissa Bartlett and affronted on her behalf.

Concern for her safety crept its fingers through his innards. Could these men be trusted to separate the character from the woman in their minds? What she exposed on stage, they might well demand she reveal off stage.

His tightened his grip on the silver handle of his walking stick. He'd come here tonight to gain an understanding about her life—and he feared he now understood all too clearly. It wasn't enough to gaze upon the actress, he must meet her in person...speak with her.

Soon, before the evening was over, or he might lose his opportunity to offer her help. What if he was too late or she wouldn't listen?

Francis nudged William's hard shoulder, urging him from the pit. He had work to do.

Backstage, instead of fighting through the crush of gentlemen making their way towards the green room, Francis forged his way towards the theatre manager's office.

William hung back and came to a halt in the doorway leading there from the backstage area. "I'll leave you now. Good luck with your introduction to the delectable Miss Bartlett," he said, merriment lighting his eyes. "You seem as enamored as all the other men."

"Just performing my role, William," he answered, annoyed that his brother had read him so well.

"Of course." William clapped him on the shoulder, his mouth working to stop the corners of his mouth curving upward.

Francis eyed his brother, ignoring William's disbelief of his motive. "Don't you wish

to be introduced to her?”

“Not in the least. I’m happy to continue to admire her from afar.”

His response surprised Francis a little—his brother was an unattached and red-blooded male. At times like this, Francis wondered whether perhaps there was someone in William’s past who had left a lasting impression, whom he was unwilling to reveal.

Francis dismissed the thought from his mind as William waved him onward down the corridor. He turned towards his goal. He had long ago formed a friendship with the manager, a well-dressed balding man of middling years, to facilitate his entry to the theatre in order to speak with the actresses. “George, a marvelous performance this evening,” he said, extending his hand to shake.

The man gave a brief smile of welcome and shook hands. “Reverend Francis, I wondered when you would turn up to see my latest sensation.”

Francis smiled in response the manager’s welcome of sorts. “She’s remarkable. You’ll have no trouble filling your theatre for this production.”

“I’m hoping her popularity lasts beyond this season.” His brow lowered, sending Francis a stern look. “You had better not be here to talk her into becoming a nun or some such,” he grumbled.

Francis held up his hands in defense. “Not at all. My only function here is to make sure she and the other actresses know there is somewhere to find support should they find themselves in difficult circumstances due to one or more of these gentlemen.” He waved his walking stick towards the noisy, milling crowd of men backstage.

“As long as that’s all you do,” George answered gruffly.

He grinned at the man. “On my honor. And in order for me to do that, would you introduce me to Miss Bartlett?” He was eager to discover whether she was as attractive in-person as she appeared on the stage and whether her personality matched her beauty.

The theatre manager cast an assessing look over Francis. “Aye, come on then.” He led the way into and through the green room. They passed into the actresses’ dressing room—a communal cluster of small dressing tables that served all the female cast except the leading lady. They strode onward to her room at the rear.

Francis knew its location from his past visits here. From every side came the chatter and high-pitched laughter of the actresses and the low hum of gentlemen’s voices as they flirted with the ladies and invited them to supper.

George reached the closed door of Miss Bartlett’s dressing room and rapped loudly. A flurry of excited anticipation reverberated within his stomach.

The door opened to reveal a glamorously dressed woman approaching middle-age, with still-dark hair, good looks, and a welcoming smile.

“Mrs. Jenkins, good evening,” the manager said, with a brief bow.

She inclined her head in response. “Mr. Prentice, you’ve come to congratulate my niece on her spectacular performance?”

He raised his arms wide. “Indeed I have, and to introduce someone to her.”

The woman’s eyes glittered and her gaze swept over his shoulder. As soon as her eyes took in Francis’s somber black evening clothes and modest white cravat, all her interest in him evaporated. She gave a weak smile of welcome and stepped back into the room. “Any friend of yours...”

From behind them, came the sounds of the crowd of jostling gentlemen, eager to meet the leading lady. Francis followed the manager into the room and closed the door, dimming the noise from the pack outside.

His gaze swept the room. To one side, richly colored costumes hung on an open rack. Against another wall stood a dressing table full of glass jars of potions and make-up, hairbrush and comb, with a candle-lit mirror above.

Miss Bartlett emerged from behind a lacquered black screen. She still wore the costume from her last appearance on stage—a gown of low-cut, flowing silk that clung to her curves. His mouth went dry at the sight of her creamy décolletage. Rich strawberry blonde hair cascaded in corkscrew curls from a Grecian knot atop her crown, while a few wisps floated around her perfect oval face. He longed to reach out a hand and test the springiness of those curls.

Clearly caught while undressing her hair, she held an ornate hair comb in her hand, while its partner remained in place. Her gaze met his over George's shoulder, a half-smile on her face and a look of interest in her eyes.

Francis's heart pounded out a greeting.

“A wonderful performance, Miss Bartlett,” the manager said in his brisk manner. He sent her a hearty smile, then his face sobered. “We will discuss a slight change of timing in your first line of the second act tomorrow afternoon at rehearsal.” He dipped his chin ending that part of his message and half-turned to Francis beside him. “And now, may I present Reverend Francis Brody, curate of St Paul's Parish, Covent Garden. He periodically visits the theatre to provide any spiritual guidance that the cast and crew might want. Reverend Brody, meet Miss Clarissa Bartlett, my most recent discovery.”

The young lady held out her ungloved hand to him with a challenging look in her eye.

The scent of lilacs wafted to him. His nostrils flared.

Large aquamarine blue eyes, outlined with kohl emphasizing their size, looked up at him in a coquettish way from beneath long darkened eyelashes. A sprinkle of freckles smattered her nose and cheeks giving her an appearance of fresh wholesomeness. This was totally at odds with the come hither look she seemed to give him now...and to which he was sorely tempted to respond.

Francis took her slim hand in his. “Miss Bartlett, I’m delighted to meet you. May I congratulate you on a wonderful performance. You delighted the whole audience.”

“You may, Reverend Francis,” she answered, a pert look on her face and her eyes sparkling at the compliment.

“I’ll leave you now. Work to do,” the theatre manager interrupted and wrenched open the door before striding out and closing the door with a sharp click.

Francis returned his attention to the vision of loveliness in front of him. “I try to attend the theatre periodically to meet the cast and ensure they are aware of the support available to them should they need it at any time in the future.”

“What sort of support would that be?” she asked. A look—part questioning, part challenging—occupied her face.

“Spiritual support of course, through St Paul’s Church. And should any of the young ladies find themselves in need of support following er...a matter of the heart, I am a director of the London Welfare League Home at Wapping, which can assist.” It was his job to care for the souls of these women and assist them to a better life. His attraction to Miss Bartlett, made him want to succeed more than usual.

“Following a liaison, you mean?” she queried, her mouth quirking up on one side.

“Ah...yes, I do.”

“What circumstances? And what support would be needed?” Her eyes were lit with merriment.

He coughed discretely. “Any unforeseen consequences of that liaison. The home is for unwed women and provides long-term support.”

Behind his shoulder, her aunt tittered.

Miss Bartlett’s eyes fixed on his, but not in a friendly way. “Reverend Frank...May I call you that?” Raising her hands to her hips, she didn’t wait for him to answer. “Let me be blunt. I have no intention of seeking out your support or your mission. I do not believe I will require the services of either.” She dropped her arms and began to turn away.

Francis straightened. Clearly this conversation was not being received with any enthusiasm. “I’m not suggesting that you will.” He smiled warmly at her despite the frosty look on her face. “However, it is my duty to advise all women in this theatre that there is support for them, should they choose to seek it.”

She turned her gaze to his and raised a sleek eyebrow. “I intend never to need your services, sir.”

He was delighted to hear the determination in her voice, if it meant that she would not engage in the affaires de Coeur into which actresses fell so frequently, for either monetary or emotional reasons. Acting was not a well-paid profession for most. “Good. It will please me to never have to assist you in such a matter.”

Although she was not receptive to his message, he was determined she would hold the key to receiving help. He reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a card.

“Contact me if you ever change your mind. I would be honored to assist you. In the event you might ever need my help in any way, please take my card. You may trust me completely.” He pressed his calling card into her limp hand and bowed over it. “I remain your devoted admirer and wish you great success in your career on the stage. Good night.”

He looked up into her crystal-clear eyes, losing himself in their blue depths for a moment. A frown line appeared between her brows before she tugged her hand free.

A sharp rap on the door sounded. Probably one of Miss Bartlett’s devotees eager to praise her. He opened the door to find Lord Marchmere standing there, impatient for entry. Viscount Travener, whom he recognized, although he had no acquaintance, stood at his shoulder.

From behind Francis came Mrs. Jenkins’s warm welcome. “Lord Marchmere,” she purred.

Surely, Miss Bartlett could do better than Marchmere or Travener, if she must form a liaison with a wealthy admirer. Marchmere was an uninspiring choice. Travener, at least was young and good-looking.

Outside, Francis sighed and scanned the room of gentlemen admirers. He didn’t expect to see Clarissa again except on the stage. Especially after her mocking rejection of his assistance.

How foolish he was to allow her attitude towards him to drive a small dagger of hurt under his ribcage. It shouldn’t disturb. He had received similar responses in the past from actresses.

What would his father, the first Reverend Brody, have said about such foolishness, were he alive?

After all, Miss Bartlett was an up-and-coming actress receiving acclaim from all fashionable London and he was an almost-engaged clergyman. Never the twain would meet and nor should they. Their careers and lives were diametrically opposed.

He had no just reason to be drawn to her. And his attraction could not lead anywhere. But Miss Clarissa Bartlett was temptation personified.

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Clarissa turned away from the door, and began removing the remainder of her costume jewelry, placing it in a box on her dressing table. The Reverend Francis Brody was an enigma. A fascinating compilation of contradictions.

Her breathing had faltered at the first sight of him...until she realized he was a man of the cloth. He wore the somber clothes of his profession—black coat, breeches and vest—combined with a simply tied, snowy-white cravat. She wrinkled her nose at the recollection of his restrained outfit.

But those sober clothes had failed to hide the tall and erect, well-muscled body that belied his profession. None of the stoop, rounded shoulders, paleness, or spindliness she associated with the clergymen she had encountered while growing up in the Duke Street Orphanage.

And his face! A decisive nose—not too small, not too large; straight eyebrows; and prominent cheekbones in a square-chinned face. Perfection! A few stray waves of brown hair fell onto his forehead and temples, softening his looks. Long side levers crept towards his chin, defining his face. But it was his mouth that truly fascinated her—its width perfectly fit his face, while his lips possessed just the right amount of fullness for kissing.

Her first thought after her perusal of him was that it a crime against womankind that such looks had been allocated to a staid man of the church. One come to preach to her about her life choices, no less!

As if he knew anything about her choices. She was perfectly capable of flirting with a handsome man without acting upon her attraction. That was precisely how she

intended to live—her career must come first until she achieved the success she craved.

But he hadn't condemned her...instead, in his deep melodic voice, he had offered assistance...should she need it in the future. No lecture given. No words of scorn. No condescension.

Yet I sent him on his way, nonetheless.

Indeed, the Reverend Frank Brody presented a conundrum . An attractive man with whom she could not flirt as he was a clergyman, although she longed to do so. The disappointment from this realization lingered as a heaviness within her—so very strange.

A girlish titter from beside her burst in upon her thoughts. What on earth? Clarissa turned in surprise.

Her aunt simpered up at Lord Marchmere, a middle-aged gentleman of ample girth and bulldog-like face. He pressed a kiss onto her knuckles. Clearly not the first. And Dora made no move to remove her hand from his.

This was the third night in a row this man had appeared in her dressing room to flirt with her aunt. It appeared he was keen to make Dora his mistress, despite the probable existence of a Lady Marchmere, who no doubt resided in his Mayfair home for the season.

Surely Aunt Dora wasn't entertaining the idea of forming a liaison with him?

“Miss Bartlett.” A youngish gentleman dressed in evening clothes of the finest cut, whom she recognized from their introduction on opening night, had entered behind Marchmere. He was blond and dapper in appearance.

She searched her memory for his name. Trantor? Traveller? No, Travener . She offered her hand. “Viscount Travener, a pleasure to see you again. Did you enjoy this evening’s performance?”

He bent over her hand and placed a damp kiss on her fingers. “Indeed, your performance only gets better with each evening.”

Each evening? A surprised laugh escaped her. “You mean to say that you have attended all my performances?” She didn’t know whether to be flattered or disturbed by that level of devotion.

“I wouldn’t miss one,” he replied earnestly.

She blinked at him. She had never encountered this degree of interest in her before. “I’m flattered.” In reality, she was a little flustered.

He smiled down at her, his face benign, his grey eyes full of ardor. “Would you care to join me for supper this evening? I have a table reserved at Rules Restaurant.”

Clarissa made a point of not accompanying gentlemen of short acquaintance to supper or anywhere else. The perils of her profession were poverty and poorly considered affairs of the heart. He seemed a kind gentleman, so she would let him down lightly. “I’m afraid my aunt and I have other plans this evening.” She glanced over to her aunt who was still deep in flirtation with Marchmere. No support there!

“If you mean with Lord Marchmere, then I can assure you that we have a joint booking for four.”

Clarissa’s mouth popped open. She snapped it closed. Her aunt had not told her of this plan. What was going on? “Well, if it is already organized with my aunt, then of course...” Her words trailed away.

A satisfied smile unfurled on his face.

“Excuse me while I speak with my aunt.” She reached Dora in two steps and hissed in her ear. “Did you accept an invitation to supper from Lord Marchmere and Viscount Travener?”

“Just Lord Marchmere,” her aunt whispered back.

Clarissa raised an eyebrow. “Apparently not alone,” she murmured.

Dora looked disappointed.

“You’re interested in fixing Marchmere’s attentions?”

Her aunt nodded.

Incredulity filled Clarissa. As her aunt seemed unaccountably interested in the bulldog of a man, she felt obliged to comply with her wishes and to socialize with these gentlemen.

Her aunt sent an appraising look over at Lord Travener then patted Clarissa’s hand. “He looks safe enough. Be adventurous, just for once, and come out to supper.” Aunt Dora sent her an I’d-do-it-for-you look.

Her aunt was right. Travener did look harmless and she’d heard no gossip about his being a rake. “All right.”

Her aunt smiled at her. “That’s my girl. You’re a success now. No need to be shy with your admirers.”

I suppose not. A little bit of social life instead of endless rehearsal for auditions and

roles seems a fitting reward for all my hard work and success . She turned to the two gentlemen, whose eyes were fixed on Dora and herself. “Gentlemen, if we are to join you for supper, I need to change. Please wait outside.”

Lord Travener sent her a warm smile, but Clarissa didn’t like the smug look that settled upon Lord Marchmere’s round face. The men exited to rejoin the throng outside her dressing room.

A short time later, Clarissa emerged in a modest silk dress covered by an evening cloak, ready to meet her waiting admirers. Aunt Dora followed and quickly took Lord Marchmere’s offered arm. Summoning a warm smile, Clarissa moved to greet the waiting throng.

For the next few minutes, Clarissa was swamped with attention. Flowers were thrust into her arms. Her hand was kissed by many. Some pushed folded missives into her palm. Would their words be poems to her beauty and grace or offers of assignation?

On reaching the side door to the theatre, Clarissa passed all the tributes to a young girl—a would-be actress, who helped as her dresser—to secure in her dressing room. Cold night air greeted them outside. Within moments, they were seated in Lord Marchmere’s warm carriage and heading to supper.

A few minutes later, they halted outside the fashionable Rules Restaurant in Maiden Lane, Covent Garden.

They were escorted through the crowded restaurant and seated at a secluded private table set for four to dine. Clarissa smoothed her hand over the crisp white linen tablecloth, taking in the luxurious interior ablaze with candlelight. As a background to the murmur of many conversations, a string ensemble seated in a far corner played a popular composition.

Champagne was brought and dispensed into chilled flutes. Apparently, the restaurant kept a store of ice. She sipped the drink, savoring its tartness as it slid over her tongue. Scrumptious .

Within moments, her aunt had drained her glass. Clarissa frowned and hoped Dora would slow her pace now her thirst had been quenched. They ordered from the menu of traditional English roasts and game.

Keeping an eye on her aunt, Clarissa sipped her drink and kept up conversation with Viscount Travener. To Clarissa's dismay, her aunt simpered in response to every one of Marchmere's compliments to her and drained another glass of champagne while they waited for their meals.

Another bottle was opened and Aunt Dora's glass filled. Clarissa's body tensed. Good lord, what is she about, drinking so freely? How will this evening end?

Lord Marchmere was leaning close to Dora and practically leering at her décolletage . And her aunt seemed happy to encourage him with a delicate hand placed on his arm, as though holding him in place. Even Lord Travener looked uncomfortable at the intimacy these two were displaying...far too close for a dining occasion.

Clarissa's face heated and she closed her eyes. She couldn't wait for this evening to end. Where were their meals?

In the meantime, Clarissa kept up an animated conversation with her companion about a performance currently running at the Theatre Royal in Drury Lane, trying to distract Travener from glancing over at the other couple.

Now Marchmere's lips were pressed against her aunt's neck, resulting in a flurry of giggles. She had never seen her aunt behave with such shamelessness, and frankly couldn't understand how a man so lacking in attractiveness and charm as Marchmere

inspired it. Uggh.

Not soon enough to save her embarrassment on her aunt's behalf, the rich aroma of roast beef filled the air as their meals arrived. Thank goodness .

Now to eat quickly and get aunt out of here and return to the safety of our rooms as soon as possible. Clarissa used all her acting ability to appear merry during the meal, but her stomach was knotted with tension. Aunt Dora continued to swallow champagne as though it was as harmless as ginger beer.

Clarissa worried her bottom lip with her teeth. How far would her aunt go in her flirtation with Marchmere? She hardly dared guess.

And now that Travener had seen what liberties her aunt permitted with Marchmere, he was beginning to take some himself, with his chair edged closer to hers, and a light touch to her arm now and then. She conducted herself as politely as possible.

Her meal finished, Clarissa lined up her knife and fork on the plate and dabbed her mouth with her napkin . If only she didn't have to pander to the egos of these so-called gentlemen on her way out. How dare they behave this way? And yet, she didn't want such influential men to turn against her and damage her reputation and her career through malicious gossip.

Clarissa smiled into Lord Travener's eyes. "Thank you for supper, my lord. Now, we must depart. My aunt is tired and I have a morning rehearsal at the theatre tomorrow." That was only a small white lie and a necessary one if she was to extract Aunt Dora before Lord Marchmere slid his beefy hand down her dress front.

Without waiting for his answer, Clarissa rose and rounded the table to her aunt. "We must go home now, aunt."

Lord Marchmere sent her a frown. His irritation at her interruption was palpable.

“Must we, dear?” Dora slurred.

Clarissa gathered up her aunt’s reticule from the table and grasped her arm. “Yes. I have rehearsal tomorrow. Come along.”

“If you say so,” Dora sighed.

Clarissa tugged her aunt to her feet and slipped an arm through hers. She turned towards the gentlemen. “Thank you for the supper and the company, gentlemen. Good evening.”

Without waiting for their responses, she started to make her escape—but Lord Marchmere was too fast. In a moment, he was in front of them and pressing a wet kiss to her aunt’s lips. Uggh!

But her aunt didn’t appear to mind and kissed him right back in full view of the other diners.

Then Travener was before Clarissa and collected her free hand to press a kiss onto her wrist.

She tugged her hand free, and her aunt from Lord Marchmere’s embrace. “Goodnight, gentlemen. I will look after my aunt from here.” She hurried Dora through the restaurant and reached the outside without further trouble from their dining companions. Relief unwound the tension tangled in her middle.

At her request, the doorman hailed a hackney carriage. She tipped him from her purse, then assisted her more than tipsy aunt into the carriage. Dora collapsed onto the worn squabs with a groan.

You will deserve tomorrow's headache.

The driver pushed open the sliding communication hatch between the carriage and himself on the driver's bench in front. "Where to, Miss?"

She gave their address.

"Right you are." The panel slid closed with a thud and the carriage lurched forward into motion.

Clarissa sank back against the squabs with a long sigh. From her reticule she pulled out the card given to her by the intriguing clergyman this evening. She turned it in her hand and squinted in the low light to read the printed address in Wapping.

Perhaps she wouldn't throw it away just yet .

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Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:55 am

Francis's eyes jerked open to the filtered light of an overcast day, with one thought on his mind—Miss Clarissa Bartlett. He had seen her leave the theatre with her aunt, the unsavory Earl of Marchmere, as well as Viscount Travener, whose reputation was unknown to him. Her smile had looked forced, rather than delighted to be in their company. In contrast, her aunt had clung to Marchmere's arm in a very familiar manner.

Since then, concern for the actress's welfare had niggled at the back of his mind. And disturbed his sleep. He must talk with her again and ensure she didn't feel pressured to associate with those men.

First, he would visit his older sister Jane and her husband, the Marquis of Dalton, who were back in town for the parliamentary session. They would be able to tell him more about these men and whether he should be concerned about Miss Clarissa Bartlett being in their company.

Hurriedly he dressed and breakfasted. Soon, he strode along the busy streets to Dalton House on Grosvenor Square.

Jane greeted him in her airy sitting room. She was a petite, confident, and articulate bluestocking, and social reformer. "Well, this is an early morning call for a man who was detained at The Regent Theatre until late last night! William was an oddly silent breakfast companion this morning, but he did reveal that you'd remained at the theatre after he left." Her face sported a wry smile.

Francis kissed her cheek in greeting, wondering about his brother. William had been quiet the night before too. He hadn't expressed much interest in the beautiful

actresses. “All my attendances at the theatres are in the pursuit of my work, of course, dear sister,” he answered in a quelling tone as he fought to suppress the smile that threatened in response to her teasing.

She laughed. “I don’t believe you at all.”

He clutched his chest with one hand, pretending to be wounded by her disbelief.

“So, how was the divine Miss Bartlett? As beautiful in the flesh as her admirers claim?” Jane asked, with a lift of one eyebrow.

“Very much so.”

“Oh ho! Are you too smitten with her, like the rest of the male theatre-going population of London? You have the look of a lovesick young swain.”

He sent her a frowning look. “Of course not. She’s a member of my flock.”

Jane laughed again. “And you, an almost engaged man!” she said, still teasing him.

Francis’s stomach clenched at the reminder of his unofficial fiancée, Miss Fanny Hodges. She was the daughter of the rector of a country parish, not far from London. The rector, a friend of his late father, had employed Francis as an assistant curate soon after his ordination five years ago.

Francis had experienced a youthful attraction to Miss Hodges, with no hope of it culminating in marriage until he was appointed to a rectory or vicarage. Nevertheless, the clergyman’s daughter had come to feature in his future plans as a suitable bride whenever he was finally appointed to a living, although that might be many years away. In his goal of obtaining a country parish, he was following his father’s hoped-for path.

He had been determined not to compromise Fanny or have anything but the most chaste relationship with her, unlike his relationship with a recently widowed landlady in Oxford soon after his graduation. Nevertheless, he and Miss Hodges had become informally engaged—that is, she and their families believed they would marry. A proposal to her had never passed his lips.

That state of being continued today and he was in no hurry to change the status quo, hoping that with time, and given that he had yet to be appointed to a rectory or vicarage, she would lose interest in him and release him from their informal engagement.

One day, however, he would have a parish of his own. Soon after Jane's marriage about a year ago, Jonathan, Marquis of Dalton, had promised Francis the living in Hampshire that was his to bestow, upon the retirement of its incumbent, Reverend Ramsdown. That hoped-for event had not yet occurred.

With each passing year, Francis had felt his attraction to Miss Hodges, stimulated as it had been by proximity, fading away. Now, with this ridiculous fascination with Miss Bartlett occupying his mind and taking over his body, he felt more confused than ever about how his dilemma could be resolved.

As a gentleman, he was in a bind. He and Fanny were not engaged, but her family expected them to marry. Certainly, Fanny took it for granted that they would marry eventually. He could not break off such an understanding. Only Fanny could do that. And currently, that appeared as unlikely as flying to the moon.

He must have continued to frown at his sister, because Jane's face turned serious. "I expect you are calling on me for a reason?" she prompted.

Francis gave an abrupt nod. "I am. What do you know about Lord Marchmere?"

Jane's lips curled in distaste. "He's a scheming, conniving misogynist. Jonathan detests him and, politically, they disagree on just about everything. Why do you ask?"

"He and Viscount Travener escorted Miss Bartlett and her aunt to supper last night and the young lady looked none too happy about it. Should I warn her of either of them?"

"Well, as you probably know, Marchmere is a married man, but the other gentleman is not. Travener is the nephew of my old friend, Mrs. Courtice. When I received her substantial bequest, he was not pleased. It reduced his inheritance, although he received all her real estate."

"Ah!" Immediately after their father's passing two years ago, his sisters had established their school for young ladies in a desperate attempt to survive financially.

At that time, neither he nor any of their other brothers were in a position to assist them financially. William had recently left the army and held only a temporary position as a private secretary. Francis himself had earned a pittance as a curate, and still did; while their two other adult brothers were naval officers serving overseas. The money from Mrs. Courtice's estate had saved his sisters and allowed them to re-open their school.

Jane continued. "I have heard that Travener has fallen into dissolute ways—wine and women, rather than gambling—in the last year, with the aid of his aunt's bequest. If he keeps a mistress, I have no idea. Why are you so concerned about this particular actress?"

"As curate, I'm concerned about all the actresses in the Parish of St Paul's. If Travener is such a man, Miss Bartlett may soon need assistance."

"I'll make further enquiries about Travener, if that will assist your mission." Her eyes

showed concern for the unknown young woman.

“Thank you. Now I must go if I’m to meet Dalton and William for our usual session at Gentleman Jackson’s Salon and to catch Miss Bartlett when her rehearsal ends.” I probably do sound like a lovesick swain.

He pulled Jane into a brief hug and kissed her cheek before striding from the room. The situation for Miss Bartlett was every bit as perilous as he had feared.

Rehearsal was underway at The Regent Theatre when Francis arrived in the early afternoon. He took a seat at the back of the foremost box at the side of the theatre. From here he had an unsurpassed view of the stage. One he couldn’t afford for any performance in his current employment.

Miss Bartlett ran through her lines and amended the timing of one in particular. Francis smiled afresh at the punch line. The revised delivery made all the difference to its impact.

Francis left his seat to wait in the green room for the cast to return. The scent of theatre make-up and eau de toilette filled the air. Miss Bartlett’s aunt was absent today. He wondered whether that was usual.

Francis leaned against the wall beside the door to the actresses’ dressing room and didn’t have to wait for long.

The leading lady advanced towards him, an arched eyebrow raised in question. “Reverend Frank, here you are again.” Her tone sounded perplexed.

Francis pushed himself upright from the wall and spoke quietly, so only she could

hear. "I would like a private conversation with you, if I may?" Cast members streamed past into their communal dressing room.

"Really? I cannot think why," she responded in surprise. Clearly she hadn't expected to see him again, especially as she had assured him she had no need of his assistance.

He needed to get his message across without annoying her. "I'm not going to tell you how to live your life...but I noticed you looked uncomfortable when leaving with the gentlemen last night."

Her gaze roamed his face. "It seems to me that you are doing just that, Reverend Frank. Or at least, you're drawing conclusions about my life and looking down on me from a high altar of righteousness."

Francis straightened his shoulders. "I assure you, I am not. I speak only from concern for your welfare." Good Lord! He sounded like a prig of the first order. He noted a few inquisitive gazes upon them from the other cast members. "As I see your aunt is not here today to chaperone you in your dressing room. Let me take you to Guy's Inn around the corner where we can talk without half the cast's eyes upon us. There we may have a degree of privacy without being alone."

Clarissa scanned her surroundings then gave a nod of agreement. "Aunt Dora is indisposed. Let me get my coat and bonnet."

Within minutes they were outside in the drizzling rain. Today Francis carried an umbrella instead of his walking stick. He unfurled it over their heads and they set off towards the inn.

Around them, pedestrians huddled under umbrellas or, if they lacked one, hurried onward, sopping wet. The mingled smells of mud and muck rose to meet them from the slippery pavement and cobblestones.

Inside the noisy warmth of the public dining room of Guy's Inn, Francis closed his umbrella and offered Miss Bartlett his arm. The rain-damp of her kid-gloved hand seeped into his warmth. He led her towards an unoccupied table in a further corner of the room and pulled out a chair for her.

The mixture of patrons in the inn—merchants and clerks primarily—were all too busy with their conversations or reading the latest broadsheet to notice the new belle of The Regent Theatre. The chatter of patrons, the clunk of mugs toasting a deal, the clank of cutlery on plates and bowls, and the bangs of tankards on wooden tables filled the air. Although in a public place, Francis and Clarissa, sitting together in the corner, seemed cut off from the rest of the patrons, in their own little bubble.

Now they were here, Francis swallowed, too tongue-tied to raise the topic that had led him to initiate this meeting. Miss Bartlett radiated an air of bright confidence as her gaze moved curiously over his face and momentarily came to rest on his mouth. He liked it when she looked at him—liked it far too much.

A flustered waitress arrived at their table. "Potato and leek soup or roast beef?" she asked distractedly, giving the limited menu options for the day.

"Miss Bartlett?" Francis enquired.

"The soup, please," she answered.

"He ordered their meals and the waitress hurried away for their meal.

Clarissa fixed her extraordinary eyes on him. "Now, Reverend Frank, you wanted to talk with me privately."

He cleared his throat. "I feel concerned for your welfare. As I do with all the theatre people of my parish. First, I want to know that you suffered no harm last night from

the two gentlemen.”

She ran a long, assessing look over his face. “My aunt and I had supper with the gentlemen. Nothing—” she hesitated for a moment “untoward happened. Afterwards, my aunt and I went home together in a hackney carriage.”

He smiled in relief. “I’m pleased to hear that. Will you go out with them again?”

Her mouth flattened. “I don’t see that is any business of yours.” Her chilly tone let him know he was being far too intrusive with his questioning.

His stomach sank. I’ve offended her. “You’re right, of course. So, I will reiterate that you may find assistance at my sister’s mission in Wapping, should you ever need a place of refuge. I gave you a card with the address last night.”

She looked away. “Yes, I have it still.”

He relaxed a little with the knowledge that she had kept the card. “Good.”

She turned back to him and pinned him with a look. “However, I will never go there. After spending sixteen years at the Duke Street Orphanage, where my creativity was repressed and almost crushed, I will never seek refuge at an institution again. Luckily, my aunt found me and removed me before I was forced to become a governess or servant.”

What? He blinked, taking in this new information. He had imagined her raised in the theatre community by her aunt and possibly other family members for her whole life. How else had she become so proficient and successful a performer?

The harried waitress arrived with their meals. Francis paid for them. Clunking the bowls, a plate of bread and their spoons onto the wooden table, she scurried away

with the coins for the meal in her apron pocket.

Francis tore a thick slice of fresh bread into his bowl and took up his spoon. What else could he suggest? “My sisters run a school for young ladies in Harley Street.” The comforting warmth of the potato and leek soup filled his mouth. “Perhaps if you are ever in need of refuge, that would be a preferable alternative.”

Again she shook her head. “I can’t imagine myself at a school for young ladies. I don’t belong there and they wouldn’t want an actress amongst them and putting off parents.” Miss Bartlett began to eat, using her spoon as daintily as any high-born lady.

“You don’t know my sisters. Their views are very liberal. My whole family is the same.” Which is why men like Marchmere despise us—and we, his opinions.

One side of her mouth crooked up, showing her disbelief. “I think not, despite their views about actresses.” Her tone was decisive.

They finished their meal and Miss Bartlett poured each of them a cup of tea from the earthenware pot before her.

Concern for her twisted in Francis’s stomach. Why was he going to so much effort for this woman, more than for others? Was his inappropriate attraction to her heightening his protective instincts?

He needed to keep a professional distance in order to assist her, but that was difficult when he was so drawn to her. He didn’t want to see the destruction of this beautiful young woman’s innocence or the ruination of her career through becoming an unmarried mother. “That is, of course, your choice,” he said, and lowered his voice. “I try to refrain from speaking ill of anyone, but Lord Marchmere is a married man. I couldn’t help but notice that his interest in your aunt seemed contradictory to that.

And Travener...well, the company we keep is a reflection of our true selves, is it not?"

She sipped her tea. His words put a wariness in her gaze.

"If the school is closed for the upcoming Christmas holiday, which is likely as my sisters generally visit Hampshire then, I will give you the address of another place of sanctuary." Francis pulled out a card from the card tin he kept in his pocket and handed it to her. "May we both hope you never have the need to use it."

She glanced at the printed words and tucked the card into her reticule. "Thank you, Reverend Brody, but I doubt I will ever need such assistance as your address." A raised eyebrow added a challenge to her words.

They finished their meal in silence and Francis hailed a hackney carriage for her then assisted her into it. Stepping back from the curb, he dipped his chin in farewell before striding back to St Paul's Church.

Have I done the right thing giving her my address? Have I lost my mind? Should she ever turn up there, her presence would lead to the ruination of both his career and her reputation. If the broadsheets ever got hold of such a tidbit of scandal—an actress and a clergyman living together. Think of the lampooning cartoons that would be drawn!

And yet, he knew he needed to offer her his assistance in any way he could.

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Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:55 am

Clarissa returned to her lodgings to find her aunt still abed with a raging headache. Her absence from their sitting room gave Clarissa time alone to consider her conversation with the Reverend Brody. In hindsight, she appreciated his kind gesture, but couldn't imagine herself ever needing or accepting his help.

He was a good man. She could see that now. He didn't show any condescension to her as an actress, which many of his calling had done previously. His severe black outfit and simply tied cravat did not diminish his good looks and powerful frame.

Her gaze had roamed his face as he spoke...and she had wondered what it would be like to be kissed by those perfect lips. She'd had to keep pulling her thoughts back to their conversation. Better he never guessed where her thoughts had strayed.

She sighed. She didn't expect to encounter him again. After all, he had said he visited all the theatres in the parish regularly, not just The Regent Theatre.

Clarissa changed her clothes for dry ones and lay out her damp outfit over a chair in front of the fire. Soon dinner would be served in the boarding house dining room below. And then she must leave for the theatre for tonight's performance.

She doubted her aunt would be well enough to accompany her. Good, because she needed time alone to consider the recent and unexpected change in her aunt's behavior. And Dora's absence would excuse her from another unwanted dinner invitation from Travener, should he appear at her dressing room door.

But not for long.

The following evening, Aunt Dora proposed that Clarissa attend another supper with her and her new beau, Lord Marchmere, with Lord Travener accompanying them.

“I’m tired of our staid ways. They were fine while we were struggling to make you a success, but now you have reached that pinnacle, it’s time we enjoyed our rewards. I want a secure future for myself. And I think you need to do the same,” Aunt Dora proclaimed.

Clarissa’s stomach clenched at the idea. Aunt Dora had never spoken of such a goal before. “And how do you intend to fulfil this wish, Aunt?” she asked as she fiddled with the buttons on one of her gloves, which was already done up.

“I intend to find a protector to support me, before I’m too old.”

“And you’ve settled on Lord Marchmere?” Clarissa didn’t succeed in keeping the incredulity out of her voice.

“Yes,” her aunt answered decisively. “He’ll do me. At my age, I’m lucky to have any wealthy man interested in me.”

“You’re not old, Aunt!”

“Old enough! I’m in my fifth decade.”

Aunt Dora was still an attractive woman and dressed well.

“And it’s time you found a wealthy patron, Clarissa,” her aunt added.

What! “Oh no, Aunt. I’m not interested in a patron or a protector. I won’t fall into

same trap as my mother.”

“Your mother foolishly fell in love with her protector. Which you won’t be silly enough to do.”

“No, I won’t, because I won’t be taking one. And I won’t be taking a husband until I’m ready to retire!” I need to make my name on the stage first .

Aunt Dora smiled, and a calculating look flashed in her eyes. “We’ll see,” she murmured. “Travener would be a generous patron for you.”

“I’m not interested in snagging a patron, aunt.” She fiddled with her glove in impatience.

“Every woman needs a protector at some time.”

Clarissa forced down her annoyance with this conversation. She fixed a bonnet onto her head. “Ready.”

Her aunt gave a decisive tip of her chin, perhaps pleased she had had the last word. “Good. Let’s go find the gentlemen and go to supper.”

Clarissa groaned. Not again. But she owed her career to her aunt, so she gritted her teeth like an obedient niece and followed Aunt Dora out the dressing room door. Francis’s words of caution about these men echoed in her mind.

They went to Rules Restaurant again and this time chose oysters for their meal. The meal was long and boozy. Again, her aunt drank so much she tittered at every inane utterance from Lord Marchmere.

Lord Travener was slurring his words well before the end of the meal. So quickly that

Clarissa suspected he had consumed a good deal ahead of their rendezvous.

During the meal, Clarissa became adept at keeping his hands at bay. But still he leaned towards her, crowding her until she felt as though she sat perched on the edge of her chair. One more touch of his hand on her arm and she swore she would leap to her feet and slap him.

Finally, the others finished their meals and readied to leave, saving her that ignominy. Clarissa sighed at the thought of steering her tipsy aunt home and into bed afterwards. Again.

But it was far worse than that. Lord Marchmere insisted on driving them home and her aunt was in the carriage before Clarissa could decline.

Inside Lord Marchmere's carriage, the darkened space felt like a closet, filled with the strong smell of new leather. Nausea threatened her. Clarissa was seated beside Aunt Dora on the forward-facing seat. For all of two minutes. Until her aunt took it into her mind to clamber across the space between the bench seats and onto Lord Marchmere's lap.

That gentleman welcomed her with a hearty kiss.

Clarissa cringed. "Aunt Dora, please sit beside me."

Instead, Lord Travener inserted himself into the space beside her, blocking her aunt's return, even if she had wished to comply. "Let me keep you company instead, Miss Bartlett," he whispered in her ear. The clip clop of the horses' hooves, the creak of carriage timbers, and the grind of wheels on cobblestones didn't mask his heavy breathing beside her.

Holding her breath in fright, Clarissa shrank away from him.

Travener's right hand landed on her thigh, hot and heavy, as he turned towards her. By the flare of a streetlight, Clarissa caught sight of his glittering, intent eyes as she shoved his hand from her leg and slid across the smooth seat towards the door.

Travener followed her, crowding her against the side of the carriage. His hands were everywhere. One squeezed at her breast, while the other made quick work of pulling up her skirt and sliding beneath and up her leg. Cold air swirled over her bare flesh.

His mouth descended into hers with a bump of teeth and morphed into a rough kiss.

Clarissa pushed at him with the arm closest to him while her left hand groped for the door handle. "Get off me!" Her left hand found the handle and she hung on to it for dear life.

"Come now, Miss Bartlett, do not be shy," he slurred. "Half of London has seen your skin on that stage. Let me show you how much I admire you." He pulled at her bodice. "Let me see your apple dumplings." His breath, a sour mix of claret and oysters, assailed her nose.

Clarissa elbowed Travener in the chest and slapped his hand away. "Aunt, help me!" Her heart pounded wildly.

Her efforts did little to deter Travener. He turned further towards her and maneuvered a knee over her thighs. "There's nothing for you to worry about. I'll fill your cock alley before you know it. You'll like it, I guarantee."

Her blood froze. He was deadly serious in his intent to have her here and now. She was out of her depth, almost overpowered by Travener's strength and weight. This was her last chance to fight him off. She balled her hand and pounded her fist into his groin, connecting with his erect cock.

The howl of pain and outrage Travener emitted as he fell back from her onto the carriage seat was more satisfying than a dozen curtain calls by a packed theatre audience. The carriage slowed to turn a corner and Clarissa wrenched the door open. She leaped from the vehicle.

Clarissa hit the pavement with a thud and pain seared across her hip. She scrambled to her feet, fearing Travener would follow her, and ran up the front staircase of a three-story row house and into the deep shadow of its portico. Her heartbeat at a wild gallop as she gulped in the cool night air.

Clarissa's legs turned to jelly. She leaned against the house wall and slid to the ground. She slumped there, her hand clutching her chest, trying to calm herself but instead reliving the scene in all its horror.

Finally, she pulled herself together and peered into the lit street. Where have I ended up?

This looked like a respectable neighborhood. And Travener had seemed like a respectable gentleman. She hurried down the steps to the street corner to read its sign. Garrick Street.

They hadn't been heading for her lodgings at all. Where had they been destined? Some love nest set up by the men, to which they took their intended conquests? She shuddered at the thought of what would have happened after they arrived. If not before.

She wasn't far from The Regent Theatre. If she returned there, the porter-caretaker would call a hackney for her. But if she went home, they might come looking for her there.

What to do? Her heart hadn't stopped pounding. She couldn't stay here. They might

come back looking for her, or some other shady character might find her.

Clarissa hurried in the direction of the theatre, heart in mouth, hoping she wouldn't be accosted and taken for a woman of the night.

A quarter hour later, she had easily gained admission to the theatre and breathlessly asked Old Thomas, the porter, to hail a hackney for her. She gave the address and hurried inside the vehicle. Slumped against the squabs, impatient to arrive at the place she hoped would provide sanctuary, she twisted her fingers in the crumpled skirt of her silk dress.

She paid off the driver at Harley Street and hurried up the shallow flight of steps to the front door. A nearby gas streetlight cast a flickering beam her way.

The door knocker was removed from the bright blue door. The school was closed! Surely a caretaker staff remained? She rapped on the door with her knuckles.

Eventually, she heard footsteps from within. The door creaked open to reveal a middle-aged man with wiry grey hair cropped close to his head. He appeared to have dressed hastily in his black outfit. He held up a lit candlestick. "What 'cher want at this time of night, Miss?"

"The Miss Brodys, if they're home. Reverend Francis sent me here."

"Sorry, Miss, they're all in 'ampshire for Christmas."

"Oh! Reverend Brody too?"

"Not 'im, he's in Lunnun still."

Clarissa pulled out the last card Francis had given her. "I have his address. Atcherley

Chambers. ”

“Yes, but you can’t go there, it’s gentlemen only, Miss.”

“I must. I’ve nowhere else to go. He gave me his card in case of such an emergency.”

The man sighed loudly and beckoned her inside. “Wait in ’ere. I’ll let Mrs. Creevy know I need to go out.”

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A knock sounded on Francis's outer door. No doubt his dissolute neighbor, drunk again and knocking on the wrong door for his valet to let him in. Francis grabbed his timepiece off his bedside table and flipped it open to read by the light of his bedchamber fireplace.

A quarter to one in the morning! Francis gritted his teeth and slid from his warm bed to pull on a pair of trousers and tug yesterday's shirt over his head. He groaned at the cold of the timber floor on his bare feet and padded to the front door.

Francis flung open the door. "What in blazes, Merrick..." But it wasn't his neighbor. Joe, the porter at The Brody School for Young Ladies, stood before him, battered hat in hand and clothes thrown on haphazardly.

Francis's heart leaped up his throat. "What's happened? Are my sisters in trouble?" There was no one who could do a better job of protecting "the young misses", as Joe called the schoolgirls and their teachers.

"Calm yourself, Master Francis, your sisters are fine. Still in 'ampshire." He half-turned to his right. "I've brought this lady to you. She says yer gave 'er yer card to come to 'ere if she were in trouble."

Francis looked past Joe. "Miss Bartlett!" She looked pale and her clothes were rumpled and soiled. His chest hollowed. What had happened to her? "Come inside, both of you." He stepped back to let them enter.

They moved into his sitting room. Francis checked there was no one in the passageway to witness his visitors' arrival and closed the door. Miss Bartlett's arms

were clamped around her waist and her face blanched white.

He reached out towards her, but pulled back from touching her in case he caused her further distress. Instead, he directed her to a large, upholstered chair before his fireplace and urged her into it. “What’s happened?”

Joe interrupted. “If you won’t be needing me again, I’ll get back to the school. I don’t like leaving Mrs. Creevy alone in that big ’ouse without protection. Never know when there might be a burglary these days.” Worry showed on his lined face.

Francis looked over at the man who had served the Brody family for decades. And had been sweet on Mrs. Creevy for just as long. “Of course, Joe. I’ll look after Miss Bartlett. Thank you for bringing her to me.” He strode to the mantelpiece for some coins, which he handed to Joe. “Get a hackney back. It’s too dangerous to be on the streets at this time of the night.”

Joe tugged his forelock in thanks and quietly let himself out of Francis’s rooms.

Francis returned to Clarissa in the wing-back chair and claimed its twin opposite. “What happened? And where is your aunt?”

“Warming Lord Marchmere’s bed, I presume.” Her mouth twisted grimly.

“She abandoned you somewhere to go off with him?” Incredulity at the idea took his breath away.

“No, she took me with her to be Lord Travener’s plaything.”

Anger ignited in his chest. “She what?” he asked, barely containing his wrath.

Clarissa gripped his hand. “It’s all right, I got away from them. Gave Travener a good

blow to his old fellow when he got handsy and leapt out of the carriage.”

What the hell! The blackguard. A tide of relief flowed through him at the news that Clarissa had escaped ravishment. The rotter deserved far worse, but Francis couldn’t help but wince at the thought of the blow.

As she told him the remainder of her adventure in the streets of London after midnight, Francis could only thank God that she had remained unharmed on her way to The Brody School.

“Are you sure you’re all right?” Despite the streaks of dirt on her crumpled silk dress, Miss Bartlett still looked like a glamorous goddess come down to earth.

“Yes, I’m shaken, but getting better now. I could murder a cup of tea though.”

Francis smiled at her reversion to the common London accent from her usual upper-class elocution. Warmth filled his chest at the thought she trusted him enough to open up to him. That she felt relaxed enough in his company to reveal her true self, rather than the trained actress with perfect diction that she presented to everyone else.

Clarissa sank back into her chair.

Francis turned to the sitting room fireplace and stirred up the fire with a poker before adding more coals. He swiveled his still-warm kettle on its stand over the flames to boil water. Into a stoneware teapot he tossed a generous handful of tea leaves, then set up two porcelain teacups and a bowl of sugar on a side table. Clarissa’s eyes tracked his every movement.

A jug of milk from the window ledge completed the tea tray. The kettle whistled and Francis filled the tea pot with boiled water and moved it to the table to steep. He waited a few moments, conscious of her watchful gaze on him, then stirred the pot

and poured the tea into two cups then handed one to her. “Sugar? Milk?”

She nodded and he placed a large sugar lump and a splash of milk in her cup before handing it to her. “Drink up, then I’ll take you to the Mission, where you’ll be safe.”

Miss Bartlett set the teacup down in its saucer with a clatter. “I refuse to enter this Mission you keep talking of.”

Francis frowned at her stubbornness. “Even now that my fears about Travener have been proven well-founded?” The danger worse than I feared .

“Even now. I’ve told you why.” Her eyes flashed and pink suffused her cheeks. “I’ll separate from my aunt.”

“Of course,” he said in the most placating tone he could summon, while his mind yelled, ‘But you need protection’ . Picking up his cup, Francis eased back in his chair.

They drank in silence for a while. The hot tea calmed Francis. He wanted to re-assure Clarissa, help her. But would she let him?

From outside came distant road noises, broken only by the call of the watch on the hour. The quiet and warmth of the room seemed to foster a sense of harmony.

Now that his anger on her behalf had faded and Clarissa had regained her color, Francis found that just her presence in his room raised his heart rate. Her lilac scent stirred his senses. His attraction to her warred with his duty to provide pastoral care for her, which was his only legitimate role in her life.

Miss Bartlett drained her tea and set the cup in its saucer. “Aah.”

“Feeling better now?”

She leant further back in the chair and smiled at him sleepily.

“Don’t get too relaxed, you need to make a decision about your next step, so this evening’s events never occur again.” I am being pushy, but it’s necessary.

Clarissa frowned at him.

“Assuming that is what you wish to happen?” He backtracked to ensure he wasn’t appearing to tell her how to live her life. Which of course, I am.

“Tomorrow, I’ll find new lodgings. Now, I just wish to sleep.” Her tone brooked no argument.

“You take the bed. The sheets are clean today. And I barely made it to bed by midnight.” He stood up and offered her his hand to rise. “Come, let me assist you.”

“Where will you sleep, Reverend Frank?” she asked. A crease formed between her eyebrows.

“Here, of course.” He gestured with his hand to indicate the room.

Clarissa lowered her sad gaze from him and nodded. “Thank you,” she whispered.

He longed to hold her and comfort her until her confidence returned. but such an idea was inappropriate, especially when she had just been assaulted.

The last time he had comforted a woman in his arms—his recently widowed landlady in Oxford when he was a new graduate—had led to his seduction by her. She had drawn him down to lie with her and encouraged him until nature took its course—as it had so easily. Francis scolded his wayward thoughts, knowing how much anguish such actions caused.

For three weeks, he had fallen into her bed, raw young idiot that he was, until the morning he had looked over at her sated, sleeping body and knew without a doubt that he didn't love her. Cold realization had crept icy fingers through his veins. If he didn't love this woman, he had no right to have relations with her. And it might be too late already to avoid the parson's noose, which getting her with child would bring.

He had never lain with her again. He had prayed that she didn't have the clap, although she'd sworn that she had been with no man but her husband. That would be one of the very real wages of the sin he had committed.

In new lodgings, he'd waited long weeks, before breathing freely again, certain that his landlady was not with child and he had contracted no disease from their liaison. And during that time of fear, he had become determined that he must follow more closely in his father's footsteps. He had vowed never to behave in such a weak and using manner again.

And ever since, he had felt obliged to assist women who had been exploited by men and then discarded. Nor had he repeated his own misdemeanor.

He had learned from that experience not to accept the offers that occasionally came his way from lonely widows and even from some actresses under his pastoral care. Why they singled him out, he had no idea. Thank goodness Clarissa was not like them.

Clarissa slid her hand into his and electricity zinged up his arm at her touch, firing every nerve from his fingertips to his cock. He closed his eyes and fought for control of his wayward thoughts and body, then braced himself to gently raise her to her feet.

When he opened his eyes again, she stood before him, cheeks flushed and eyes looking over his shoulder into his bedchamber beyond with its rumpled bed sheets.

Only in his wildest dreams did he think she was imagining, like him, what it would be like to walk together into that room hand-in-hand and to sink back onto the feather bed and under the warm bedclothes together.

May the good Lord give him strength to resist his attraction to Miss Clarissa Bartlett. She deserved far more than the imaginings and fumblings of an impecunious curate. She deserved respect from him and all men.

He bowed over her hand. "Good night, Miss Bartlett," he murmured.

"I think that now you have rescued me from the dastardly Lord Travener and I will be sleeping in your bedchamber, you should call me Clarissa." She sent him cheeky smile, which gave him hope that she had recovered somewhat from her ordeal.

He sent her a smile to acknowledge her generosity in allowing him to use her name. "Thank you, Clarissa."

"And I shall call you Frank." She chuckled to herself, apparently amused at her own cheekiness.

His jaw clenched at her bantering tone. Dismissing his response as a petty over-reaction, he led her to the doorway of the bedchamber. She swept through it without a backward look and he closed the door behind her with a sharp click of finality.

His heart contracted. That she did not reciprocate his infatuation with her was clear . And thank goodness for that!

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The next morning, Clarissa woke to the scent of sandalwood and citrus. Her eyes still closed, she inhaled the delightful aroma. Mmmm, eau de Frank Brody.

Then she remembered the events of the previous evening, which had ended with her finding sanctuary at Reverend Brody's lodgings. And finally, alone in his warm bed, cocooned in crisp linen sheets imbued with his masculine cologne.

Through the window came the feeble light of another winter's day. Clarissa stretched and squirmed deeper into the feather bed, away from the chilled air of the bedchamber. She dozed again, but soon an appetizing whiff of toast roused her.

At the third growl of her stomach, she threw aside the bedclothes and stepped onto the timber floor. Cold, cold, cold . Hastily, Clarissa pulled on her overgarments from yesterday and opened the bedchamber door to step into Francis's sitting room. Warmth greeted her.

The well-organized space she remembered from last night was set for breakfast. A small table stood between the two wing chairs standing on either side of the hearth. Francis sat in one, holding a loaded toasting fork over the flame in his hearth. Three slices lay on a plate, already buttered and ready to eat.

He turned to her, a warm smile on his face, lighting up his brown eyes.

"Good morning." She smiled back at him, glad of his welcome. "That toast smells marvelous."

"Come and eat before it goes cold. The tea is ready too."

Clarissa took the vacant chair and poured the brew from the stoneware teapot into the ready cups. Then she attacked the plate of toast. Delicious .

And Frank looked delicious too—enticingly kissable this morning, with his mussed-up hair and a few stray waves on his forehead.

She really shouldn't be having those sorts of thoughts about the good curate. There were much more pressing and important issues she must resolve today. She swallowed the last of her toast. "I need to find new accommodation without delay."

"I can help you with that. One of my parishioners told me yesterday that she has a vacancy."

Her shoulders lost the tension she hadn't realized they held. A room opening and Francis knew the landlady. Surely she would be successful. She took a bite of toast.

Long before Frank's more fashionable neighbors had arisen, he escorted Clarissa to a boarding house a few blocks away, run by a landlady who was a member of the St Paul's Parish. Clarissa quickly secured the room, then accompanied by Francis, marched to her former lodgings where he stood guard outside while she packed her belongings. She struggled out of her room loaded with four carpet bags and a hat box.

"Was your aunt home?" Francis asked, closing the distance to her.

"No, and there's no sign she has been here since last night." She sent a significant look his way. Although bewildered by her aunt choosing such an unappealing man as her lover, relief that their paths hadn't crossed was her overriding emotion.

"Ah." Francis claimed all but the hat box from her arms. "Is this all your luggage?"

"All that I wish to keep. My aunt is welcome to the rest. She can sell my dresses for

her expenses, as I will no longer be needing her assistance.” Would the sale of some dresses and trinkets keep her aunt happy, instead of the money from Clarissa’s ascendancy on the London stage? Possibly not .

They hurried back to her new boarding house to unpack her belongings before leaving again for rehearsal at the theatre. Clarissa hoped her aunt would not turn up. Surely she had drunk too much to wish to venture from Lord Marchmere’s bed today.

To make sure she would never have to deal with her aunt again at the theatre, Clarissa informed the manager and the porter that as they were no longer working in association, her aunt should no longer have access to the theatre.

The last curtain call couldn’t come soon enough. Clarissa had a crashing headache in reward for her late night the previous day. She whispered a prayer of thanks that her aunt had not arrived while she was on stage, so there was no argument to be had after the performance.

When Clarissa exited the stage entrance ready to request one of the doormen to hail a cab for her, she found Frank Brody outside in conversation with the theatre manager. At her appearance, he bid Mr. Prentice goodnight and strode towards her. “Miss Bartlett, may I escort you to your lodgings?”

“Yes, of course.” His offer cheered her. She didn’t want to be alone.

“Shall we walk, or would you prefer to take a hackney?”

“Tonight, I feel like walking, if you don’t mind.” Especially with you. She stole a sideways glance at his handsome face.

“I would be delighted. I usually walk.”

He offered her his arm and Clarissa curled her fingers around the crook of his elbow.

“Your aunt didn’t turn up?”

“Thankfully, no. I don’t know what to say to her anymore. I’ve left word that she’s not to be admitted.”

“If you are concerned that she will cause a scene, I’m happy to escort you to your lodgings every evening until you are confident your aunt will not accost you.” He seemed utterly sincere.

His kindness towards her warmed her heart. He was a good man.

Early in the afternoon of the next day, Clarissa answered a knock on the door of her boarding house room to find the young girl who acted as a general servant standing there. “You have visitors, miss. They’re in the sitting room awaiting you.”

Apprehension filled her. No one but Francis knew she had moved here, did they? Had he brought someone with him?

She hurried downstairs and into the visitor’s sitting room. Her heart sank at the sight she found there. Her aunt, escorted by Marchmere and Travener, stood in the center of the room.

The men looked uncomfortable in these humble surroundings. Marchmere’s curled lip showed his distaste. Travener held her gaze with a hint of challenge in his eyes.

Her aunt stalked towards her. “There you are, Clarissa. I’ve been so worried about you,” she announced loud enough for their audience to hear. Enveloping Clarissa in

an embrace, Aunt Dora whispered in her ear, “Thought you could get away from me, did you?” There was menace in her voice. Her aunt’s woolen dress scratched against Clarissa’s hands, folded in front of her.

Clarissa jerked out of Dora’s arms. “Our association is ended, as I wrote in the letter I left for you,” she answered, her voice as cold as the winter wind blowing outside.

“Oh, but Clarissa, the gentlemen and I have come to take you for lunch. Surely, you can still spare some time for your aunt and friends?” she announced with an arch look at the menfolk.

Clarissa’s stomach churned at the thought of more time in their company. “I would rather not. I don’t care for your friends,” she answered sotto voce.

“Of course, you can,” said Aunt Dora for the benefit of the room’s other occupants. “We need to discuss the terms of your debt to me for the last five years,” she hissed. Dora turned to the gentlemen and gave them a wide smile. “We will join you in the carriage shortly, if you like?”

Clearly happy to depart the lowly boarding house, the gentlemen left. But not before Travener sent her a look filled with dark intent over his shoulder as he departed. Clarissa’s blood froze in her veins.

Her aunt grasped Clarissa’s forearm in a steely grip. “And now, get your pelisse, you’re coming to lunch.”

Clarissa pulled her arm from her aunt’s clasp. “I will not.”

Her aunt’s hand flashed out. The slap burned every inch of Clarissa’s cheek. A squeak of surprise left her mouth as her hand shot to her face. She tasted blood.

Her aunt had never hit her before. Dora's way had always been subtle manipulation. Not that it had been required very often, as Clarissa had yearned for the success on stage her aunt had proposed when she arrived to spring Clarissa from the Duke Street Orphanage, five years ago.

"Get your pelisse, Clarissa," her aunt ordered through gritted teeth.

"No." To hell with you.

Her aunt examined her with a speculative look in her eyes. "Listen, my dear. If you humor me now and come to lunch, and listen to my proposal for your future with Lord Travener like a civilized person, I will tell you all I know about your father."

Come again! "What do you know about my father?"

"I know everything about him."

Clarissa grabbed her aunt's arm. "Tell me now," she demanded.

"I'll not tell you a thing unless you agree to take Lord Travener as your protector. We need the money and security that he and Lord Marchmere can provide. We've survived so far on my savings and what your mother left you, but no longer, even with you as a popular performer. I've run out of dosh!"

Clarissa closed her gaping mouth. She had waited her whole life to find out anything about her father and now her aunt told her she knew everything about him. And they had run out of money. How, when she had been earning so much this season? Her mother had left money too and that was gone?

The only way she was going to find out any of the answers she needed was to accompany her aunt. In a daze, she left the room and trudged up the three flights of

stairs to her room. She pulled on a matching pelisse and tied the ribbons of her bonnet under her chin. What was she to do? She secured the top of her bonnet to her hair with her longest steel hatpin. At least she had a weapon, just in case she needed one.

When she arrived back in the sitting room, Aunt Dora threaded her arm through Clarissa's and urged her from the room and out the entrance of the boarding house. In front stood Marchmere's carriage, its door was open, waiting to swallow her.

Her aunt bundled Clarissa into the busy Covent Garden street with its winter smell of slush and muck. From all around came the sounds of trundling cartwheels, horses, and loud voices. A dog paused in its progress to give a quick woof and pee on the carriage wheel.

Clarissa looked around in dismay. Would anyone help her if she struggled against this coercion? Probably not.

Her aunt tugged her inexorably across the crowded pavement towards the open carriage door. Clarissa's limbs began to shake. She was torn between wanting to know about her father and escaping the fate that awaited her at the hands of these three people.

Her aunt's betrayal hurt her more than her slap. Dora had spent her mother's money and concealed information about her father. And to think Clarissa had ever trusted her. The vice that gripped her heart squeezed tighter.

"Miss Bartlett!"

Francis's shout reached Clarissa through the fog in her brain. She turned her head towards that sound of salvation and saw him running towards her. She halted and turned to face him. Her aunt tugged against her, trying to urge her to the carriage.

“What’s going on here?” Francis demanded as he stopped in front of her.

“We’re going to lunch. Not that it’s any business of yours, I’m sure, Reverend,” Aunt Dora replied with a sneer.

Francis ignored her aunt. “Clarissa, do you wish to go to lunch with these people?”

She shook her head. Good Lord, no she did not, but she wanted the information her aunt held.

“Then why are you going with them?” he asked in a gentle voice.

“Aunt Dora will only tell me what she knows about my father if I do as she asks. I desperately want to know about him. I always have.” She sounded like a lost child. Disgust at her weakness filled her.

“What? She’s blackmailing you?”

Clarissa wanted to cry. “What choice do I have?”

“I’ll help you find out about your father. We can visit The Duke Street Orphanage. There must be some information there that your mother provided them if she sought shelter there.”

Why did I never think to do that myself ? Because I vowed never to set foot over that threshold again . She stared up into his brown eyes. They were so kind and warm that she just wanted to fall into their reassuring depths. Maybe I can face my fear if Frank is beside me .

He put out his hand to her, but the hand she extended never reached him. Aunt Dora yanked her back as Lord Travener curled his fingers around her upper arm. He must

have exited the carriage. Standing frozen on the pavement, Clarissa stared down at his hand—the same hand that had taken liberties with her. Her stomach curdled.

“Unhand her!” Francis demanded.

She glanced towards the curate. He had drawn a small sword from his walking stick and held it pointed at Lord Travener’s neck.

Travener released Clarissa’s arm, but her aunt still hauled on her other side. She resisted, planting her feet solidly on the pavement, then pushed her aunt. “Get away from me!” She hurried back from the yawning carriage door, and ripped the hatpin from her bonnet, holding it ready in her hand.

Travener may have let her go, but he wasn’t vanquished yet. He pulled a short knife from a top boot. “Do you wish to take me on, parson?” he scoffed.

Francis didn’t answer, but with a swift double step forward he lunged towards the Viscount. With a deft thrust, his swordstick shredded Travener’s coat sleeve and scored a line down the hand holding the knife. Blood rapidly filled the sword’s path.

Travener dropped the blade and clutched his injured hand to his chest. “You’ll pay for that, parson!” He scanned the crowd that had gathered around them. With a sneer at Francis and Clarissa, he elbowed his way through and marched up the street.

Clarissa hurried to Francis’s side. After wiping the thin blade of his swordstick with a handkerchief, he sheathed the weapon, transforming it once again into a walking stick. “Are you all right?” he asked her in his calm way.

She nodded then turned to the last of the players in this melodrama. Marchmere had exited the carriage and was now aiding Aunt Dora into it. The look her aunt sent her through promised vengeance to come. With a trembling hand, Clarissa returned her

hatpin to its rightful place.

When the couple departed in the carriage without any further argument, Clarissa breathed a sigh of relief. “You’re a man of surprises, Reverend Frank.” She didn’t try to keep the wonder out of her voice. Who would have suspected that the mild-mannered man of God walked around London armed with a concealed sword and was able to use it proficiently?

“Come, let us go inside and stop giving the whole world a free street performance.” He escorted her into the boarding house. In the sitting room once again, she sank onto the sofa to which he had guided her. And began to shake.

Francis slid an arm around her shoulders and pulled her into the circle of his arms. “It will be all right. I have a solution. You’ll be free of them from now on.” His undemanding presence and reassuring words comforted her.

The only thing more comforting would be if only he kissed her. What! Don’t even think that, Clarissa.

Francis held her for a few moments longer, then dropped his arms and rose from the sofa. “I wondered how long it would be before Mrs. Jenkins turned up to renew her parasitic relationship with you.” He pulled his watch from his waistcoat and checked the time on its face. “Approximately thirty-six hours.”

Clarissa bowed her head. Not long at all . And now Dora knew where she lived, there would be no avoiding her. “I need to move again.”

“Yes, I fear you do,” he agreed, his voice full of resignation. Then he sent her a swift glance of misgiving . “If you can’t bear to go to the Mission...well, that is...not that I would ever suggest it if the situation weren’t truly...” He paused and pinched the bridge of his nose. “There’s only one alternative until my sisters return from

Hampshire.”

She stared at him. Blankly so, she was sure.

Reluctance darkened his gaze. “My rooms.”

Clarissa closed her eyes. What choice did she really have? But if anyone found out, it would be a gem of a scandal for the broadsheets to exploit.

Yet she yearned for the safety and comfort of his home again. Right now, she just wanted to sink into the engulfing softness of his feather bed, her nose filled with his enticing cologne, until she was lulled into sleep in its cozy embrace. Her heart cracked open to emit a small spark of happiness at the thought of being there with him.

She packed her belongings once more. There was no other solution. She must reside in Francis Brody’s bachelor abode until the Misses Brody returned from their Christmas sojourn in Hampshire.

Without anyone finding out.

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Francis accompanied Clarissa as, once again, she arrived at the door of his gentlemen-only accommodation without being discovered. This time she wore a clergyman's black attire—a costume borrowed from the theatre. He found it far less nerve-racking to enter the building with her wearing such an unassuming disguise, although hiding her long hair under the accompanying tricorne hat was impossible without an overcoat collar pulled up high.

Francis unlocked his door and ushered his companion into his rooms. Until his sisters' return to London, he would be sleeping on his sitting room floor in front of the fire. Clarissa would occupy his bedchamber when she wasn't at The Regent Theatre.

Francis swiped a hand over his stubbled chin. Good lord, this delicate situation had better not blow up in his face. The last thing he needed was for the good Reverend Randolph of St Paul's to learn of it. Or the bishop. Francis would be dismissed from his post in a flash, if not from the church itself!

And if that wasn't enough to concern him, his attraction to Clarissa hadn't diminished one jot. Already her lilac perfume haunted his rooms, teasing his senses and reminding him of her. He needed a distraction. Anything to take his mind off her alluring presence as she peered curiously out his window.

On their way to the theatre earlier that afternoon, Clarissa had revealed more about the reason she had been willing to accompany her aunt, namely, the compelling lure of information about her father. He now realized how important it was to Clarissa to discover the identity of the man who had abandoned her expectant mother in her hour of need.

The more he thought of her quest, the more he wanted to help her. And the place to start their enquiries was the Duke Street Orphanage where her mother had sought assistance.

Francis carried her luggage, now stuffed into valises from the theatre's costume supply, into the bedchamber. "Clarissa, once you finish unpacking, we need to talk. I have a suggestion for you."

That statement got him a sharp look of concerned inquiry. "Of course, Frank. I know my stay here is a threat to your career in the church—"

He held up a hand. "I wish to discuss something else entirely. I'll heat the kettle in the meantime."

Eyes wide, she closed her mouth and gave a nod of acceptance.

Francis exited the room and set about preparing their meal. Over tea and buttered tea cake some minutes later, he outlined his plan of investigation. "If you wish, we could make enquiries at the orphanage about your intake there. There may be information about your father provided by your mother."

Her eyes gleamed, but then a shudder rocked her body. "I don't want to go back there alone."

"I'll be with you," Francis leaned towards her and laid his hand on her forearm. He meant to provide comfort and perhaps he did, but that jolt of awareness that raced up his arm at the first touch of his fingers on her wool-covered limb surprised him. His stomach clenched as he fought his physical response.

He scooted back in his chair. "Let's finish our tea and cake, then set out," he said hastily. "If you agree, I mean."

“I do,” Clarissa replied, her face lit by a grateful smile.

How was he going to control his impulse to pull her into his arms and kiss her over the next week or more until his sisters’ return? The rhythmic tick of the carriage clock on the mantelpiece sounded like a countdown to his, and possible her, professional doom.

It was mid-afternoon when Francis and Clarissa approached the Duke Street Orphanage. The closer they got, the heavier Clarissa’s hand became on his arm. By the time they turned the corner into Duke Street, her steps had faltered to a stop.

He halted too and turned to her.

“I don’t think I can do this,” she said in a trembling voice.

This was not a good start to their investigation. Was she fearful of what they would discover? Or did being here again bring up bad memories for her? He squeezed her hand where it lay on his arm. “Why are you frightened?”

She turned rounded eyes on him. “I remember years of being told that my love of performing and singing was immodest, a sin. Of being sent to bed without supper because I had, once again, ‘made a spectacle of myself’ rather than behaved like a demure future governess or servant who faded into the background, as they were trying to train me to do.”

His heart constricted at the thought of the young Clarissa forced to repress her nature and her talent as a performer. Had she been physically harmed here? “Were you beaten?”

She shook her head but didn't meet his eyes.

He lifted her chin with his forefinger to look into her eyes and read the truth. "Were you?" he asked again softly.

This time she gazed back at him without flinching. "No, I was not, but they humiliated me in front of my friends and enemies. Every. Single. Time." She swallowed. "I haven't forgotten, even after five years."

"Perhaps you never will," he murmured. "But you now know that your talents are extraordinary. Talents are given by God and it's our duty to use them for good. You do that. You make people's lives lighter, happier, more bearable, if only for the duration of your performance. You understand that, don't you?"

A crease formed between her arched eyebrows. "I've never thought of my performing like that."

"I think you should."

"You're right." Her voice was filled with wonder at the new way of viewing her craft.

He pointed his thumb over his shoulder at the orphanage. "The people in that building can't take that gift away from you. Not then, now or ever."

She dipped her chin once, decisively. "Yes, I agree."

Her bravery filled him with warmth. He pressed her hand lying in the crook of his arm against his body to reassure her. "Now, are you ready to face your past in order to find out what information the orphanage holds?"

"I am." Her fingers squeezed his arm and they resumed their journey.

Francis rang the bronze bell hanging beside the large timber door. Within moments, the door was opened by an elderly porter. Francis provided his card and asked to speak with the matron.

After a short wait in the small vestibule, a young girl dressed as a servant arrived. “Matron will see you now.” The girl led them along a wood-paneled hall and knocked on the door at its end.

Behind this door might lie all the answers Clarissa sought. Or disappointment. In either case, he wanted to provide the support she needed to face her future. That was a dizzying thought, which almost rocked him off the soles of his feet.

Francis’s attraction to Clarissa was very much alive and growing. His pastor father would be rolling in his grave at the thought of his son so enamored with an actress. And his father had been liberal in his views compared to the bishop!

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This was the place of her repression. The familiar scent of vinegar used to wash the floors of the orphanage, mixed with the ghastly smell of cooked cabbage, flooded Clarissa's nostrils and aroused memories she would rather obliterate. The chime of the grandfather clock that occupied its place of importance in the entrance foyer, and regulated all the inmates' activities during the day, resounded three times throughout the building.

Clarissa shuddered, not just from the chilled and damp air resulting from not enough fires being kept burning, but also from the familiarity. Three o'clock meant it was time for boring needlework. Uggh . Mending clothes and making samplers. The weight of her memories pressed from all directions.

"Come in," a woman's voice called.

The girl opened the door to reveal a small office. "Your visitors, ma'am," she said, bobbing a curtsy before backing away to allow them to enter.

The grey-haired Mrs. Hutton rose and walked around her desk. Clarissa shrank back from her a little. She remembered her well, as the person who often sent her to stand at the center of the vast dining room as punishment for making too much noise or exhibiting too much energy indoors. Clarissa had stood there alone while the whole orphanage ate their meal. Afterwards she would be given bread and dripping.

"Reverend Brody, I understand?" Mrs. Hutton said.

"Yes," he said. "And Miss Bartlett."

The woman ran a practiced eye over Clarissa's waistline then gave a small smile of greeting. "Please be seated." She pointed to two worn wooden chairs before her desk. "How may I assist you?" The matron resumed her seat.

"I'm assisting Miss Bartlett in her search for information about her parents."

The matron's eyes darted back to Clarissa, speculation in their depths. "You look familiar. Were you raised here?"

"I was born and grew up here," she said, and something about Frank in the chair beside her safely anchored her to life beyond these walls. She caught his kind gaze and unclenched her hands. This place couldn't harm her now. "My aunt found me five years ago and took me into her care."

"Aah." Understanding dawned on the matron's round face.

"Now I wish to know what information, if any, exists about me in your records."

"I assume there is an intake register?" Francis added. He removed his wire-rimmed reading glasses from their case and put them on.

"When were you born, Miss Bartlett?"

"August 1798."

Mrs. Hutton rose and walked to the shelves that lined the wall behind her desk. Tall registers were lined up on the top shelf. Each book was stamped with a year in gold lettering. She selected 1798 and opened it on her desk before running her index finger down a column. "Clarissa Bartlett. Is that you?"

She nodded and held her breath.

“Born on 9 August 1798. Not here, but nearby. Mother – Miss Mary Bartlett. Father – unknown.”

Clarissa exhaled. Her sharp breath must have revealed all the pain of her disappointment, because Frank’s eyes roamed her face. He turned and asked the matron, “Is there nothing else?”

Mrs. Hutton extracted a folded piece of paper tucked into the page. She opened it and scanned the page. A small smile grew on her face and she looked up at Clarissa. “This note may be of interest to you. It says that a gentleman enquired after Miss Mary Bartlett about two years after you left here.”

Suddenly Clarissa was breathless. “Was he my father?” Her question rushed forth.

“He believed he was your father, yes. He claims not to have known of your birth until he received a lost letter from your mother years after she had dispatched it.” She glanced down at the letter. “He claimed to have searched for your mother several times when he had returned to London from abroad...in the time before he got the letter from your mother.”

Clarissa’s heart ached. Her mother had been dead by the time he’d returned to her and she had been incarcerated here . “From abroad? Was he a foreign gentleman?” Clarissa asked.

“No, a ship’s captain in the navy.”

A naval officer! That would explain his absence at the time of my birth . Her pulse raced as though she was waiting for the curtain to rise on opening night. “Did he leave a forwarding address, Mrs. Hutton?”

Her smile widened. “He did. I’ll transcribe the note and give you the original so you

may continue your search for him. His name is Captain Richard Harding.”

Captain Richard Harding . Clarissa rolled the name around in her head. What manner of man was he? She turned to Francis and couldn’t keep an excited grin off her face. Could this be happening?

He returned a hopeful look, then turned to Mrs. Hutton. “Is there any information about Miss Bartlett’s aunt and how she came to gain custody of Miss Bartlett?” he asked.

Mrs. Hutton rose and pulled another register from the shelf. After a brief check of the year 1814, she answered. “Five years ago, Mrs. Dora Jenkins is your aunt?” she asked Clarissa.

After Clarissa nodded, she said, “Mrs. Jenkins visited several times about the matter of taking custody of you, her niece, claiming to have only recently found out about your existence after consulting the birth register for this parish, she said.”

How did she know to do that? Clarissa frowned.

“There is more to the story of your relinquishment.”

What? Clarissa’s stomach plunged. She exchanged a frown with Frank.

Mrs. Jenkins matched the description of the woman who left you here as a baby. Who had claimed to be Mary Bartlett’s midwife and present at your birth.”

This doesn’t make sense! If Aunt Dora had placed me at the orphanage, why did she lie about not knowing of my existence? “ Aunt Dora ...left me here after my mother died?”

“I’m sorry, but it appears so...although, we didn’t know she was your aunt at the time,” Mrs. Hutton answered in a sympathetic tone.

“And you let her take me, although she previously left me?”

“She provided evidence of your family connection, through the assistance of the reverends of the parish in which she and her sister were baptized, and this parish where you were baptized and your mother died. Our policy is to restore children to their families, if we can, or find new guardians for them.”

The moment of revelation played out across Clarissa’s body, turning her hot and cold. Aunt Dora had abandoned her in this grim place...and then sixteen years later had returned to collect her...to train her for the stage.

Why? As her meal ticket? Dora had revealed that her sister’s money had run out recently. Had Dora waited until the hard work of raising her was done before returning to gain access to that money as her guardian? Was that what had happened? Clarissa rubbed her roiling stomach with one hand.

While Mrs. Hutton finished scratching out a copy of the file note about her father, Francis leaned towards Clarissa. “Are you unwell?” he asked, softly enough for only her to hear.

“I’ll be better once I get out of this place and find my father,” she whispered back.

Memories of the day her aunt had come for her played in her head. She had hurried through the paneled passageway to this very office. Halting outside, she had raised a hand to rap on the closed timber door.

“Come in,” matron had called.

Mrs. Hutton had sat behind this battered desk. Opposite her was a woman not yet in her middling years. She was flamboyantly dressed in what Clarissa thought was the height of fashion. She had never seen this woman before. She had dragged her eyes back to matron. “Ma’am, you sent for me?”

“Yes, Clarissa. Your aunt has come to give you a home.”

Clarissa slammed her shocked gaze onto the woman. “My aunt?”

“Yes,” the woman answered quietly.

“If you’re my aunt, where have you been for the last sixteen years, while I’ve moldered in this orphanage?”

The woman averted her gaze.

“Really, Clarissa—” Matron began.

The woman cut her off. “I’ve spent that time trying to find you. Your mother died when you were a baby, and you were placed here.”

“It’s taken you a long time to find me!” Clarissa huffed.

“Nevertheless, I’m here now and ready to take you under my wing and train you as an actress, just like your mother. You’ll become famous, just like her too.”

“Clarissa, you don’t have to agree to go with your aunt. You can choose to stay here and finish your education and become a governess. You are bright enough to excel in that role.” Mrs. Hutton interjected, her voice kind.

With a long, slow appraisal, Clarissa had sized up the two women and the offers they

made for her future. An excellent governess or a famous actress? Should she trust this 'aunt' of hers? "Have you proof that she is who she claims?" Clarissa asked Matron.

"I've seen written evidence and I've checked her claim to work at The Theatre Royal, Covent Garden, and seen her lodgings nearby."

A look of outrage had passed over the woman's face, at this admission of investigation, but was quickly extinguished to be replaced by a smile and nod of approval. "Rightly so," she said.

"What is your name please?" Clarissa asked.

"Mrs. Dorothy Jenkins," she replied with an engaging smile.

"Not Bartlett, like my mother and me?"

"I used my husband's name when I took to the stage."

"And Mr. Jenkins?" Clarissa asked.

"No longer in this world," Mrs. Jenkins said, muffling a faint sniff.

An actress indeed .

"Have you made a decision, Clarissa?" Matron had asked gently.

To work like a drudge as a governess or to have an exciting life on the stage? There is no decision to make. She dipped her chin in assent. "I wish to go with my aunt and make my career on the stage, like my mother. I have loved performing in the few Shakespearian plays we have staged here."

Aunt Dora had clapped her hands together, a smile breaking out on her handsome face.

Elation had filled Clarissa. She had felt like jumping up and down. But she didn't. She knew better than to show such a display of emotions in this institution. It could only lead to punishment. Good governesses hid their feelings behind a professional mask of calmness.

Aunt Dora had stood and extended her hand. "Come, let us depart. You have a new life to begin." The wide smile she sent her seemed genuine.

Clarissa slipped her hand into her aunt's, a triumphant grin breaking out on her face.

"I'll have your possessions packed and brought downstairs, Clarissa." Mrs. Hutton rang a bell on her desk. "In the meantime, Mrs. Jenkins, there are documents to sign before we relinquish Clarissa into your care. She is still underage, so you need to sign in her stead."

"Of course," her aunt had said. A look of glee had shone in her eyes for a moment.

I'm going to train as an actress and become more famous than my mother. Clarissa had never forgotten that vow.

With the address clutched in her hand, Clarissa thanked the matron and hurried from the orphanage. "Call a hackney, Reverend Frank. My shout. I want to get to his lodgings quickly."

The journey took too long for Clarissa's peace of mind. She jiggled her legs impatiently, tapping the floor with her booted foot as they drove through a middling

sort of neighborhood where the houses were cared for and the streets cleaned, but without any signs of great wealth. Finally, they arrived in front of a row of brown brick terrace houses.

Without waiting for the step to be put down, Clarissa jumped to the pavement from the carriage. Francis paid off the hackney and followed her to the front door of the boarding house. She rapped the knocker loudly.

A short, round woman opened it and greeted her.

This was her chance. “Hello, we’re looking for Captain Richard Harding—a naval man. Does he still reside here?”

The woman folded her arms over her ample bosom and her forehead creased. “I remember him. He did live here a few years ago, but he went to sea again. I haven’t seen him since then.”

Clarissa’s stomach sank. “Would he have returned here when he came home again?”

The woman shook her head. “Not necessarily. He wasn’t a regular. He stayed for a few months only, then went back to Portsmouth to his ship.” She jerked her head to indicate that place to the south.

“How would I find out where he is now?”

“I wouldn’t really know, dearie. Ask the navy nobs. Now, I must get on. Bedmaking to finish before the gents get home.” She stepped back and closed the door.

Disappointment weighed heavily in Clarissa. She turned to Francis. “What do we do now?”

“We can enquire at the naval headquarters at Whitehall. The navy will at least be able to tell us the name of his ship and perhaps an expected return date.” He sent her a reassuring smile.

Francis’s willing assistance cheered her. She still held hope that she would find out more about her father.

The visit to the Admiralty building at Whitehall was not very encouraging. They were asked to wait, while enquiries were made. As she sat on the hard bench trying to still her fidgeting body, her mind filled with questions.

Did he find Aunt Dora and she told him that I was put into an orphanage, but she didn’t know which one? Or did she say that I had died? Or did Dora tell him about the Duke Street Orphanage?

It didn’t matter which scenario was correct, the reality was that Dora had withheld the information about her father from her and stopped them meeting. The degree of betrayal by the woman she had trusted was enormous. She seethed at Dora’s duplicity.

After waiting for an hour, a naval clerk advised them that Captain Richard Harding indeed served in His Majesty’s Navy, but was presently at sea on board his ship, Siren’s Call .

Excitement bubbled in Clarissa’s veins. “When will he return to England?”

“The ship could dock any time in the next few months or years,” was his unsatisfactory answer.

“Can you not predict a due date any more closely?” she pleaded.

“The sea and duty are the masters of time, not man,” the clerk informed her in a lofty tone.

Clarissa’s heart sank at his blithe answer. She must curb her disappointment. At least she had a name and his ship—more information than she had dreamed of previously.

She smiled over at Francis, the man who had made this revelation possible. Warmth filled her heart. He had proven himself to be a man of his word and completely trustworthy.

That was something to be treasured in this deceitful world, where her aunt had kept information about her father from her. She could only despise the woman now. Never would she trust her or have anything to do with her again.

Although any meeting with her father could be months or even years away, Clarissa hugged the information about him to her chest and smiled at Francis. “Let’s go home, Frank.”

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Christmas for Francis came and went in a flurry of services and sermons. He didn't need to worry about Clarissa. For her, Christmas and Boxing Day brought a few days without performances, allowing her to remain safe at home while he was out of doors and busy.

He was thankful for that busyness—it kept him away from the temptation of Clarissa Bartlett. The urge to take her in his arms and kiss her grew with each day.

In the evenings, Francis struggled against his attraction to her as they spent time together. Sitting in front of a roaring fire, snug in his cozy rooms, away from the cold and threatening dark outside world, he helped her memorize her part for her upcoming performance in a new burletta. They laughed over her fluffed lines and about his staid delivery of even the most comic lines.

He now knew what kind of woman would willingly expose herself to the eyes and appetites of men. One who was driven to succeed in her profession, even though society frowned on it, because acting was her passion. That woman was funny and kind and enlivened his quiet life.

Clarissa became interested in his charity work. As she had lived in the Duke Street Orphanage, she had ideas about how such institutions could be improved, from a resident child's perspective. He planned to present her suggestions to Jane, whom he was sure would assist him in swaying the Mission's board to implement them.

Most of all, Francis learned that he and Clarissa got along very well. Resisting his attraction to Clarissa became harder every day. Naturally, he stayed away from home for as long as possible.

Once his sisters returned, Clarissa would be able to move to their school in Harley Street. That location and the presence there of Joe, the porter, would keep her safe from her Viscount Travener's attentions.

Then, this dangerous interlude while she resided in his rooms would thankfully end. No more dressing her as a clergyman to enter and exit. No more resisting her growing allure and the desire to kiss her. No more reading scripts together while he enjoyed her vivacious company.

In the afternoon of New Year's Day, they exited his rooms and hurried downstairs and out the front door of Atcherley Chambers on their way to The Regent Theatre. It was his daily habit to escort Clarissa there at dusk, well before her performance. They had done this so many times without detection, so Francis barely glanced around to ensure they were alone.

The heavy front door closed behind them. A hand came to rest on his forearm. The overwhelming scent of lavender accosted his nose. "Francis Brody? It is you! I was about to send a note up to you. To invite you to a recital with Papa and I." She nodded towards a street urchin hovering a few steps away, ready to do her bidding.

Fanny! His unofficial fiancée.

Francis's stomach lurched.

The woman's quiet voice pressed into his conscience like fingertips on an unhealed wound. Her dark clothes blended into the failing light. No wonder he hadn't noticed her. His eyes searched the gloom for her father, but saw only a female servant lurking on the other side of the road. How came she to be here, unescorted by Reverend Hodges?

Good Lord, what was he to do? Bluff it out? He bestowed a smile on her. "Fanny,

allow me to introduce Mr. Clarence Bartlett. Bartlett, meet Miss Hodges.”

Fanny’s attention drifted over to Clarissa and she took a long slow look at her. A crease formed between Fanny’s eyebrows, then her face registered shock. Her brown eyes were wide as she returned her gaze to him, so wide they seemed to prise open his heart and release the truth within. I don’t love her. And now she’s found out in the most hurtful way.

Fanny’s mouth turned down and her eyes narrowed. Already a plain woman, her face wasn’t improved by her scowl. “Don’t lie to me, Francis Brody. Or is it to yourself? I can tell a woman dressed as a man when I see one.” Her chin lifted, but her bottom lip puckered at his betrayal . She sent him a look of pained disappointment. “What I want to know is why she is leaving your lodgings with you?”

He needed to calm her. “It is not as it appears, Fanny. We are innocent of any misconduct.”

“I don’t believe you!” He had never heard such a harsh tone from her before. Her upper lip curled in contempt. “I see what you are now, Francis Brody. A sinner, with your doxy!” Fanny’s voice scraped over his conscience like fingernails on a blackboard.

Could this get any worse? “You’re assumption is wrong,” he replied calmly. “Fanny, I—”

“If you think I will remain affianced to you after this, you are mistaken!”

Francis straightened his back and lifted his chin. “That is your prerogative.” Please release me from my obligation. He clenched his jaw to stop himself smiling. Something good might come of this disaster . “That is your right, of course.”

“Indeed it is. I could never marry one such as you. You’re a disgrace to the church. I’ll have to tell my father, you know. Wait until he informs the bishop of your behavior.” Vindictive malevolence filled her voice.

His stomach knotted at her words and the fervor in her voice. Of course, there will be hell to pay for this.

“Fanny, please—”

Her reticule hit him on the side of the head. Stinging exploded across his boxed ear. Fanny continued to vent in a low, waspish voice. This was a newly revealed side of her nature. She had always been meek, demure and softly spoken. He covered his battered ear with a hand. Of course, he deserved her ire, but he hadn’t expected it to be so physically painful.

Fanny raised her arm to deliver another blow.

Clarissa’s hand snaked out from beside him, catching his ex-fiancée’s arm and stopping its arc towards his head. “I think not,” Clarissa growled. “Find yourself another punching bag.”

Fanny drew herself up to her full height, middling though it was, and tugged her arm free. “You’ve not heard the end of this, Francis Brody.” She stomped away, to be quickly swallowed by the foggy winter’s day. Her maid hurried in her wake.

“Are you all right?” Concern filled Clarissa’s mellow voice.

He grimaced. “Nothing hurt except my pride.” The tang of bitterness filled his mouth. He must think. Fanny would be on her way to tell her father everything, and he would be at the bishop’s palace tomorrow morning to fill that man’s ear with Francis’s sins. He hoped no one else had heard what Fanny had to say.

Guilt-fueled anger coiled in his belly, and he was distraught about the upset the scene must have caused Clarissa. But at the same time, euphoria flowed through his veins in relief at his unexpected release from his no-longer-wanted engagement to Miss Hodges.

Finally he was a free man again.

Free to pursue his feelings for Clarissa. If she would allow him. The chances of that were slim to none, but he had to try...because he suspected he loved her already.

He shook his head at the enormity of his realization.

But he was getting ahead of himself. With a sinking stomach, he realized he must first face the backlash from this event, with the bishop. There was only one way to deal with this problem—head on.

Clarissa must not have her name tarnished by the scandal of living with him. There was only one sure way to stop that happening.

They must marry.

As soon as possible. By bishop's license.

There was no other choice. That path required a sworn statement from both of them averring there was no legal reason they couldn't marry. Could he fulfil those requirements before he had to face a disciplinary meeting with the bishop—the likely result of Fanny's tale reaching him?

There was only one way to achieve his goal. He must see the bishop today and plead for the license on the grounds that he must marry Clarissa to give her a home and protection as she was alone in the world.

If she would have him.

Clarissa looked stricken, her eyes wide and her cheeks pale. “I didn’t know you were engaged. Why didn’t you say? I would have found another place to stay.”

“We were not officially engaged. Long ago I realized that I didn’t love Fanny. I haven’t seen her for over a year, hoping she would change her mind and realize what we experienced was only a youthful infatuation.”

Her mouth formed an ‘o’ and a frown still crossed her forehead.

“Come Clarissa, we need to get to the theatre.” He grabbed her elbow and set her in motion. After a moment’s resistance, she moved forward and they hurried towards Covent Garden.

“Clarissa, I have something to ask you,” he said after a few minutes striding through the busy streets. He halted them. “Your name will be sullied by the gossip Fanny’s father will spread far and wide and I may face expulsion from the church when my bishop summons me.”

“I’m sorry to hear that you will be punished for helping me. I—”

He cut her off. “I see only one way out of our predicament. You must marry me.”

She froze and gaped at him. “Frank, I’m flattered, I’m sure, but...but—”

“There is no other way. I’ll go to the bishop this afternoon and obtain a license before Miss Hodges and her father can do their harm through whispering in the bishop’s ear tomorrow. We must marry at St Paul’s Church.”

Clarissa’s face softened. “Thank you, Frank, but I’m not ready for marriage and

babies. Not before I've succeeded on the stage. Can you see me as a mother? I think not. I'm far too self-centered for that. At least, not yet...until my acting career is firmly established."

"I'm offering you a marriage of convenience. There will be no infants to stifle your career. The marriage will never be consummated unless you change your mind."

She stared at him opened mouthed for a moment. "No, Frank, I can't. I appreciate your concern for me." She tugged on his arm. "Come now, I must get to the theatre for rehearsal."

"Think about it while you're there. I'll collect you afterwards, bringing all the paperwork necessary, and ask you again." He had no intention of giving up on his plan yet.

After walking her to the stage door, Francis took a hackney to his brother-in-law's solicitor then hurried to St Paul's to consult his employer, the Reverend Randolph, about his intention to marry by bishop's license.

Hours later, Francis arrived back at The Regent Theatre—only to see Viscount Travener in front of him striding purposefully towards Clarissa's dressing room. Francis bolted forward as the man entered Clarissa's dressing room without knocking.

He wrenched open the door to find Clarissa struggling to free herself from the blackguard's embrace. Francis lunged forward and crashed his walking stick across the man's shoulders. "Unhand her, you rogue!"

Travener staggered back, releasing Clarissa, who threw herself onto Francis's arms.

“Get out!” Francis yelled at Travener, threatening him again with his stick.

The man slunk out of the room. “I’ll get you for this, Brody.” Travener snarled.

“You can try,” Francis jeered before turning to Clarissa. “Are you hurt?” he asked her.

Clarissa’s hands trembled in his. “No, but I fear that wouldn’t be the case had you not arrived just in time.”

He tightened his grip on her and she sagged into his embrace. “You’re safe now.” He guided her to the chair before her dressing table.

“Yes, with you I am.” She gazed up at him. There was a new warmth in her eyes. “I’ve been thinking some more about your proposal.”

Francis swallowed. That’s a good thing? “I believe our marriage is the only way to make you permanently safe from scandal and from Travener.” He used his most assured voice.

“I agree.” Clarissa glanced away but encountered his gaze in the dressing-table mirror. And would make you safe from Miss Hodges’s machinations.

His heartbeat leaped into a gallop. “Do you?”

Clarissa took a deep breath. “Yes, I believe you’re right. I wouldn’t marry any man but you. Only you would I trust to keep your promise about ours being a marriage of convenience.”

A marriage of convenience . Of course. His heart shriveled at her words.

Francis bundled Clarissa into a hackney and hurried to the Bishop's Chambers in London House next to the Bishop's Chapel in Aldersgate Street. By some luck or grace, he was admitted to see the bishop, because his last appointment of the day had not shown up. Francis left Clarissa in the waiting room, preferring to meet the bishop alone to explain the situation and stop him questioning Clarissa directly, unless he insisted upon doing so. For now, he would prefer it was not known that she was an actress.

William Howley, Bishop of London since 1813, was a learned man of advancing years, who had held a professorship at Oxford University. Tall and lean, he turned from the window looking out at the grim day. His wig of office was discarded on his desk, to reveal brown hair swept back in waves from his broad forehead.

The bishop sent Francis a brief smile. "Reverend Brody, how may I assist you?"

Francis bowed his head respectfully. "My lord. You may regard this as sudden and unexpected, but I wish to marry by common license. The lady in question is without family who will support her and under threat of imminent homelessness. We have formed an attachment. She is of age and there is no legal impediment to our marriage. We see no reason to delay our plans to marry when her situation is so dire and I can assist her."

"This is very sudden, Francis. Marriage is a serious business. I had heard talk in the past of you and Miss Hodges considering marrying."

"There was no formal engagement and Miss Hodges believes we are no longer suited. I agree."

"If the situation is as serious as you claim, could the lady in distress not abide with

your family while banns are read?"

"Yes, that could be done, were my sisters in London, but they are in Hampshire for some weeks more."

"Could she not travel to them?"

"I think you would agree that she shouldn't travel such a distance alone?"

"Ah." Bishop Howley fiddled with the pens on the desk in front of him. "And this lady is a woman of good character?"

"Of the best," he averred. He honestly believed that, even if all the world did not.

"You have sworn statements?"

"I do." He handed the two statements, devised by his solicitor and signed by himself and Clarissa already.

The bishop read them before he rang a small brass bell on his desk. "In that case, I agree. There is a fee."

"Certainly." Francis pulled a one-pound bank note from his pocketbook.

The bishop's clerk entered. "An ordinary marriage license for my signature please," he requested of him.

With the license safe in his pocket, Francis strode outside to collect Clarissa from the antechamber. Now he just had to keep her safe from Travenner and her aunt until they could marry in seven days' time. And then keep her at arm's length for a lifetime after that.

Lord, help me. To preserve this woman's reputation, I have just condemned myself to a life of torment.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:55 am

One long, worry-filled week later, Clarissa accompanied Francis to the Covent Garden parish church. His employer, Reverend Randolph, an austere-looking elderly man, waited to marry them. The simple service, witnessed by the minister's wife and the church warden, took little time.

Before Clarissa could comprehend, she was a married woman, she was outside the church again and on her way to Guy's Inn for the most casual of wedding breakfasts.

Clarissa could barely believe she had secretly married a man...a curate...by license at St Paul's Church last evening. Not just any curate, but the masculine Reverend Francis Brody. The only man in the world she truly trusted. Her new best friend.

She felt dazed, but happy with the turn of events as she walked along the pavement, her hand through the crook of Francis's arm. The rough wool of his coat over his hard muscles beneath exuded a pleasant warmth.

As soon as their meals were set before them, she leaned forward to tell him her news. "The whole cast of the show will be leaving town for a week to give a special performance for one of the Royal Dukes at another gentleman's country estate. Our understudies will deliver the London performances in our absence."

Francis swallowed. "Congratulations. I'm sure the duke will be suitably impressed by your performance."

"Thank you. We depart in the morning."

Francis blinked in surprise at her. "You're leaving London tomorrow?"

She nodded and extended a hand to pat his. “And will return in a week. You won’t have time to miss me.” She winked and took up her knife and fork to attack her roast.

He briefly closed his eyes before leaning back in his seat. “That will give me time to find new accommodation for us.”

She wrinkled her nose. She would miss Francis’s comfortable bachelor rooms. “We cannot remain where we are?”

“It’s for gentlemen tenants only.” His face looked bleak.

She set down her cutlery. “I’m sorry to be the cause of your moving. Will you miss the place?” She squeezed his hand in sympathy, feeling guilty for causing such upheaval in his life.

His lips curved into a smile, but it didn’t reach his eyes. “Not at all. We’ll be creating a new life together somewhere else.”

“I look forward to that,” she said. And to her surprise, she did.

Their meal finished, they walked home. She was keen to get out of the brisk breeze that blew from the Thames, and back to their cozy haven from reality.

Once there, Francis pulled her into his arms and kissed her cheek. “Good night, wife,” he murmured. “Sleep well.”

She rose on her tiptoes and kissed his cheek. “Good night, husband.” Warmth filled her heart at their easy familiarity. Their marriage of convenience was going to be a success. They were good friends already.

Snug in her bed and the belief that their marriage was off to a good start. They could

live together in harmony. Clarissa slipped into a deep sleep.

Next morning, Francis insisted on escorting her to the theatre in time to meet the hired carriages departing for Kent. They were just about to leave his rooms in their daily attempt to creep from his lodgings unnoticed. Her hand turned the doorknob and the door began to open.

Francis pushed it closed and pulled her into his arms. “Aren’t you going to say goodbye to your husband?” he growled.

Clarissa laughed. “Of course.” She set one hand on his shoulder, and stretched up to kiss his cheek as she had done last night.

He leaned down, his mouth on a path to kiss her in the same avuncular way as last night.

A sudden yearning, to know exactly how his mouth felt on hers, gripped her and urged her to tempt her saintly husband. She turned her head. His warm, full lips, which had fascinated her for days, landed directly on hers.

She gasped and pulled back. They were as tantalizing as she had imagined. Her eyes locked onto his and found them full of hope.

He tilted his head slightly to one side in enquiry.

Curiosity and excitement filled her. She swayed closer, enticing him to respond.

Then his mouth lowered to meet hers. One brush of his lips against hers. Two. Three. Tingles exploded across her mouth and she drew back with a sigh of wonder.

She sought his eyes again. They were dark pools of warmth, holding her gaze.

Something pulsed between them and her body tensed.

Francis leaned down, his head inching towards hers. To kiss her again?

Her heart skipped a beat. Mesmerized by his eyes, eager for his touch, she moved to meet him.

His hands cupped her cheeks.

“Kiss me, Frank,” she breathed.

Their lips met on a sigh. Like a homecoming. Her fingers threaded into the hair at his nape, delighting in its softness.

He deepened their kiss. She answered his questioning lips, returning the pressure. Her heart pounded against her ribs. His hands came to rest at her waist and drew her closer.

Their mouths opened in synchrony. Then his tongue greeted hers, and introduction over, furthered their acquaintance. Warmth flooded her body.

His embrace tightened and his muscular body engulfed her. She pressed closer, wanting more, until her sensitized breasts were flattened against his chest.

While their mouths performed their own mating dance, their hands explored each other's form. Frank's hands travelled lower and flexed on her buttocks, pulling her against his hardened member. Heat pooled at the apex of her legs. She moaned in response to the unfamiliar need.

Frank broke their kiss to trail his mouth down her neck, pushing aside her winter garments to access more skin. Eagerly she helped him. His hands were on her breasts,

massaging them through her clothes. A spike of arousal arrowed low in her belly. She panted in want.

Suddenly, his urgent hands ceased their actions. Breathing hard, Francis leaned his forehead against hers. "I think we had better leave now or I won't let you go at all."

Stunned by the passion of their kiss, Clarissa nodded her head, incapable of speech. In a haze of sensation and fuzzy thoughts, she let him lead her to the theatre and insert her into the carriage in a forward-facing seat beside a window. She'd been so excited about her trip, but now, she suspected all the excitement she'd ever need lay in Francis's capable hands.

Submerged in her thoughts and emotions and sensations, the carriage rocked ferociously as it sped towards Kent.

If she had known a man's touch could create fireworks like that in her body, would she have kissed more of her admirers? Or was it only Frank Brody who could elicit such a response? She hummed at the recollection. She suspected it was only him.

The carriage lurched over another bump in the road and Clarissa clung to the leather strap beside her head for dear life. Around her, other members of the cast tried to sing, despite the rough road they travelled through the bleak winter countryside. Meanwhile, she tried to resolve her confusion.

As each milepost passed, Clarissa daydreamed about their future happy life in London, with her performing a new role while Francis continued with his parish duties. She envisaged late evenings spent together in front of a cozy fire.

But Francis had mentioned sometime in the last few weeks that his brother-in-law

would appoint him to a living he held, after the present incumbent's retirement. She couldn't yet imagine herself doing good deeds amongst the poor anywhere.

She dismissed that idea entirely. She had a career to pursue and no time for a real marriage and a family. She had vowed to herself when Aunt Dora put her on the stage that, unlike her mother, she would put career before marriage and men.

And marriage with a man of the cloth had certainly not been in her plan!

The journey ended at an enormous country house built in the Palladian style. Clarissa left the vehicle, shaken by the carriage ride and by her thoughts.

But as the week progressed, her feelings for the Reverend Francis Brody only became clearer. The memory of him grew in her mind with each passing day—kind, generous, and irresistible—consuming her thoughts and tugging painfully in her chest. She woke every morning, aching for his gentle smile as he cooked her tea and toast.

She found herself wishing she could catch the woody-sweet scent of his cologne. She longed to hear his deep, clam voice, to feel his solid body beneath her hands and to feel the steady beat of his heart against her cheek.

By the end of her time away, she was anxious to see her Frank again. Although they were the epitome of the saying that opposites attract.

She was falling in love with a clergyman!

Ridiculous! She still could not see herself as a rector's wife, with her role confined to doing good deeds and raising their children. Not yet. Maybe not ever.

Was a comprise possible?

If only there had been time for them to discuss this, but Francis had been engaged in church business most of the week and when he was with her, she wanted only to savor their precious time together.

A continuation of their current life in London—her acting and Francis working for the church—but with some way to express her intense feelings for him without jeopardizing her career. She wanted to propose this to him.

Surely this would be possible? Didn't some married actresses continue to perform? Mary Robinson had done so. Many more had not—like Mrs. Jordan, who had retired from the stage to live as the Duke of Clarence's common law wife.

One day in the far future when she had achieved her ambitions, could she see herself listening to his sermons, begging him to seduce her, and then bearing and raising his children? Her mind hurriedly skittered away from these thoughts. Maybe? But not yet.

Back in London, Clarissa hurried to Francis's rooms to wait for him, ready to tell him that she was falling in love with him. She paced the sitting room while she waited. He should be home by dusk.

Butterflies circled and plunged in her stomach. Had Francis been as pained by their time apart as she had? Would he want to set their marriage on a new footing as desperately as she did?

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:55 am

Francis opened the door to his rooms. Clarissa's familiar lilac scent hit him. He had endured a lonely and heart-sore week without her. He'd been smitten with her since he met her, but it was now obvious he was completely and irrevocably in love.

All was silent except for the tick of his carriage clock on the mantelpiece. He strode to the bedroom, which he had been using again in Clarissa's absence, and opened the inner door. Curled on top of the bed was his wife, dressed only in a silk wrap over her chemise.

His heart hammered in his chest at the sight of her. In a few strides he was beside the bed. He stroked his hand over her cheek while his eyes soaked up the wonder of her unblemished beauty.

Her blue eyes flickered open. "Frank. You're here," she murmured, her voice still thick with sleep. "I've missed you so."

"And I you." He leaned forward to buss her on the lips.

She eased her mouth away from his. "Wait, Frank. I want to tell you something." She put her a finger on his lips to hold him at bay. "I've decided that I don't want a marriage of convenience."

He slumped down onto the bed and eyed her flushed face. She wanted to separate? When she'd told him immediately after their wedding that she was leaving London for a week with the cast, his heart had slowed at the thought of being without her even for a few days.

To lose her forever would destroy him.

But he mustn't let her know how devastated he felt by her impending departure. He sat on the bed, body rigid, holding her gaze and steeling himself for bad news. "You don't want to continue our marriage?"

She frowned at him. "No, yer mug," she said lapsing into Duke Street Orphanage cant that elocution lessons hadn't eradicated entirely. "I mean I want more from our marriage. I want you."

His body flared. She wanted him as much as he wanted her. He set his lips on hers.

She eagerly returned his kiss. Her response was every bit as enthusiastic now as during their parting kiss a week ago.

His heart pounded with hope.

"Understand now, Frank?"

"Mmhm. Clarissa, you're telling me all I need to know," Francis murmured against her lips. He deepened the kiss and for a few more minutes she returned each stroke, nip and lick he gave.

He leaned his forehead against hers. "I want to make you happy." For the rest of my days.

"And I you." You still don't want babies, do you?

Clarissa shook her head. "Is there any way to avoid that fate?"

"There are several ways, some more successful than others. Trust me?"

“I do, Frank, I do. And I want you badly.” She pulled his head down for another kiss. Then her slender hands got busy untying the linen cravat around his neck.

Francis shrugged off his coat. Clarissa watched him with wide eyes as he flipped open the long line of buttons on his waistcoat, consigning the garment to the floor.

Clarissa sat up on her knees to pull his shirt from his pantaloons and tug the linen over his head. As her gaze tracked across his torso, she sucked in a breath. Then she reached out a hand to touch his broad chest and glide her fingers over the ridges of his abdomen. She let out a soft sigh.

He flexed his muscles. “Like what you see?” he teased her, gratified that she was impressed by his sport-hardened body. Just as well he had kept up with his brothers’ physical pursuits, necessary for their roles in the army and navy.

Her face flushed. “Oh, yes.”

He slid the silk wrap from her shoulders and it puddled around her on the bed. A dusting of freckles graced her shoulders like stars in a milky sky. He pressed his lips to each in succession, as he traced a path across her soft skin, leaving it flushed and heated.

Her hands moved to the waistband of his pantaloons to tussle with the placket buttons. His body tensed. He covered her hands to halt their activity. “Let me,” he said, and released the tapes that tightened the waistband. He heeled off his shoes and peeled the pantaloons and stockings from his legs, leaving him in only his drawers.

Clarissa leaned forward to untie the ribbon garters that held up her woolen stockings.

Francis slid his hand up her calves to stop her. He rolled off her stockings, one by one, placing kisses on the exposed skin of each bared limb as it was exposed.

Only her chemise remained. Holding his gaze, Clarissa tugged it over her head, revealing all her naked beauty. Francis's mouth went dry at the sight of her luscious body.

He crawled up the bed on his hands and knees until he rested above her on his outstretched arms. Then he leaned down and kissed her kiss-swollen lips.

She responded enthusiastically.

Francis palmed a breast, massaging its roundness and felt his member harden further. He licked and kissed his way down her neck to her breasts, then swirled his tongue over each erect nipple in turn. Clarissa arched her back to thrust them forward for his attention. His breathing became short and fast. His mouth tracked lower over her belly until he reached the junction of her legs.

She was already slick for him. With mouth and hands, he transformed her into a needy wanton, eager for him.

She climaxed with a ragged gasp and looked up at him with wonder in her eyes. "Oh, Frank, you have surprised me." Clarissa looked at him with warmth in her eyes.

He chuckled and kissed her deeply. "In a good way, I hope?"

His erection ached for release, but he would not compromise her wish to succeed on the stage by getting her with child. He needed to obtain a French letter as soon as possible.

"The best. And I like you the more for it."

"Anything for you, Clarissa," he promised.

“But this can’t be all that coupling involves,” she said, and pulled him on top of her.

“No, it’s not,” he murmured in her ear, then nipped and laved her earlobe. “But if you want to remain child-free, we must be patient until I can obtain the means to protect you,” he said as he rolled off her. His cock jutted against her hip.

She looked down at his rampant member. “There must be some way I can relieve your...um discomfort, as you relieved mine?”

“There is, if you don’t mind helping?”

Her eyes glittered with eagerness. “Oh, I would like that,” she purred like a temptress.

He lifted her hand from his chest and settled it around his penis, guiding her hand with his in a slow pump along the shaft.

She looked startled for a moment, then licked her bottom lip as she concentrated on her task.

With his help, she found the perfect rhythm, then he returned his attention to kissing her senseless and working her with his hands. Their moans and panting breaths were the only sounds in the room. Clarissa’s second climax initiated his own groaning release onto her belly.

He collapsed beside her. “Thank you, my angel,” he murmured against her lips. They shared another long kiss. He drew back to gaze into her darkened eyes, hoping to wordlessly convey all the love he felt for her. After a last sip of her lips, he set to cleaning them both up with a flannel.

Afterwards, she snuggled into the curve of his body with a satisfied sigh before her eyelids drifted closed.

Lying awake beside Clarissa as she slumbered, he savored the afterglow of their lovemaking and wondered at the change in Clarissa's regard for him following their week apart.

They hadn't actually discussed their future, only their agreement that they belonged together in a marriage that gave full reign to their mutual desire for each other. He wanted absolutely everything with her.

And it appeared that she wanted the same.

Still savoring the intense pleasure of their lovemaking—far more satisfying than he had ever experienced with his Oxford landlady— Francis closed his eyes and drifted into sleep.

They woke a few hours later. He and Clarissa barely made it to The Regent Theatre on time. As Francis stood in the wings watching her, he could only marvel at the extra sparkle that radiated from her. Clearly, their lovemaking had added a new dimension to her performance.

And the audience lapped it up, if the cheers from the pit and the thunderous clapping from the boxes was any indication. His talented wife thrived on the stage and he now understood why she put herself on display for their hungry attention. It wasn't about them—it was about her. Her love of the role; her sense of freedom in character; and of course, the acclaim.

This realization didn't completely suppress his twinges of jealousy and unease that their cheering instigated. Protecting her was second nature to him now. He hurried to her.

Clarissa changed from her costume immediately after the show, before greeting all her admirers waiting in the communal dressing room. Then, she looped her arm

through Francis's and almost dragged him from the theatre.

As soon as they entered his rooms, they fell on each other, tearing off their clothes. Francis lifted the chemise-clad Clarissa into his arms and carried her into their bedchamber. He dropped her on the feather bed and stripped the last layer from her body.

Her nimble fingers worked on the tapes of his unmentionables, apparently eager to renew her acquaintance with his throbbing member and to repeat the relief she had given him. But first he would enjoy pleasuring her again.

The next morning, Francis forced himself from the warmth of his bed and the delights of his wife. Yesterday, his employer, Reverend Randolph, had advised him that their bishop had requested that Francis meet with him this morning at 9 o'clock sharp. And he dare not be late.

He hurried to wash and pull on his clothes.

At the Bishop's Chambers, Francis paced the stark waiting room outside his superior's office.

Finally, the door opened and his lordship's assistant stepped into the room. "You may come in now, Reverend Brody." He held the door open for Francis to pass through. The man hadn't become any less dour and distant through further acquaintance.

Francis halted abruptly just inside the room. The door clicked closed behind him. His stomach sank. The room held a welcoming committee.

The bishop, wearing his wig of office, sat behind his ornate desk, while every

adversary Francis could name was aligned on seats on either side of the room. Reverend and Miss Hodges; Mrs. Dora Jenkins, accompanied by the Earl of Marchmere; and Viscount Travener. Even his employer, Reverend Randolph, was present. This was not an interview with the bishop, but a star chamber meeting to try him.

“Take a seat, Reverend Brody,” the bishop instructed, pointing to the straight-backed chair centered in the room.

A heaviness formed in Francis’s stomach. “First, I would like to know what is going on here.”

The bishop looked over the top of his reading glasses at him. “Of course. A number of complaints about your recent activities have been brought to my attention over the last two weeks. The claims are disturbing. I’ve brought you here to hear your side of the story.”

“And if I don’t submit to this process?” Francis asked.

“I will have no choice other than to dismiss you from your position as curate to St Paul’s Parish immediately.”

The heaviness in Francis’s stomach morphed into a lead weight. He strode to the chair and subsided onto its bare wood.

“You came to me two weeks ago, requesting a common license to marry a young woman of good character, who you claimed was in a dire situation facing homelessness. Now I find from the testimony of her aunt, Mrs. Dora Jenkins,” he nodded towards that woman, “that you have been the instrument that has seduced her niece from her care.”

Mrs. Jenkins nodded in agreement. “He did.”

The bishop sent her a quelling look. “What do you have to say to that charge, Brody?”

Anger ignited in Francis’s chest. “I say that is a complete misrepresentation of the situation. My wife, who is of good character in every way, was being pressured by Mrs. Jenkins to take a lover.”

He pointed at Travener. “That man. He had already tried to force himself upon her, causing her to flee from a moving carriage and seek my assistance to escape her aunt. My wife moved residence and cut off contact with her aunt, but Mrs. Jenkins found her again and used further coercion to persuade Clarissa comply with her wishes.”

The bishop looked taken aback by this. “Is this true, madam?”

“O’course not! She liked Lord Travener. Even went to supper with him a couple of times. Would have been a good match.” Her words showed a complete lack of empathy for her niece’s wishes. And her eyes were as cold and flat as an adder considering its prey.

The bishop raised an eyebrow. “And you, Lord Travener? Did you force yourself upon the actress?”

“Didn’t force m’self upon her. Might have tried to kiss her. Merely a peck. No need to leap from a carriage though!”

“So, she did jump from a moving carriage to remove herself from your presence?”

Travener indicated Marchmere and Mrs. Jenkins with a flip of his hand. “We all thought she had gone crazy. Jumping out of moving carriage at night.”

“So, you weren’t alone together?” the bishop asked.

“Not at all.” Travener feigned wide-eyed innocence.

The bishop turned back to Mrs. Jenkins. “And what did you do to preserve your niece’s modesty when Lord Travener kissed her?”

Mrs. Jenkins’s eyes darted left and right as though she sought an escape route. “Nothing needed to be done. She wasn’t in any danger of harm.”

The bishop’s mouth firmed into a straight line. “We do not seem to agree in this matter.”

“Your grace,” Reverend Hodges cut in, “none of this has any bearing on the fact that the actress was discovered leaving Reverend Brody’s lodgings dressed in men’s apparel in broad daylight. Scandalous behavior! And what was she doing there? Did they reside together? That my daughter should have witnessed such behavior from a man of the cloth is unforgiveable!” The Reverend’s usually ruddy face had become blotched with puce as he spoke.

“Care to explain what happened, Brody?” the bishop asked Francis.

Francis’s jaw clenched. This was a far harder charge to address. “Yes, your grace. Following the incident just related, Miss Bartlett sought sanctuary with my sisters who run the Brody School for Young Ladies in Harley Street. They were away from home for the Christmas vacation, so their school’s porter brought her to me for her safety. I gave her overnight accommodation as she refused to go to the Mission in Wapping in the middle of the night.”

“So, it is true that you spent the night under the same roof, unchaperoned?”

Francis had no way of avoiding the truth of that statement. “If you call my sleeping on the floor in front of my sitting room fire, while she slept in the bed in another room, sleeping under the same roof, then yes. There were no liberties taken, I can assure you. The lady had just escaped from a molester. This man.” He jabbed finger in the direction of Travener and sent him an angry glare.

“What about his public attack on me with a sword, your grace? Surely you don’t condone your clergymen attacking people with weapons?” Travener asked in his drawling manner.

“How do you respond to the charge of attacking Lord Travener?” the bishop asked, a thread of disapproval in his usually neutral voice.

“As Lord Travener was attempting to help Mrs. Jenkins force Miss Bartlett into a carriage against her will, I say I had full justification to fight him off.”

The bishop’s eyebrows rose so high they almost reached his white wig.

“What about his behavior towards my daughter, your grace?” Reverend Hodges interjected in an affronted voice. “He threw my daughter over and married an actress!”

Fanny sobbed into her handkerchief. “We were to be married, but he abandoned me for her,” she wailed.

Francis inhaled a deep breath, fighting the tension in chest. “That is untrue, Fanny, and you know it. You broke off our informal engagement. Quite indisputably. I married Miss Bartlett after that occurrence.”

“Is this true, Miss Hodges?” the bishop asked gently.

She looked up at the bishop, her eyes red and watery. “Yes, but—”

“She was too upset—” her father began.

The bishop held up a hand cutting off the Reverend’s excuse. “And you, Lord Marchmere, what accusation do you have to make about Reverend Brody?”

“He comes from a family of raving Benthamites. Education for women in the classics. Votes for women. Whatever next? It’s unnatural! Quite inappropriate for the church. A bad influence. He shouldn’t be let anywhere near women and children.” Marchmere’s look, of outrage with a pinch of smugness, stoked the anger in Francis’s belly.

The bishop’s eyes widened in response to this statement. “Ahem. Is that your only complaint about Reverend Brody?”

“Isn’t that enough?” Marchmere huffed.

The bishop turned to Francis’s employer, Reverend Randolph, who sat stiffly on his chair, looking embarrassed to be in the room. “And what about you, Reverend Randolph? I asked you here because you have the longest and closest association with Brody. What is your assessment of his work and character?”

Reverend Randolph pushed his fingers into his receding hairline in a gesture of discomfort, but his kindly face held compassion. “I have had no issues with the work of Reverend Brody during his time at St Paul’s. He comes from an educated, albeit Avant guard, family that’s heavily involved in social issues. I knew his father—a good clergyman. Until Francis’s recent hurried wedding, I thought him a steady and sensible young minister, but his choice of wife...an actress...now makes me wonder...”

“And yet you married them?”

“At the time I did not realize she was the latest star of The Regent Theatre, the leading lady of a burletta, no less. I cannot imagine a woman less suited to the role of a clergyman’s wife, who must of course be an irreproachable role model for women and girls.”

Francis groaned. Clarissa was blameless, but her profession was not considered reputable. “I can only re-iterate that my wife is without moral blemish and fully supports me in my charitable works.”

“That’s as may be, Brody, but—” Reverend Randolph answered.

“She will be an asset to my work in St Paul’s parish, encouraging other theatre people into the church. They will feel less judged if there is one of their own profession by my side.”

The bishop didn’t answer immediately, then he swept his gaze over the assembled company. “Thank you all for coming this morning and providing your testimonies. This inquiry is now concluded. Reverend Brody, please remain behind, so that I may talk with you.” He picked up a pen from his desk and dipped it into his inkstand and began to write on the document before him.

The witnesses in his inquisition trooped past him. Mrs. Jenkins scowled at him. Marchmere didn’t deign to look him in the eye. Typical of the man.

Viscount Travener paused to lean down and whisper in his ear. “Gentlemen entertain actresses, they don’t marry them, you fool.”

Anger exploded in Francis’s chest. He jerked out his seat, his hands fisted. “Never disrespect my wife again,” he hissed at the man, who had the sense to step back and

hurry on his way, the smirk wiped off his face.

Reverend Randolph placed a steadying hand on Francis's shoulder. "Let it go, young man. Never rise to the taunts of others."

Francis tipped his chin and folded himself back into his chair, trying to regain an even temper.

Randolph patted his shoulder. "Good man. We should talk later."

Francis nodded and his employer strode away.

after the room had cleared, leaving Francis to face his judge, the bishop put down his pen and waived Francis to a chair nearer his desk. When Francis arrived, he said, "You seem to have taken a misstep in marrying Miss Bartlett, one that will affect your career in the church because of her profession. I do not doubt that you think you have done the right thing by marrying her and that you love her. I hope her feelings are equally engaged because I believe she needs to prove she is suitable as a clergyman's wife."

"I'm sure she will do so, especially in St Paul's Parish, your grace."

"I'm not so sure staying in St Paul's is the best way forward. The scandal, you know, won't be forgotten quickly. Men like Marchmere and Travener will make sure of that."

"Their own behavior doesn't bear the light of day being shone on it."

"That's as may be, but they are titled men and as such can get away with much. A woman...an actress to boot...married to a clergyman, cannot. That is the way of this imperfect world." The bishop said wearily.

This is not going well. “But it’s a world that needs changing, your grace. And Clarissa and I could be part of that change, rather than a dirty secret.”

“I don’t believe our world is ready for that change yet. And I must act in a manner that is appropriate for our times, while compassionate.” His wide brow was furrowed and his face serious.

The lead weight in Francis’s stomach expanded. Would his fears be justified? Every ounce of intuition he possessed screamed that a good result wouldn’t come from this meeting.

“I shall instruct Reverend Randolph that you should be dismissed from your post as curate of St Paul’s Parish. I suggest you find an appointment as far from London and the scene of your indiscretion as possible. Perhaps a position in Wales? There, your wife can prove her suitability for her role, away from the prying and judgmental folk of London.”

Francis’s heart shriveled to nothingness. He was to be unemployed. Exiled from his parish, from his mission work, from his city, from his family. And it would mean the end of Clarissa’s dream of a career in the theatre—

If she would accompany him at all.

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Clarissa woke late that morning. She hugged to herself the exciting knowledge she and Francis had come to an agreeable new understanding about their marriage. Francis had bid her goodbye at dawn with a kiss that had turned into far more before he extracted himself from their bed. She hadn't wanted to let him go to his early morning appointment. How wicked of a clergyman's wife!

She buried her nose in the sheets and inhaled the sandalwood and citrus scent of him. As she stretched languorously on the soft mattress, she smiled to herself at the memory of their extremely satisfying activities.

Her body had heated immediately when he kissed her. At first, anxious to confide her revelation to him, she had stopped him before she got distracted by their kisses. But once the words were said, there had been no stopping for either of them until they had proven their desire for each other in the most pleasing way. Francis was so clever to know ways to enjoy intimacy with each other that didn't threaten her career.

A knock sounded on the outer door. She ignored it. Perhaps whoever it was would go away if she didn't answer.

Another more insistent rap sounded.

Clarissa sighed and hastily donned her chemise and added her silk robe over the top. She finger-combed her hair. She should not be answering his door, but they already needed to find new accommodation, so there couldn't be more than a little to-do about her presence here as Francis's wife.

After another loud knock, Clarissa carefully eased the door open and peeked around

it.

A young blonde lady, wearing a fashionable outfit of the best quality, stood in the hallway. A uniformed footman stood behind her. The woman's mouth dropped open. She snapped it closed.

Who could this be? "How may I help you?" Clarissa asked, using her best enunciation. Aunt Dora's money had not been wasted on her elocution lessons.

"You may help me by telling me what you are doing in the Reverend Brody's rooms," the lady demanded with all the righteousness of rank and wealth.

"And who are you to be asking, madam?" Clarissa pertly responded, unwilling to show obeisance to this stranger.

"I'm Lady Dalton. And you are?"

Clarissa puffed out her chest. "I am Reverend Francis Brody's wife."

"His wife!" The woman almost screeched the words. "Since when?" she demanded.

"Since a week ago. Why are you enquiring after my husband, Lady Dalton?"

Her eyes widened. "I'm his sister."

Clarissa stared at the attractive woman while she took in this unexpected information. "How do you do?" She sank into a well-practiced curtsy. "You had better come in, my lady," Clarissa said, opening the door wide. "Shall I make tea?"

"Thank you, but no. I'm only here to invite Francis to dinner at my home tonight. Both of you must come. You'll meet Francis's other sisters and my husband."

“I’m sure Francis will be delighted. As am I. Are you sure you don’t have time for tea?”

“Perhaps I do.” Her new relative stepped across the threshold into the room, leaving the footman outside. “Now that we’re sisters, I feel I should know your name,” Lady Dalton said.

“I am Clarissa, Lady Dalton.” She closed the door.

Lady Dalton smiled, and it appeared genuine. “You must call me Jane. My brother mentioned you, but I had no idea he was courting you. I’m curious to know more.”

While they sat either side of the warm hearth, teacups in hand, Jane interviewed Clarissa on the where, why and how of her marriage to Francis. The experience was intense, although not wholly unpleasant, as Jane accepted her answers without any appearance of judgement. A short time later, Clarissa’s exulted visitor swept out of Francis’s lodgings on her way, she said, to the Welfare League Home for Unmarried Mothers in Wapping.

Her sister-in-law’s friendliness had surprised and charmed Clarissa and made her hopeful that she would be accepted by all Francis’s family. However, doubts still niggled in her mind about how his family would react to his marrying an actress. She could not be their first choice for their clergyman brother, who needed someone who behaved with propriety and set a good example for his parishioners.

Soon after the church bells of London rang to signal noon, Francis arrived home in time to lunch with Clarissa. Her heart did its usual flip-flop when he entered. Truly, she had no regrets about her marriage.

He seemed distracted but pulled her into his arms for a bone-crushing hug. “Are you all right?” she whispered in his ear, as she tightened her arms around him.

“I am now,” he answered on an exhaled breath.

She eased herself from his arms to look at him. Despite his words, he still seemed lost in thought. “Your sister Jane has invited us to a family dinner at Dalton House tonight.” She blurted out the news to bring his attention back to her.

“Jane was here?” Francis blinked at the news, then gave a decisive tip of his chin. “Good. I can introduce you to my sisters all at once.”

Clarissa nodded.

Francis smiled. “Excellent, we can dine there after your performance.”

“What are your sisters like?” Clarissa asked, as she twisted the woolen skirt of her dress with her fingers.

“You’ll like them, and they’ll love you. Except for Katherine, who is a pupil teacher at present, they are the directors and teachers of the Brody School for Young Ladies, which you have already visited.”

“Won’t they look down on me when they’re told I’m an actress?”

“Don’t give that a thought. My family is well-known for its liberal social views.”

They must be a very unusual family indeed, if they would welcome an actress into their midst. She hadn’t thought about the family she was joining! Why hadn’t she considered this before their marriage? Because it was be only a marriage of convenience .

Clarissa couldn't help suspecting that Francis was gilding the lily about his family. Her stomach clenched at the thought of meeting them, but she would do it. She swallowed her fear and began to ready herself for the ordeal, both mentally and physically, by wearing her best silk dress.

Clarissa arrived with Francis for dinner at Dalton House in Grosvenor Square after her performance. Jane and her husband, the Marquis of Dalton, greeted them. Francis introduced her to his younger sisters.

Charlotte, clearly the elder of the sisters whom Clarissa hadn't met, had a thin face and a worried look. Why? The next sister was Anna. Her face was calm and cheerful, with a smile that warmed her voice as she greeted Clarissa. Katherine's dark hair hung down her back in a long plait, revealing that she was not yet old enough to be out in society.

These were the young women who ran a school for young ladies. She admired their youthful enterprise. And their determination to teach girls the classics and mathematics, subjects usually reserved for boys, amazed her. That didn't happen at The Duke Street Orphanage. She marveled at Katherine teaching advanced mathematics, despite her youth.

Would she have enjoyed such an education if the orphanage had offered it? Perhaps not, as acting was her passion. But she liked the idea of there being choices for girls, rather than educating them for the narrow domestic sphere to which they were generally confined.

As an actress, she felt liberated from those confines and wouldn't enjoy being pushed back into them.

Francis's family was welcoming, quietly curious, and surprisingly supportive of her acting career. Clearly, Jane had disseminated the family gossip to all of them, as they didn't press Francis or her for further details about their hasty marriage. Instead, they offered their congratulations and showed only quiet disappointment in missing the event. Francis had maintained they were liberal-minded, and that seemed to be the case for all the Brody family present tonight.

The Marquis of Dalton was a Corinthian, from his short brown hair swept upon his brow and his tall athletic body clad in the best of men's fashion, to his shiny black shoes. Although welcoming, he was quieter than his family-in-law.

Francis's older brother, William, who had a military bearing and a harsh face, arrived last. Introductions made, and his welcoming words added to those of his family, he turned to Francis. "So tell me, brother, how you come to be married, and so quickly, to the belle of Covent Garden? When I left you at The Regent Theatre you professed it your duty to become acquainted with Miss Bartlett. I see you have created a new definition for professional interest." He lightened his words with a chuckle and a swift grin at his brother.

Some of his sisters gasped at his bluntness. Jane covered her smile with a hand, while her husband raised a dark eyebrow. All eyes riveted to Francis.

Clarissa stepped closer to her husband and settled her hand into the crook of his arm. "Well, that's quite a story," she said with her most charming smile fixed on her face. Her gaze swept the group. "Shall we start at the beginning, Frank?"

"I fear we must, my dear," he answered with gusty sigh, playing to the audience as she had hoped he would.

They related their history with all the dramatic embellishment they had practiced while reading lines together during their enforced co-habitation. And his family loved

its telling, rewarding them with exclamations, gasps and laughter, as each scene required. At the conclusion of their tale, the sisters hurried forward to hug Clarissa. Tears prickled her eyes at their warmth towards her.

They sat down to a hearty dinner, fit for a winter's day. Once the soup course had been removed, the main course served, and their wine glasses filled, the Marquis called for everyone to raise their glasses to toast to the newlyweds and formally welcome Clarissa to their family.

Their kindness sent heat flooding her face. The flush to her cheeks had just subsided when his lordship resumed speaking. "Jane also organized this dinner to celebrate Francis's appointment to the living that I promised him some time ago...to occur when the present incumbent retired." The Marquis raised his glass again. "To Francis, congratulations on being appointed to the living at Everslie. Reverend Ramsdown has finally retired. He decided in a hurry over Christmas and informed me just before we returned to London. I think he feels his age at last."

The company raised their glasses and drank to him. Their good wishes chimed in over the top of each other.

"Congratulations, Francis."

"At last."

"I'm so pleased."

"A home for you both."

Excitement for Francis bubbled through Clarissa. Francis had been appointed to a living and would have his own home!

Beside Clarissa, Francis stiffened in his seat. He lifted his glass in acknowledgement. “Thank you. This takes me by surprise.” He didn’t look overjoyed about the news like his family.

“What’s wrong, Francis?” Clarissa whispered before taking a sip of her drink.

“We can discuss it later.”

This sounds ominous. She turned to their host. “Lord Dalton, is Francis’s new parish close to London?” she asked hopefully.

A flicker of confusion passed over his face and he glanced at Francis before answering. “No. The living is in Hampshire, based around my family’s estate.”

“Hampshire!” Her stomach sank. In the country. So far away. Oh god, the mud.

Lord Dalton dipped his chin.

“That is extremely generous of you, Lord Dalton,” she said through numb lips. And she meant her words too, but at the same time Clarissa knew she could not live there. She still could not see herself as a rector’s wife happily going to church and doing good works, while raising Francis’s children, as would be expected of her. Let alone living in the wilds of Hampshire.

Francis fidgeted on his chair then met her gaze. “Would you be willing to try residing in Hampshire with me? If you don’t enjoy life there, you could return to your career in London in time for the next season.”

The table went quiet, waiting for her answer. She scanned the assembled company. All eyes were on her. On the whole, they were kindly eyes, but speculation was rich within them.

“I’m not...I don’t believe I’m in a position to leave London for the joys of country living yet. When I have a solid career behind me perhaps, but not now.”

“Will you not try?” Francis asked. There was a strained note of pleading in his lowered voice.

She frowned at him. Why did he not understand how important her career was to her? Disappointment and sadness filled her. “No, my love, I cannot.”

“Is it not your duty as my wife to support me in my endeavors?” he exclaimed. “I need you.” There was pain in his voice.

Someone coughed politely. Was that Jane? Does she disagree with the idea that Francis’s career is more important than my own and the view that I ought to support him as a priority?

Clarissa clenched her jaw, determined not to point out that, at present, she was probably the bigger money earner by far of either of them, and able to support him financially. She glanced around. All interest remained on them, albeit discretely.

Jane spoke up. “Francis, perhaps you should take some time to consider whether a living in Hampshire will serve your interests best?”

Francis cleared his throat. “But Jane, it is what I’ve aimed for since I first went up to Oxford at sixteen years of age. How can I turn down such a gift, especially when Jonathan has, no doubt, overlooked a dozen equally worthy recipients to offer the living to me. Father would have been ecstatic about such an opportunity.”

“That’s as maybe, Francis, but our father was a country-raised man and always yearned to return there. That was not to be, and we grew up here in London. I think you’re far more at home in the capital than you would be in rural Hampshire.”

Francis shook his head. "I'm persuaded I must take it."

"But will it make you happy?"

"If my wife is beside me, I expect I will be marvelously happy."

Jane lifted an eyebrow but held her tongue.

"But at what cost to me, Francis?" Clarissa whispered.

"Think on it, Francis," his brother-in-law advised, looking uncomfortable. "We will talk about it again another time. For now, let's enjoy our dinner."

The family resumed their meal and tried to restart conversation around the table, but the happy atmosphere had disintegrated.

"Are you sure you will not try Hampshire?" Francis asked, sotto voice, once more after the dessert was served and the servants had left the room.

"No, Francis, I will not give up acting for country life yet. It grieves me to say so, but if you move to the country, you will do so alone." Hopefully no one could hear their conversation.

"I have no other choice. The bishop has dismissed me from St Paul's Parish."

His words sucked the air from her lungs. "How can that be?" Clarissa whispered hoarsely.

Francis looked around the table at the curious faces of his family. With a sigh of defeat, he recapped his meeting in the bishop's office for everyone at the table, explaining that there was no option for him to stay in London. The bishop would not

approve him for any position in his bishopric.

Francis's family was clearly dismayed by this news and told him so.

Clarissa's heart melted in compassion for his predicament. "Francis, remember that I earn a good income at present to contribute to our household."

"Thank you, my dear, but I would rather support my wife myself."

Her jaws clamped together so she didn't reveal her frustration with his stubbornness about accepting her income.

"And if you were to be without roles for a while or, heaven forbid, were expecting a baby? What would happen then?"

"Would we not have savings upon which to live?" Clarissa asked.

"Yes, but they can run out."

Clarissa closed her mouth and returned her attention to her dessert.

Soon afterwards, the meal came to a solemn conclusion. Clarissa turned to Francis. There is so much we need to discuss. "I think we should leave, Francis."

He nodded his agreement, then made their excuses and wished everyone a happy evening. Clarissa thanked her hosts profusely for the dinner and apologized for spoiling the meal through her wish to remain in London.

Jane waved away her apology with a sympathetic smile. Dalton was similarly forgiving. The dinner party broke up. With concern filling their eyes, Francis's brother and sisters bid them a goodnight and headed towards Jane's sitting room.

Clarissa's face heated at the thought of being the topic of their sitting room conversation once they left.

Dalton shook Francis's hand and they proceeded without him down the grand staircase leading to the foyer.

"How can I protect you from your aunt and her scheming friends, if you are in London and I am in Hampshire?" Francis persisted as they walked downstairs. "Dora and Travener have already shown they are ruthless and relentless."

"Really, Francis, I do not know."

As Clarissa hurried down the staircase eager for enough privacy for them to talk, he kept pace with her and retrieved her cloak from the hall footman. A knock carried to them from the front door. While Francis adjusted her cloak on her shoulders in the foyer, Clarissa heard the man at the door ask to speak with the Marquis of Dalton.

She peered past the pompous butler who protected the front door, at the man who stood in the circle of light on the front step of Dalton House. A naval officer.

Again, he requested to talk with Lord Dalton. "Please give him my card. I am Captain Richard Harding."

She knew that name.

My father!

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Clarissa rushed forward and jostled the overly protective butler out of the way. “Did you say Captain Richard Harding?”

The middle-aged man turned his attention to her. “I did.” He was only a little taller than her. With his face tanned to a deep brown, he looked as though he had spent his life outdoors. Despite this, he was still handsome.

“Then you’re my father!”

Recognition dawned on his face, followed by shocked delight. “If you are Miss Clarissa Bartlett, then I believe I am.” His smile lit his blue–green eyes. Her eyes.

She threw herself into his arms to hug him. She savored the feel of his arms around her as they clung to each other. She had waited so long for this moment.

Too soon he drew back to look at her again. “You look so much like Mary, your mother.”

“So my aunt has told me, but I’ve never seen an image of her.”

He reached into his coat and pulled out a miniature painting. “This is her. I’ve carried it on me every day since it was painted.”

From the small frame peered the image of a young woman dressed in the fashion popular before Clarissa was born. Long auburn hair flowed around her shoulders and Clarissa recognized her own face smiling at her.

“I’m so sorry, I wasn’t able to find you before now. The admiralty offices gave me all the contact addresses you left for me. This was the last on the list.”

“I’m so glad you persisted in tracking me down.”

“I tried many times to find your mother. Then five years ago I received a lost letter from Mary telling me she was expecting you. It wasn’t until my last return to London that I tracked you to the orphanage through an old landlady of your mother’s. That was after I found your aunt and she swore to me that you hadn’t survived the birth.” His expression darkened.

“She lied to you and to me.” Clarissa’s voice trembled with anger at her aunt’s actions.

Lord Dalton arrived in the foyer and ordered his butler to show his guests into his library.

Behind Clarissa, the butler coughed.

She released her father, and drew him into the house. The butler led them to a ground floor room at the rear of the house.

Once inside, Francis introduced himself to the captain. “I’m Clarissa’s husband, Reverend Francis Brody.”

They gave each other assessing looks then smiled before shaking hands. Both followed Clarissa to a cluster of seats before a bright fire.

She took the sofa in front of the cozy hearth. Francis sat beside her while the captain took a chair opposite.

“We’ve been searching for you. When did you arrive in London? Where have you been? Are you staying for long?” She had so many questions for him.

He looked happy, perplexed, overwhelmed. “I’ve just returned to port after a long sojourn at sea. I expect to be living in London for the foreseeable future.”

He was another reason for Clarissa to remain in London. Her longing to spend time getting to know him was like a raging thirst. She wanted to know everything about him and how he had met her mother. She yearned for that story, hoping it was the great romance she had dreamed of as a child.

“How did you meet my mother?”

“Ah.” His eyes took on a faraway look. “She was acting at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane. I saw her on stage and couldn’t take my eyes off her.”

Frank chuckled beside her. “It was the same for me when I first saw Clarissa,” he said, a small smile on his face and his voice full of warmth.

“Aye, they have that effect on a man,” her father concurred. “So, I went backstage and to my absolute surprise, she was as taken with me as I was with her. Her sister didn’t like that. Dora felt that your mother should be concentrating on her career and finding a wealthy patron, not some almost penniless captain in the British navy.”

“So my mother didn’t listen to her?”

“She didn’t take a blind bit of notice of her sister. We had the banns called a month after we met, but I was called back to my ship a week later without notice. I had to leave immediately for Portsmouth.” The captain paused.

Clarissa leaned forward eager for more of her parents’ history.

He continued his account, a small frown furrowing his forehead. “This was the height of the war with the French republic, you mind. I promised to marry her as soon as I returned to England. God alone knew when that would be though, and it was more than two years later. By then she was dead and buried in a pauper’s grave and you were gone to that orphanage, although I didn’t know about that at all.”

“What would you have done, if you had known of me?” Clarissa asked. Her heart raced as she waited for the answer.

“I would have got you out of there and placed you in my family’s care to raise. They would have seen you right.” His voice held absolute certainty.

Her eyes filled with tears at the thought of being raised within a family...her own family. Francis’s arm came around her. His warm hand on her waist comforted her.

“How did you learn of my existence?” The mystery of how he began his quest for her had plagued her mind since she learned of it.

“We docked in Gibraltar five years ago. “A letter from your mother was there. She was so happy to be expecting our baby. She loved you already, Clarissa, so much. The letter had been lying there for over fifteen years, because it had gotten mixed up with the letters for another ship of a similar name, gone onboard, and returned several times.”

Clarissa gasped. Such a small mistake had caused so much pain in their lives.

“Once I returned to England again, I searched for your aunt, but she must have left London. I went to your mother’s previous lodgings, but there was a new landlady. On a later shore leave, I tracked down your aunt, who told me of your mother’s death and claimed her baby had died too.

Finally, I found the landlady I remembered and she told me you hadn't died but had been placed in an orphanage. She didn't know which one. Then I searched at every orphanage in London for a child born to Mary Bartlett. Eventually I found the Duke Street Orphanage, but you were gone with your aunt and I didn't know where to look next. By then it was time to return to my ship and leave again."

Evidence of Dora's duplicity squeezed her heart again. A tear slid down Clarissa's cheek. "Well, you've found me now. I was looking for you too."

His face shone with hope at that. "I'm glad we've finally found each other. There's so much of our lives to catch up on." He turned to Francis. "If you will allow that, Reverend Brody?"

"Of course, you must, although I will have little say in the matter."

Her father looked confused.

"I'm leaving London for Hampshire soon to take up a living there."

"Congratulations! But won't Clarissa be accompanying you?"

"Not at the first," Clarissa answered for Francis.

Francis looked like he might say more but firmly closed his mouth.

"Tell me about your family? Is it a large? How many siblings do you have? I've always wanted a sister, so I think it would be wonderful to have cousins." Her words spilled out in a rush.

Her father laughed. "It is a large family. My father is a baronet with an estate in Norfolk. I have six older brothers and sisters...all married with children. My mother

keeps busy visiting their homes and her many grandchildren. Twenty and counting, I believe.”

Her eyes widened. My goodness, I have so many relations, and my grandfather is a baronet! “ Will I be able to meet them?”

“I can’t see why not,” her father said. “At a time that suits your husband, of course,” he deferred to Francis.

“I make no call on Clarissa’s time. It is her own to do with as she pleases.” The slight undertone of tartness told her he had accepted they must part and return to the original terms of their marriage of convenience.

Clarissa heart shriveled inside her chest. Although he was granting her what she wished, his willingness to separate from her still hurt more than she’d expected.

Captain Harding seemed taken aback by Francis’s words. “That’s very liberal of you, Reverend. I thank you.”

Francis inclined his head.

“Well, if that’s the case, why don’t you stay with me, Clarissa, when Francis goes into Hampshire?” her father asked. “I’m retiring on my prize money and have leased a house in Soho. Then your husband will know that you are safe in his absence.”

Surprise and eagerness filled her. “Could I?” she replied and looked at Francis for his opinion.

“That sounds like the perfect solution,” Francis said. To her father he added, “That would indeed make me far more comfortable leaving Clarissa in London. She could, of course, stay here with my older sister or with my other sisters, who operate a

school in Harley Street.” Francis’s face had lost some of the lines of concern it had worn most of the evening. “That way, I won’t worry endlessly about you being unprotected,” Francis told her. The look remaining on his face she could only describe as stricken.

“My home is at your disposal, Clarissa. And if you decide to live elsewhere, you are welcome to visit me at any time,” her father added. “And I hope you will.”

Too soon, her father remembered a social commitment at his club and had to leave to fulfil it. All three departed together in a hackney. “Will you call on me tomorrow?” he asked when they arrived at Francis’s lodgings, before her father continued on to his club.

She promised to spend time with him the next day.

The decision about her future seemed perfectly clear. She could not leave London now! Even though that meant parting from Francis.

Her heart ached at the thought of being separated from him. Just when she had found him. She loved him.

But she loved her career also and was desperate for greater success. It was as well she had not revealed the full extent of her feelings for him. Then he might not let her go.

If only there was a solution to this impasse.

And now her father was here in London and she finally had the chance to get to know him. And to meet his family... her family . How could she walk away from that wonderful opportunity?

But how could she be happy without Francis?

She was so torn by her choices.

Back at Francis's rooms after leaving her father, Clarissa warmed her hands in front of the refreshed fire. Francis silently prepared a pot of tea. He had hardly spoken since alighting from the hackney and he hadn't once looked her in the face.

She placed a hand on his arm, waiting until his eyes met hers. "Frank, we need to talk."

"Is there anything more we need to talk about? You must stay in London and I must go to Hampshire to take up the living."

Her stomach sank at his decisive words. He didn't see a resolution that would keep them together. "When would you need to leave?"

"Immediately, now that Reverend Ramsdown has retired, so there is no suspension of services and pastoral care."

Her throat clogged with emotion. "Tomorrow?"

"No, but very soon. I'm sure Jonathan will let me know sometime tomorrow. I should have asked him."

The thought of losing him so soon, chilled her. To occupy her hands, she poured the steeped tea.

"What about us? Nothing is decided between us about our future."

"As we must part soon, I think it best we return to our marriage of convenience." His

face held a determined but sad look.

“Can we not share one last night together?” She yearned to hold him again and make passionate love again now that their separation was imminent.

Francis blanched. “I would be better if we did not—so there is less disruption when we must part.”

Her heart ached as though it was being crushed in a vise. He couldn’t love her in the same way that she loved him. She had begun to think that he did.

“Why don’t you take your tea into the bedchamber. I will tidy away the tea things and lay out my bedding. I will not disturb you again.”

“But Frank, won’t you join me?”

“It’s better this way.” His face resembled an expressionless mask bought for a public masquerade.

Where had this coldness come from? It was not like Frank to show no compassion.

“I think you’re right.” With her heart cracking in her chest, Clarissa lifted her teacup and forced herself to walk through the bedchamber doorway. As she closed the door a sob rose from her chest. She battled it down. She would not give in to such weak behavior or give up.

The next morning, at far too early an hour for polite visiting, Clarissa lifted a trembling hand and rapped the door knocker at Dalton House. Was she making a mistake in coming here? Surely Jane would talk with her? Or would she show me the

door now that Francis and I appear to have separated.

The haughty butler did not slam the door in her face. Instead, he invited her inside, took her bonnet and coat and showed her into a small room off the foyer, to wait while he enquired whether her ladyship was available.

He returned within a few minutes and escorted her upstairs to a small sitting room that let in feeble winter sunshine through a bank of south-facing windows. A perfect place to spend a dull winter's day.

The marchioness rose from a small writing table and hurried forward to greet her. "How lovely to see you again so soon," she said as she leaned forward to kiss Clarissa's cheek.

Clarissa blinked in surprise. So, she wasn't going to be cut dead, but welcomed instead. "Thank you for seeing me, without notice."

"You're a member of the family now. We don't stand on ceremony with one another. You are welcome to call at any time, although I don't guarantee to be home." She smiled warmly at Clarissa and led her to a sofa standing before the windows.

"Thank you, Lady Dalton."

Jane sat down and Clarissa followed. "You must call me Jane," she reminded Clarissa.

"Thank you. Of course."

Jane looked at her expectantly, her blue eyes intent. "Now, is this a social call or one with a more serious purpose?"

Clarissa swallowed. "I would like your advice about how I can be reconciled with Francis, although he must go to Hampshire and I must stay in London." Tears prickled the back of her eyes.

"Have you spoken to him since last night?"

"Yes, but we seem to have reached an impasse. He must leave. I must stay."

"I feel I must ask you whether you see yourself eventually retiring from the stage and taking up the duties of a clergyman's wife?"

Jane's voice was filled with gentle enquiry, not condemnation, but still Clarissa's face heated. "I must confess that before meeting Francis, I never imagined I would ever assume such duties. Now I can see myself doing so at some time in the future."

"But not in the foreseeable future?" Jane lifted an eyebrow in enquiry.

"Unfortunately, I'm quite ambitious and long to become a successful actress. I believe I'm well on my way. I haven't told Francis yet, but I've been offered a role to perform at the Theatre Royal, Haymarket during its summer season. I don't wish to lose that opportunity to transfer from burlettas to plays."

"I can see your difficulty."

"We need a way for Francis to remain in London and be employed, without becoming embittered because he had to give up the living that your husband has so kindly offered him," Clarissa said. She couldn't be the cause of his unhappiness in such a way.

Jane leaned forward and patted Clarissa's hand. "I think you should leave the living to Jonathan to sort out. However, Francis will still need daily employment to keep

him happy. He's always been an active man, although not engaged in physical work like our brothers serving in the navy and army."

"Yes, that is what he needs. It is not enough for my income to pay our expenses. Frank must be busy and feel he has worth as a man supporting his wife."

"I agree completely. I believe we will get on famously, Clarissa."

"I believe so. But can you assist with any ideas?"

Jane squeezed her hand. "Let me discuss the matter with my sisters and husband. It may take a day or two for us to come up with a plan."

Slightly disappointed that there wasn't an immediate solution, Clarissa suppressed a sigh. She didn't want to be separated from Frank, but she didn't want to give up her dreams. "I will leave you to finish whatever you were working on. Thank you for seeing me."

"This may seem unnecessary when it appears you may be separated from Francis for long periods of time, there's one more thing you must consider. If Francis and Jonathan can work out a way for him to remain in London, and I'm sure they will, it will be important to ensure you don't become burdened by babies at this early stage of your career. I can help you with that."

"I couldn't get rid of a baby or put one in an orphanage!"

"I'm not suggesting that you do. The aim is to prevent their conception." Jane explained further and Clarissa's cheeks flamed as she listened intently.

"That, at least, will remove that barrier to your success on the stage." Jane declared.

Clarissa's mind whirled with the possibilities than Jane's idea opened to more enjoyment for Frank and herself in the bedchamber. A smile stretched her face.

Jane led her to the door and opened it, before hugging Clarissa in a tight embrace. "Welcome to the family once again," she said.

"Thank you, Jane. I'm so glad to have Francis's family helping us." They were far more caring and helpful than she deserved. Tears prickled her eyes, but she blinked them away.

Clarissa followed a footman downstairs, donned her outdoor apparel from the butler and departed. She walked quickly to her father's house in time for lunch with him. Suddenly, almost everything she could ever wish for was within her grasp —except Francis in London with her.

But she wished for him most of all.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:55 am

Late on the morning after their fateful dinner at Grosvenor Square, Francis stared into the flames in his fireplace and wiped a hand over his face. How could he turn down his brother-in-law's gift of the Everslie living in Hampshire? Even though it broke his heart to leave Clarissa.

That would be ungrateful of him and a catastrophic decision for his future, not to mention that he would lose Jonathan's goodwill in the process.

Besides, he was without income and had little prospect of employment in London.

And yet, Clarissa was adamant that she could not leave London because of her career and the presence of her newly discovered father.

When he moved, he would do so alone.

One good thing that had come from the inquisition yesterday morning was that Fanny and her father could do no more damage to his career than they had already achieved. Mrs. Jenkins, Travener, and even Marchmere, however, remained as threats to Clarissa in the future, from whom he would need to protect her until they found another target.

Last night he believed he had no choice but to put distance between them to protect his heart. It would be hard enough to cope once they were apart, even having spent so little time in each other's arms. How much worse would it be if he had given in to his heart's wish and spent another night with the woman he loved?

After he had experienced a sad and lonely night sleeping in his sitting room again,

following renewal of the terms of their marriage as one of convenience, Clarissa had left for her father's leased townhouse in Soho. His heart ached already, as the silence of his previously pleasant home had turned unwelcoming and bleak.

Somehow, he must find a way to restore their marriage to what it was before their breakup. But, as there were so many forces against them, that outcome seemed unlikely. Clarissa must stay in London for her career and to spend time with her father.

He wanted to stay in London to protect Clarissa from her aunt and Travener, but as he had no prospect of work in the church here, he must leave the capital. Wales, the bishop had suggested! The only sensible place to go was the living in Hampshire that Dalton offered.

He didn't want to be separated from Clarissa for one minute, let alone by hundreds of miles. Even returning to living a marriage of convenience under the same roof was heartbreaking to contemplate.

Nevertheless, he must talk with Jonathan to resolve the matter of the living.

Within the hour, Francis was announced to Jonathan in his study at Dalton House. His brother-in-law rose from his chair and strode around his oak desk to shake Francis's hand.

"I hope I'm not imposing on your morning?"

"No, I'm glad to see you," Jonathan said, with a smile and a firm shake of his hand.

"How can I assist?"

“I need to talk with you about the Everslie living.”

“Of course, take a seat.” He indicated an informal grouping of chairs before the fireplace. Francis took the nearest and withdrew his reading glasses case from his pocket. Jonathan sat opposite him. “Now, have you and Clarissa come to an understanding? What would you like to do?”

“Jonathan, I’m torn between my options. I can take the living and exist separated from Clarissa, or I can turn it down and remain in London and try to win back my wife.”

Jonathan blinked. “I suggest you choose whichever means the most to you.” His voice was filled with compassion.

“My wife, of course, but I have no employment with which to support her. And no prospect of any within the church in London.”

“I believe your wife said she earns more than enough to support you both in London. Is that an option you have considered?”

“I would rather not! I try to be a humble man, but to be supported by my wife is a hard thing for a man’s pride to swallow. Besides which, her employment and income are not reliable, because they’re dependent on her being offered roles.”

Jonathan’s forehead wrinkled. “Hmm. Is there other employment you might take up?”

“Perhaps more mission work that could bring in a meagre stipend? But how would we support the children that inevitably follow marriage?”

“You know there are ways to limit the number of children that are conceived?”

“Yes, but none that are condoned by the church, except abstinence, unfortunately.” Not that he believed the church should make those decisions for its flock. Abstinence is the last thing I want to practice with Clarissa . “I can’t support the edict that couples must not limit conception with good conscience. That can only cause discord within a marriage. I see that now. It takes away the rights of women to have agency over their bodies, their lives...even life itself.”

“I’ll leave you and your wife to make those decisions.” Jonathan looked a little flushed around the neck. “With regard to the living—does the idea of residing in the Hampshire countryside and ministering to a country flock still appeal to you? Would you still wish to take it up in the future, even if you don’t take it up now?”

“Yes, definitely.”

“Jane is concerned that you are unduly influenced by your father’s dream of a rural living and that you are really a city person at heart.”

Francis remembered when at age sixteen his father accompanied him to St. John’s College, Oxford before he began his studies. His father had told him about his own time at Oxford. And how he had always wanted to obtain a rectory in the country, especially after he had a family to raise, as he believed that was the ideal environment to live and raise children.

Francis had immediately adopted that goal as his own, although up until then he had been happy to live in London.

Was he clinging to an old, out-of-date, and appropriated goal? His enjoyment of country living when he had been newly ordained and working with Reverend Hodges had been real. It remained a vivid goal of his. “I’m sure that a country living is my true calling,” he said.

Jonathan gave him a long steady look, as though trying to read the truth of his words on his face. “In that case, leave it with me. I will work out something for the living. You need only concern yourself with making everything right with your wife.” Jonathan rose to his feet, strode to the door and opened it.

Their interview was over. Stunned and a little confused by Jonathan’s response, Francis rehoused his glasses in their case and hastened to comply.

Jonathan shook his hand again and ushered him out. “So glad we could have this discussion, Francis. I’ll be in contact with you soon,” he said in farewell. Very business-like .

Within minutes, Francis was again on the street, hat on head, walking stick in hand. He reviewed the meeting, but could not determine what Jonathan had meant. He must solve this dilemma on his own. He headed for Fleet Street, intent on asking for employment with the many newspapers located there, hoping to entice them with his extensive contacts in the theatre world.

Afterwards, unsuccessful and with nowhere else to go, he headed back to his lodgings.

In the early afternoon, there was a tap on his door. The young boy who delivered missives on behalf of The Brody School stood there. He brought a letter from Charlotte inviting Clarissa and himself to a family afternoon tea at the Brody School for Young Ladies. Is this just a social occasion or do they have another reason for inviting us?

Francis quickly penned a note to Clarissa at her father’s house via the same reliable lad.

Mid-afternoon on that bitter January day , Francis knocked on the door of Captain

Harding's townhouse and asked for his wife. Within minutes, Clarissa walked with him to Harley Street. She held his arm stiffly and answered his polite enquiries about her day in a few words, until he had no more questions and conversation lapsed.

His heart ached at the loss of their previous camaraderie and affection. He swung his walking stick, forward and back, as they proceeded in silence. I hate feeling this powerless. Dalton, he feared, was his only hope of a solution .

Once in the foyer, they handed their coats to Joe. Francis led Clarissa down the hallway, past the stairway leading upstairs to his sisters' bedchambers. Doors branched off on either side of the foyer. They paced past his sisters' formal parlor where they interviewed the parents of prospective pupils. The familiar rich smell of the bees wax polish used on the wooden furniture and doors tickled his nose. Distant sounds of girls' voices, as they practiced French with Madame , drifted down from upstairs.

They strode onward to his sisters' private sitting room. Inside, his sisters were assembled on the mixture of chairs that populated the room. Jane, Charlotte, Anna, and Katherine greeted them warmly. Francis and Clarissa claimed a striped sofa that faced the scattered chairs.

Moments after their arrival, two maids entered bringing tea and cakes. Dalton arrived in time to receive a cup of just-poured tea from Jane before cakes were passed around.

Francis sipped his tea then set his cup and saucer on the small wooden table before the sofa. Clarissa may have been sitting beside him but the gap between them was too wide physically and emotionally for him to feel anything but loss. And worse, he knew that distance would soon become far greater. He shifted in his seat, trying to ease the stiffness in his muscles.

What was the purpose of this gathering? Surely not just for chit-chat over tea and cakes? He accepted a tea cake slathered with butter onto his plate and sat back to wait for all to be revealed.

Once everyone was served, Jonathan cleared this throat. “Thank you for coming, Francis and Clarissa. I’m sure you’re wondering why you are here.”

Francis dipped his chin in response. Clarissa glanced around as though trying to read the answer on his sisters’ faces. His hand strayed to his pocket coat where his glasses case resided.

“Jane?” Jonathan prompted his wife.

“We have discussed your dilemma and have another option, which you both may wish to consider that wouldn’t require you to be parted,” she said. “Unless you wished to, of course,” she added hurriedly. “Jonathan has an idea.” She looked expectantly at her husband, who soon elaborated.

“With regard to the living in Hampshire, Francis, it is yours to take up whenever you wish. If you are not in a position to do so yet, you could employ a curate until you are. That would give you an income...and give you time, Clarissa, to fulfil your career ambitions on the stage.” Jonathan splayed his hands, palms upwards, before him and smiled, eliciting their comments.

A sliver of hope ignited Francis. It was a good option. in him. One that Francis hadn’t seriously considered. It had seemed so ungrateful to take the living and not fulfil the position himself. Now Jonathan had approved that course, the tension in his body eased.

But he still wouldn’t have work in London except for the mission at Wapping, which did not occupy much of his time.

The eyes of his family members were on him. They waiting for his response. “I’m extremely grateful that you are willing to allow me to take over the living, but not fulfil the residency there. That’s very generous. However, the problem remains that I am without a job in London and barred from obtaining one with the church presently. Unfortunately, it would leave me without enough occupation. I’m not a gentleman of leisure by nature.”

“Let me interrupt,” said Charlotte. “The Brody School for Young Ladies would like to offer you both teaching roles at the school. Francis to teach the Classics to the older girls and Clarissa, if your acting engagements permit, to teach elocution and dramatics to the whole school. We would pay a stipend to each of you, which, though not a great amount, should be sufficient to support you, should Clarissa not have stage roles for whatever reason, and fulfil your need to contribute to society.”

Would this enable them to stay together in London? His answer was a decided ‘yes’. Agreement depended on Clarissa’s wishes.

It seemed to be a good long-term solution to Clarissa’s precarious employment and his lack of employment in the city. Francis slid his eyes to Clarissa held his breath, waiting for her to say something—yay or nay—o his sister’s proposal.

He still feared that Clarissa wouldn’t remain with him even though a resolution of their situation was proposed. Her face looked serious, not happy and relieved. His stomach clenched while he waited.

“I don’t wish to give up my acting career, so I think your suggestion is a marvelous solution.” She smiled and her forehead lost its worried frown for the first time since the announcement of his new living. “I will be happy to do both. But you do realize I have no experience as a teacher, don’t you? The Duke Street Orphanage was training me to become a governess, but I never came close to reaching that goal.”

Francis's sisters spoke at once, full of enthusiasm.

"You'll be fine."

"The girls will love you."

"We'll help you in every way we can."

"You won't be asked to do more than you can cope with."

"Then you both agree to the proposal?" Jane asked, her gaze jumping between them both.

They turned to each other and shared a hopeful, questioning look. "Yes!" Francis slid his hand across the distance on the sofa to take Clarissa's hand in his and give it a squeeze. She returned the pressure and gave him a look full of promise. He slipped the glasses case back into his pocket.

"There's more, too. As you must leave your bachelor lodgings, Francis, you are both welcome to move into Dalton House, if you wish it," Jane said.

"Or here," Charlotte said. "Our parents' room is unoccupied. You are very welcome to reside here with us."

"The decision is yours entirely," added Jane. "As newlyweds you may wish to have your own lodgings."

Francis turned to Clarissa, but couldn't read her thoughts about the offer. "Thank you, we will discuss your kind propositions."

"Whenever you're ready, let us know," Jane said.

“We’re forgetting our tea and cake,” Katherine interrupted.

“Who needs tea? Pour the wine, Jonathan!” Jane said, pointing to the carafe and glasses on a sideboard.

“Wine! Tea! Cake! Let’s have them all,” Clarissa joined in. A huge smile lit her face.

Thank goodness for his family. Their intervention may just have saved his marriage.

But he needed more than a marriage of convenience. Would it be more than that? He wouldn’t know until they left.

If Clarissa came home with him, he had a good chance.

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Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:55 am

Darkness crept over the city like a blanketing fog on as they exited The Brody School. The gas lamp over the blue door drew a warm circle of light around them. Clarissa slid her hand into the crook of Francis's arm. Hope and anticipation of life with Francis in London, bubbled in her chest.

If only they could agree to the sort of marriage she wanted...yearned for...with him; and return to the place of harmony and bliss they had briefly attained.

"Are you coming home with me?" he asked.

It was Sunday evening. There was no performance tonight. "You want me to?" she asked.

"I would like nothing better." He squeezed her free hand then brought it to his mouth to press a kiss on her knuckles.

Clarissa's heart sped up. "Good, because there is no other place I would rather be than with you, Francis."

"I'm glad to hear it." His deep voice was full of warmth. "But before we get there, I have a question for you and I want your honest answer."

She swallowed at his ominous words. "And I'll give it to you."

His eyes still held uncertainty. "Do you wish our marriage to continue?"

That was easy to answer. She held his worried gaze. "Yes, I do," she said, with

conviction.

“Do you wish to resume it as one of convenience or one with full marital relations?”

I want it all, Frank! “What do you wish for?”

“I think you know very well what I desire from our marriage, but I’m willing to respect your wishes. Do you want chaste marriage, or one where we can freely express our love for each other?”

Clarissa halted, forcing Francis to stop too. His gaze found hers, his brown eyes intense and hopeful.

“Francis, I want everything you will give me. And I want to give you all my love too.”

His shoulders relaxed. “Good.” He grinned at her. “I love you, Clarissa. I couldn’t bear the thought of being without you for one day, let alone a whole theatre season.”

“I love you too, Francis.” She gazed into his dark eyes, lit by light spilling over the front stoop of The Brody School.

“Then why are we standing here? Let’s go home to bed,” he urged. “I want to show you how much I need you.”

She chuckled. “Ooh, I can’t wait.” She tugged at his arm, urging him along the street. “Hurry, my love.”

By the time they reached Atcherley Chambers, the evening was fully dark. They hurried upstairs. Francis pulled out his key and inserted it into his lock.

The door across the corridor opened and a young man in natty evening clothes stepped out, ready to socialize somewhere. He caught sight of Clarissa.

“Oi, you can’t have a woman in here, Reverend!” he said in outrage.

“She’s my wife,” Francis answered, in a curt fashion.

“Still, not allowed, old chap.” He leaned against the wall as though he had already had plenty to drink.

“I’m moving out as soon as I get other accommodation sorted. No need to report me.”

“Well, that’s all right then.”

“Glad you think so, Merrick.”

“Don’t I recognize you?” Merrick asked Clarissa. “I’m sure I’ve seen you somewhere before.”

Thank goodness he doesn’t recognize me yet. Clarissa smiled over at him. “I’m sure we’ve never been introduced.” Please don’t figure it out!

He lifted a corner of his mouth. “Right you are. Pity. Evening, Mrs. Brody.” He tipped his tall hat and walked carefully down the hallway.

Francis opened their door and whisked Clarissa into the room. He pressed her up against the closed door and stared down into her beautiful face. They shared a smoldering look. “I love you, Clarissa.”

Hearing those words again warmed her heart. “And I love you.” She had no doubt about her feelings now. She would tell him every day.

They lunged towards each other. Their mouths met with a clash of teeth. Clarissa giggled, but Francis soon stopped that with his questing lips.

He bent and effortlessly lifted her into his arms, and carried her into their bedroom.

“You know there are measures we can take to ensure you don’t get with child?”

“Yes, and I think, for now, we should use them, don’t you?”

“For as long as you wish, my love.” He halted and held her gaze. His brown eyes deep pools filled her need. “Are you sure this is what you want, Clarissa?”

“I’m very sure.” And the sooner the better .

He dropped her on the bed, then began stripping off his clothes in double-quick time.

Clarissa made fast work of removing her own clothes. She paused to take in his glorious, muscled body and stroke her hands over his broad shoulders. Her body tensed and heated. His delicious sandalwood and citrus scent teased her nose.

Francis looked his fill, and his cock grew larger.

With a gentle pressure on her shoulder, he guided her back onto the feather mattress, and followed her down into the bed’s warm embrace.

Clarissa held out her arms to him and he gathered her to his chest. Their mouths met in single-minded eagerness. Their lips slid together, teeth nipped, and tongues licked. He tasted of tea cakes and wine.

Her heart pounded against her ribs. The only sound was their rapid breathing as they explored each other. Her hands glided over the ridges and planes of his chest and

abdomen, savoring his muscles.

His mouth found her hardened nipples and gave them his thorough attention, sending hot arrows of arousal through her, igniting her body, making her a panting ball of want. Finally, his hand cupped her mound and his fingers worked their tantalizing magic, inflaming her body with need.

Clarissa vibrated with need for him. Now. Her hand found his engorged cock and stroked over it.

Francis groaned. He leaned across her and from a bedside drawer, retrieved a French letter like the one Jane had shown her, and smoothed it over his member, tying its ribbons to keep it in place.

Pleased that he was a man of his word, Clarissa looped a foot around his leg and urged Francis back into her arms. He complied, lying half on her, his weight pressing her deeper into the soft mattress.

He kissed her deeply. His erection was hard and heavy against her thigh, revealing his eagerness, but still he didn't rush her. "Are you sure this is what you want?" His fingers teased her folds, plying the wetness there, foreshadowing what was to come.

She panted with need. "I want everything you can give me, Frank," she said, her voice breathy and insistent.

He grinned at her. "I'm only too happy to oblige."

"Fill me, Frank," she demanded. "Make me yours."

He positioned himself at her entrance. "At your command, my lady," he said breathlessly, and entered her smoothly.

With the tightness came a flicker of discomfort.

Seeing her reaction, he held himself still, clearly not wanting to hurt her.

“Don’t stop,” she breathed.

“I want you to enjoy this experience. This is our first coupling in what I hope will be a long lifetime of shared loving.”

“And it’s going to be wonderful.” She squirmed a little under him. “Don’t hold back, Frank. It’s now or never.”

He pushed in completely and paused.

She tensed for a moment, then urged him onward with her ankles around his legs. Francis began to thrust and with a moan she joined his rhythm. He had begun with a gentle rhythm, but she urged him on until he was pounding into her.

Yes! She relished the tightness and the feeling of completeness from sharing this physical expression of love. With Francis inside her, she felt whole.

There was nothing gentle about their lovemaking. It was too raw, too hard-won, too precious for that. They had retrieved their future from the brink of despair and she had no desire for delicacy or niceties.

Clarissa’s sighs turned to achy gasps until she came with a long breathy moan of satisfaction as her body exploded with pleasure.

Moments later, Francis groaned his completion and collapsed on top of her, kissing her deeply . They rolled onto their sides and held each other, breathless and exhilarated.

“Oh, Frank, you have surprised me.” Clarissa looked at him with wonder in her eyes.

He chuckled and kissed her lightly. “In a good way, I hope?”

“The best. And I love you more for it.”

“Anything for you, Clarissa,” he promised. “Any time.” He rolled onto his side taking her with him.

They lay in each other’s arms enjoying the warm aftermath of their coupling. They talked of their future plans for their life together. Her success on the stage and his work at the mission and how after she retired in a few years’ time, they would have a house full of children, with summers in Hampshire and spending some of the season in London attending all the latest stage performances.

Clarissa’s mind brimmed with hope, expectation and love. Her body hummed with languid satisfaction.

Her thoughts wandered along an unexpected path. “You know, Frank, I find it ironic that your approach to protecting me from the unwanted attentions of gentlemen drawn to actresses was to pursue me yourself. Yours is a very novel form of pastoral care.”

He gave a bark of laughter that vibrated her hand on his chest. “Yes, and I think I’ve perfected it, don’t you?”

She climbed on top of him. “Oh, I think you have. Shall we practice it again?” she purred.

“That would be my pleasure.”

“And mine too.” She kissed and licked a path down his muscled torso. “I think I could get very used to your brand of ministering, Reverend Frank.”

“I hope you do, my love, because I’m sure I’m already addicted to yours. You’re far too great a temptation for me to resist.” And he proceeded to show her the truth of his words.

~The End~

I hope you enjoyed Francis and Clarissa’s story. If you did, please leave your review [here](#) . Find more Regency romance by Isabella Hargreaves [here](#) or read on for an excerpt from *The Persuasion of Miss Jane Brody* .

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Grosvenor Square, London, August 1817

The door to his library crashed opened, bouncing off the bookshelves behind. An erect, gray-haired lady dressed in the latest Parisian fashion marched into the room and stood before him as he sat behind his oak desk, bathed in early afternoon sunshine. Jonathan Everslie, Marquess of Dalton, gave her his full attention, as she clearly wanted, and smiled in amused anticipation.

Without hesitation, Lady Lucinda Mulgrave launched the frontal attack he expected. “Now you have inherited the title, you must marry, Dalton, you must!” The up and down motion of her pointing index finger emphasized her words.

Good grief. He hadn’t been admonished like that since boyhood.

“You have a large family of dependent aunts and cousins, and there is no heir to follow you. Do you want them thrown out on the streets when you die?”

Jonathan fought to keep a smile off his face and attempted to calm her with logic. “I must have an heir somewhere, Aunt Lucinda. It only stands to reason. If I were to expire, I’m sure he would be found.” As an afterthought he added, “And would look after his dependents.”

His aunt raised her chin and stared down her aquiline nose at him, her mouth set in a disapproving line. “There may be a cousin in New South Wales from my youngest brother who was sent there in exile—but his mother could be a convict for all we know. It is your duty to marry and beget an heir, and soon.”

“Let me be absolutely clear, Aunt Lucinda. I know it is my duty to marry, but I won’t marry anyone I consider unsuitable.”

Lady Lucinda ploughed on with her lecture. “This is not the time to be fastidious. There are myriad young ladies every Season more than suitable for the task—with impeccable backgrounds, and some with money to match.”

His words hadn’t stopped his aunt... hadn’t even slowed her down. What would it take to placate her? “And I will consider them. However, the Season doesn’t begin for another seven months. This conversation is premature.”

“Nonsense, there are many families with eligible daughters whom you could visit or invite to stay at Everslie Park in the meantime.”

“And how do you suggest I do that?”

“You have your secretary write invitations and send them, Jonathan.” She glared at him.

“How do I know who these candidates are?”

“I have a list already written.” She produced it from her reticule with a flourish and laid it on his desk. “I expect to be presiding over a house party for these ladies and their families at Everslie Park by Christmas.”

Having delivered her message and assumed agreement, Lady Lucinda nodded to him and strode from the study, leaving the door wide open.

Jonathan ran his fingers through his hair, pushing the short dark waves from his forehead. He picked up the list and scanned the names set down in his aunt’s fussy handwriting. He had met them all and been bored to the point of irritation by their simpering ways. He groaned and crumpled the paper into a ball, tossing it into the

empty fire grate.

“Stevens!” His elderly secretary and man of business appeared in the doorway. “Send to the stables for Nate to saddle my horse. I’m going out for a ride. I believe we have concluded today’s business.”

“Yes, we have, my lord, but have you forgotten that you promised to take your sister to a lecture this afternoon, as Lady Lucinda is unavailable?”

Vexed at the impediment to his escape, Jonathan sank back into his chair with an exasperated sigh. “Ah, yes, I remember. We shall be gone for the afternoon.” He was trapped by his obligations. Or was he? Stevens still stood in the doorway, waiting for further instruction. He had an idea. A smile spread across his face. “Send word to my solicitor that I shall see him tomorrow morning.”

“May I tell him what it concerns, my lord?”

“I wish to trace the whereabouts of my uncle’s family in New South Wales, as he has met his maker.”

Stevens nodded and left to follow Jonathan’s orders.

Jonathan sank into a reverie about the onerous obligation that befell those who inherited titles—that of producing heirs for the benefit of their families. Of course, he mused, it shouldn’t be an onerous task to find a wife and create a family—it should be a pleasurable duty.

Why wasn’t it turning out that way?

She was the one.

He wanted her. Only her.

Jonathan shook his head. Am I mad? Where did that idea come from?

The room came into focus, and her words swirled around him. The drawing room of the modest townhouse leased by the Reverend William Brody was awash with late summer light streaming through its tall arched windows. An assortment of well-loved chaise longue and chairs were grouped around the simply dressed young woman who was expounding, in her low-pitched voice, on a better way to educate young women to take their place as men's equals in society.

Miss Brody had drawn quite a crowd for this unfashionable time of year. But then, there wasn't a fashionable person in the room. Instead, when he looked around, those he recognized were doctors and the committed few society people who devoted themselves to philanthropic causes. To his left was Mrs. Courtice, an eccentric and elderly widow who supported every charitable cause in the city. Her birdlike form was clothed in an outmoded dress. That was deceptive. She was neither timid nor wanting for money. In fact, he knew that her husband had left her extremely wealthy, as there was no entailment on his property and no children to support.

What am I doing here? Jonathan glanced at his sister seated beside him. Her pale skin contrasted with the dark circles beneath her eyes. She had urged him to accompany her to this important talk for women.

Oh, he had resisted of course. What man in his right mind wouldn't, especially a peer of the realm? To entertain such notions was to upset the established balance of the known world. His role was to keep things stable. Bad enough that the working classes were threatening to rise up against their masters.

Nevertheless, he couldn't resist a plea from his sister Elizabeth for long. Her sweet disposition had always meant that he gave in to her requests—the precious few she made. Involving herself in charity work from the time she had left the schoolroom,

she had pulled him into supporting her causes with generous donations. Occasionally he accompanied her when she needed a chaperone other than their aunt, but he had not escorted her to this residence before. He suspected their aunt hadn't either. A huff of amusement escaped him. Lady Lucinda would not countenance the idea of educating women to be men's equals.

Jonathan focused on the speaker. Miss Brody was petite, confident, and articulate. She had the most beautiful open and earnest face, with clear blue eyes. Her golden-brown hair was formed into a severe knot at the back of her head, emphasizing her high cheekbones but not improving her attractiveness at all. He began imagining how her loosened hair would curl around her slender shoulders. How far would it drape down her naked back? The audience listened in silence, intent on her message, unaware of his lascivious thoughts.

Soon the talk ended. For a moment there was stillness, then polite applause began. As hostess, the speaker invited all to join her for tea, which two servants brought in on cue. A hubbub of conversation followed as a number of guests surged toward her. Elizabeth took Jonathan's arm and urged him forward into the throng around the woman now presiding behind the large teapot.

Apparently, his sister knew the speaker. Elizabeth skirted the furniture, guiding him toward the young woman. Jane Brody, in her daffodil yellow summer dress and matching bead necklace, looked like a beam of sunshine.

He was drawn to her like a cat to cream. The thick carpet hushed his highly polished Hessian boots but the tassels swished against them as he strode forward—catching her attention, he noticed. At their approach, her gaze traveled from his boots up his body, transforming into a look of admiration, before she focused on his sister.

“Jonathan, may I introduce Miss Brody?” Elizabeth said, in her breathy voice.

“Charmed to meet you, Miss Brody. My sister insisted that I accompany her to hear

your views.” And I will certainly do so again after seeing how very much more attractive you are close up.

“I’m delighted to meet you, Lord Dalton. I trust I have convinced you that women have voices that ought to be heard. This fraternity needs people in high places, such as you, to spread the word and convince men that women are entitled to equal rights.”

Surprised by her confident expectation that he was a supporter of her cause, Jonathan felt compelled to disabuse her. “I’m afraid that I do not yet believe there is reason or need for women to demand an equal place in our society. Nor to be educated for such a place. They are intended to marry and raise their husbands’ children.”

“If they do not need equality of rights, of education, then why do women die every day from too many confinements weakening their health?” she demanded quietly.

He struggled to keep his face impassive, but couldn’t stop a flicker of his left eyebrow. “Unfortunately, they do die,” he replied. “But the number of confinements a woman bears is an issue for man and wife to debate and settle—not society as a whole. And surely not a subject for an unmarried woman to concern herself with?”

“And how do you expect women to control their reproduction if they are not informed about or permitted to discuss the question and the means before they are wed? Afterward, their fate becomes a *fait accompli*, does it not?” she queried, her smile still in place and her voice calm, but with a look of fierce determination on her face.

He made no reply.

“Can I count on your maiden speech in parliament being on the topic of women’s rights, my lord?” she added, a look of innocent inquiry on her face.

Good God! Has she left hold of her sanity like old King George? “I’m afraid not,

Miss Brody. I will not be lecturing my peers on such a personal topic.” He hoped the conversation was at an end, but he saw a battle light in her eyes and suspected she would not let him off the hook. She might be a formidable opponent if not a woman.

She spoke quietly. “I took you for a man of greater moral fiber, my lord. I see I was mistaken.” She turned to his sister and then Mrs. Courtice on her right, offering them tea and cake.

He was dismissed—as if of no further interest or use to her. Being ignored by an unmarried woman, or by anyone else for that matter, was an unfamiliar feeling. Stunned, he stepped back from the group and strode away to talk with Dr. Logan, the middle-aged doctor who aided a mission in Wapping for unmarried mothers. It was a charity to which Jonathan had given funds for some time, but in which he had never taken a close interest, preferring instead to let his money do the work. He listened distractedly to the doctor but his mind was churning.

This woman, this Miss Jane Brody, the daughter of a clergyman, had challenged his very usefulness in the world and found him wanting. Anger flared in him. By what right did she feel she could do that? Did she truly believe that women were the equal of men? Obviously, she did. He looked around the crowded room. Did all these people hold the same belief? It was a sobering thought. Those present didn’t represent the peerage but did include well-respected members of London’s intellectual group.

The anger died as quickly as it rose. Why be angry at being called to account? Better to find out more about her ideas like the man of letters that he was. He would investigate her and her writings, find the flaws in her beliefs, and make sure she could never put him on the back foot again.

Her slight but womanly figure, seated at ease behind the china tea set, drew his gaze. She looked so right there; as did most ladies of his acquaintance. It was a charming and attractive sight. But she wasn’t chatting about the weather and fashions and events for the upcoming Season, like others. Instead, she and her fellow

bluestockings and philanthropists were discussing ways of changing the order of things in society.

She was a disturbing phenomenon.

Jane seethed. While smiling and serving her guests, she sensed Lord Dalton's eyes on her. He was the most annoying man. First his narrow-minded attitudes and now his steady brown-eyed gaze upon her. He was every inch the Corinthian, from his short brown hair swept upon his brow and his tall athletic body clad in the best of men's fashion, to his shining Hessian boots. Obviously, good looks, a wonderful physique, and enormous wealth did not ensure intelligence and manners!

What a contrast to his delightful and thoughtful sister. Jane had met Lady Elizabeth a number of times at meetings of charity groups over the last few months. The last encounter had been at a ball when Lady Elizabeth had been accompanied by her aunt, Lady Lucinda Mulgrave. The aunt was a typical society matron intent on pushing her niece forward into a suitable match. It appeared the brother was the same.

Having met two examples of the family, Jane hoped these traditionalists were not pressuring Lady Elizabeth to accept the usual role for women before she was old enough to think for herself.

Jane's sister, Charlotte, had married about a year ago at the age of twenty, despite all Jane's counseling to wait a little longer—until she was at least of age and better knew her fiancé. Instead, Charlotte had persuaded their father to give his consent to the marriage. She was now residing near Portsmouth with her cavalry officer husband, close to his regiment's encampment. Too far away for frequent visiting, leaving only weekly letter writing between the sisters as their means of communication.

Jane's next sister, nineteen-year-old Anna, was also keen to find a husband. Jane

sighed. She couldn't understand the haste or the reasoning. She was glad to be unshackled by husband and children who would claim every moment of her day. Instead, she devoted her spare time to charitable work when not supervising her father's household and organizing her three youngest siblings, who were still living at home. Anna required escorting to public events from time to time, but the younger pair of siblings still needed tutoring, which Jane shared with their father.

Eight years after his wife's death, her father, the Reverend Brody, still had not recovered his zest for life, nor much interest in the people and events around him. He seemed to have shrunk inside his clothes; his hair had gone white, and his laughter was rare. Jane had taken over much of his charity work.

Realizing she was daydreaming, Jane focused on the conversation going on beside her between Mrs. Courtice and Lady Elizabeth. "Have you been well, Lady Elizabeth?" asked Jane.

"I'm much improved since the cloudy, foggy days have gone," she responded. "As long as London's sky remains clear, my cough is nonexistent. If the weather changes, I may have to retreat to the country again, like last spring. My brother keeps a close eye on me and whisks me away if my symptoms start."

"Indeed, he is a very caring, solicitous brother from what you say," Jane conceded.

Lady Elizabeth nodded. "I do wish I could convince him to take up your cause now he is to take his place in the House of Lords. The rights of women need to be recognized so we may have some chance of independence in these tumultuous times."

"Yes, we need a powerful champion if we are to spread your message, Jane," agreed Mrs. Courtice. "It is not enough for us to just perform charity work to help women who have fallen on hard luck. We need to change the way society thinks of women. We are not inferior to men. We ought to be educated to assume our rightful place

beside them.” Her look pierced Jane. “You must continue to write your pamphlets about our cause, Jane. It is valuable work.”

“I won’t stop until our aim is achieved, Mrs. Courtice,” Jane agreed. “But we still need a patron—preferably a man of influence.”

“Then you must try to persuade my brother to take up our cause, Miss Brody,” Lady Elizabeth said. “If anyone can do it, it is you. He has always been complacent about social issues but now he has inherited his title, he has the ability to effect change. He needs to be shaken out of his complacency.”

“How should I go about that? He seemed quite adamant that he was against women’s rights when I spoke with him a little while ago.”

“Don’t let one failed attempt put you off!”

Mrs. Courtice nodded her encouragement.

“Call upon me tomorrow morning,” Elizabeth urged. “My brother always works in his study with his man of business before luncheon. I’ll ensure that you get the opportunity to talk with him.”

Their eager looks overrode Jane’s reluctance. Why did she feel as though she would be confronting a lion in his den when she tried to convert the handsome, yet reactionary, Lord Dalton to their cause?