



An Affair at Christmastide

A MARY & BRIGHT NOVEL

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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AUTHOR OF THE DIAMONDS OF LONDON SERIES

An Affair at Christmastide

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New Independence Books

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Author's Pledge and Promise

You have my promise that I have never used AI technology to produce any part of the books I write and publish, and that I never will. Each and every word is mine. I spend copious hours every day outlining my books and then writing them. I refuse to use AI technology because then that product isn't writing. That is cheating and asking a computer to do the work for me.

So much of writing is organic, and computers simply can't make a reader feel the things a hero and heroine go through. I absolutely love connecting my characters with my readers, and letting my readers have a fully immersive experience while reading my stories.

Rest assured that I will still write every single word in each one of my books, and you have my guarantee that what you have purchased is the genuine book and not artificially created.

I adore my readers far too much, as well as the craft of writing, to cheat them in any way.

Thank you for your continued support.

Dedication

To Angieleigh, because you love Christmas romances as much as I do.
Thanks for always being there. Love you bunches!

Blurb

Nothing ushers in the holidays like mistletoe... and murder.

Widow Mary Tomlinson isn't looking for romance. At four and thirty, she's content enough to keep house for her brother in London, but when the opportunity to act as chaperone for her niece at a Christmastide house party comes her way, she jumps at it. Even more when she discovers the party is hosted by Viscount Stanwick, a man she used to fancy in her youth. The fly in the ointment is his brother and the troubling attraction for him she can't quite ignore.

Inspector Gabriel Bright is attending his brother's house party in the countryside to help his son enter society. He cares not for ton life or for settling down; he feels most vital while working cases for Bow Street, but when the butler turns up dead shortly before dinner one night and Gabriel's son is found with the murder weapon, he's thrown into action. This plus an impromptu kiss with a woman in the stables that excites his imagination and fires his libido might prove the company not as dull as he thought.

Possessed with organizational skills and an affinity for broken things, Mary soon is recruited to act as the inspector's assistant as they investigate. Heat and desire simmer between them, but the two have more in common than they think when secrets from their pasts come to light during the case. If they wish to explore a life together beyond the boundaries of their torrid Christmastide affair—as well as solve the case—they'll need to stay one step ahead of the killer.

Chapter One



*December 15, 1818
Grosvenor Square
London, England*

There was something so deliciously primal, mysterious, and curious regarding reading about murder between the pages of a good book.

Or so Mary Tomlinson thought as rain drummed steadily on the window glass while she turned the page of the thrilling, Gothic novel she'd been engrossed in for the past four days. The snap and crackle of a cheerful fire behind a plain wrought iron screen lent a coziness to the drawing room of her brother's modest townhouse—Number 12 to be precise—and filled the room with much needed warmth. If the temperature dropped any further, the precipitation would soon change to snow, and frankly, it was too early in the season for that.

At least in her opinion.

What would it be like to stumble upon the body of a murder victim? Would she have that sort of personal courage, or would she be one of those women who fainted at the sight of a grisly, bloody wound? There were no answers, but she was glad her life didn't move toward the criminal element. Though, truth be told, it might be the best fun to investigate a murder and really test the bounds of her intelligence.

Then she uttered a snort of unladylike laughter, for when would she ever be put in such a position as to find herself front and center of a murder investigation? What a silly notion.

"Mary? Are you in here?"

She blew out a frustrated breath at the sound of her brother's voice then righted herself on the low sofa so that she sat in a more proper posture.

By the time he came fully into the room, she'd arranged her skirting demurely over her legs with her book resting in her lap. It would seem for the next few minutes, the leisure time of reading would be interrupted. "Where else would I be?"

When William came into her sight line, her niece trailed in his wake. "Ah, there you are." He possessed blond hair like hers though his had thinned over the years. Since he worked as secretary to the English ambassador to Austria, William Swanson was only home a few months out of every year. His wife had died ten years prior and he didn't quite trust his daughter's governesses over the years, so when Mary's husband had expired four years before, it had been agreed she'd come to live with them. Her days now revolved around seeing that the house was taken care of and keeping an eye on Adelaide when she wasn't at school. "Mary, love, I need a moment of your time."

"Oh? How so?" She set aside her book while bouncing her gaze between her brother and Adelaide, her nineteen-year-old niece, who looked as if she would sprint through the room if given a chance to show the excitement she tried so hard to hide.

"You'll never guess, Aunt Mary. I can scarcely believe it myself!" That same emotion reflected in her blue eyes and lay stamped all over her face.

"Yes, well, calm down, child. Unless my sister agrees, you will not be going." He held up a card in his hand as he held Mary's gaze. "It would seem my daughter has been invited to a Christmastide house party in Oxfordshire."

"What a lovely surprise." Mary rose from her sofa to take the invitation from her brother. "That should be a wonderful way to spend your time, and good experience I daresay. Who invited you?"

"Belle Bright. She's the daughter of Viscount Stanwick, and she is my roommate at Mrs. Bainbridge's School for Young Ladies."

"Viscount Stanwick, you say?" Not having heard that name in many years, it immediately ripped open a closed doorway to her past she'd thought long forgotten. The strength left her knees, and she was obliged to sit rather quickly on a nearby chair, which disturbed the third nap of the day of her feline, Admiral Nelson.

"Auntie, are you quite well?" Alarm etched through Adelaide's expression as she and her father exchanged a glance.

"Yes, don't mind me. The name took me by surprise, is all. I used to

know a Francis Bright many years ago.”

The girl nodded with enthusiasm. “Yes, he is Belle’s father. The viscount.”

Oh, dear heavens.

“Ah.” Why would that name resurface now? He had been a mistake on her part, but one she had no regrets over. Deliberately ignoring her history with the man, she finally focused on the invitation in her hand.

Lord and Lady Stanwick, as well as the Honorable Belle Bright, desire the honor of Miss Adelaide Swanson’s presence at Stanwick Hall in South Oxfordshire for a Christmastide house party from 21st December through 4th January. Travel is, of course, weather dependent.

“This is quite an honor,” she said slowly as she looked up from the missive that had been written in pretty scrolled handwriting and the paper decorated with gold flecks. Since neither she nor William were of the *ton*, but William’s wife had been a daughter of a baron, that was enough of a connection to warrant invitations to a handful of society events. Not to premiere balls or meeting anyone within the *beau monde* high on the instep, but decent outings that could help a young lady plan her future if she were clever and resourceful.

“It is indeed, and seeing as how my social calendar is full through the end of the year, I don’t mind if Adelaide goes.” When the girl stifled a squeal, he held up a hand. “However, since she no longer has a governess, she’ll need a companion to accompany her.”

They both stared at Mary.

“You want me to play companion.” It wasn’t a question.

“Oh, please Aunt Mary!” Adelaide threw herself onto her knees in front of Mary’s chair. She crushed her free hand between hers. “This is the most important invitation I’ve ever been given, and I know I’m still in finishing school, and it’s too early to have my own Come Out, but don’t you think this will be good experience?”

The girlish ramblings and the plea in the young voice coupled with the hope in her niece’s rounded eyes all worked to punch through Mary’s natural tendency to deny going down that particular rabbit hole.

With a sigh, Mary glanced from the card to her niece’s upturned face.

“Let me think upon it, for this isn’t something I can answer immediately.”

“All right.” When she realized that Mary wouldn’t be the pushover that her father sometimes was, Adelaide stood. “I’m going to pack just in case.” With a wave to William, the girl ran from the room while Mary slumped in the chair.

“Good heavens.” With her mind spinning, she peered at the invitation again. “I never thought I would have cause to see Francis Bright again. At least not in this lifetime.” She watched in stunned silence as William dropped into a chair that matched hers.

He shrugged. “Scandal has a tendency to come back to haunt us.”

“That was fourteen years ago, and it wasn’t a scandal because no one knew about it.”

When she had been a young woman of twenty, she’d met a reckless, exciting son of a viscount in Hyde Park, who was a good ten years her senior. Her father had been a prominent merchant at the time, and he had connections everywhere. In any event, she’d been out driving with one of her female friends on Rotten Row when Francis Bright lost control of his high perch phaeton. At the last second, he stopped the horse with a few inches to spare before his carriage would have slammed into the one she rode in. While her friend had fainted from fright, Mary had kept a level head and had dressed him down before ever knowing his name.

Apparently, he’d thought it all a lark, and since he was quite arrogant and thinking the world revolved around him, he’d hopped down from his carriage and into hers. Seconds later, he kissed her then released her before crowds of onlookers swelled. As he’d jumped to the ground, he promised her that he would see her again.

She’d countered that he didn’t know who she was, but he’d merely laughed and said if a man wanted something badly enough, the lack of knowledge wouldn’t prove a hinderance.

William’s soft cough jogged her from the memories. “Someone always knows of someone else’s scandals.”

“I don’t see how. We were quite careful; he insisted upon it.”

True to his word, Francis Bright had somehow discerned who she was. He issued an invitation to her to a masquerade ball his parents were throwing at the end of the week, promising another meeting just as exciting as their first.

She’d agonized over whether to attend, but in the end—and at her

own brother's urging and reminding her that he would be quite the feather in her cap should she land him—she'd pulled together a quick costume of a Greek goddess and mask. Halfway through the ball, Francis had whisked her from the ballroom and into the shadows of the butler's pantry. The kisses he'd treated her to—her first kisses from anyone—had completely turned her head.

After that, she passed the best summer of her life, for Francis was determined to conduct a courtship of sorts with her, except all of their meetings were of a clandestine nature. Mary hadn't realized it at the time, but such a man with that sort of rule wasn't of a mind to court a woman, but she'd been young, not much older than Adelaide, and his romantic attentions had more than turned her head. She'd fancied him—no, she'd loved him—and would have followed that man anywhere if he'd said the word.

During that time, he saw to it that her name was on the guest lists of a handful of society events where he would meet her and then they'd sneak off to unused rooms or gardens. One night, she gave him the only gift of any value she had. They came together a few times after that, and she'd been all too certain he was the man she would marry. It would make her parents so proud, and then her father wouldn't need to worry over her future any longer, for as the daughter of a merchant—even one with multiple connections—she'd never be able to land in the *ton* unless Francis Bright offered for her.

Until one evening when his parents hosted a rout, and she was there. While she stood to one side of the drawing room, impatiently waiting for the designated time when she would meet with Francis in his bedchamber upstairs, he arrived in the room with a beautiful brunette clinging to his arm. Shortly after that, his father called everyone to order and announced the engagement of his son to the darling daughter of a marquess. Her gaze had met his across the room. He'd given her a shrug and that damned charming grin that had made her do scandalous things, but then just as quickly, he dismissed her.

Her whole world had crashed down around her feet that night as she'd had no choice but to clap for him and the lady. When the guests in the room swarmed about them to congratulate the newly engaged pair, she slipped out of the room, but as she'd gained the entryway, the butler had her evening wrap ready and waiting.

“Remember, Miss Swanson, men of the aristocracy find their entertainment cheaply but marry dear. Guess which one you are?” Then he'd

escorted her from the house, put her into a hired cab, and sent her on her way with the parting words, “I trust you won’t persist in hanging about now. He’ll be a viscount someday, and he doesn’t need the temptation.”

“If you don’t wish to do this, I would quite understand, Mary.”

She jerked and came out of her thoughts when William laid a hand on her arm. Dear lord, the Bright’s butler had been a cad, but then what had she expected? For days afterward, she’d been numb, for it had finally dawned on her that Francis had never been in love with her. He’d only been led by lust. Would he have kept her on as his mistress? If she hadn’t found out about his true plans, would she have let herself become a kept woman?

The sympathy in her brother’s eyes with that slight hint of pity, strengthened her resolve and she straightened her spine. “When you came home from university, you were the only person I told of that wonderful, terrible summer. Not even Mama and Papa knew what I’d done; it would have broken their hearts.”

“They would have understood. Young women go quite mad when they fancy themselves in love with bounders.”

She huffed. “I was too headstrong.”

“Perhaps, but Papa had his business to grow, and Mama was struggling with the cancer by then, and we didn’t know it.” He clasped her hand. “Don’t think badly of yourself for one mistake made in the past. It could have been much worse had you fallen pregnant.”

That was certainly true. She had been fortunate in that regard, but then, as evidenced by the barrenness of her marriage a couple of years later, there was obviously something not quite right with her body. “I don’t wish for Adelaide to make the same one.” The thought of being the girl’s companion, or potentially seeing Francis—or rather Lord Stanwick as she should think of him now—had the power to rob her of speech and take some of the starch out of her fight. “While I can only hope he doesn’t remember me after the string of women he must have done the same things to—men like him always do—there is every possibility he *will* remember, and that would be awkward.”

“It was a long time go, sister dear. Men don’t have that good of a memory.”

Oh, how she wanted to believe him! “I suppose it would break Adelaide’s heart if I tell her I don’t wish to serve as her companion due to one little indiscretion in my youth.”

“If you tell her that, she’ll want to know what you did, and *that* I won’t allow,” he said with a gentle smile.

“No, that wouldn’t be a good idea.” She didn’t remember much about the Bright family, for Francis hadn’t shared details about his personal life. That should have been yet another warning to her, but she’d been blinded by infatuation and far too young besides.

It would seem my luck with men is naught but misfortune.

“The girl will get over her sulks, if that is what you’re worried about.”

“Honestly, I don’t know why my mind is in such a pelter. The viscount is no doubt married. He has his own life now, and I was never to be a legitimate part of that. I have long ago consigned him to the dust of time and memories, and there are no lingering feelings for him.” She shrugged as she held her brother’s gaze. “This will be good for Adelaide.” Had the viscount even had a niggle of remembrance or concern when he’d realized his daughter’s roommate had the same last name as the girl he’d tuppied all those years ago?

“Then you’ll do it? You’ll act as her chaperone?”

“I suppose I should.”

Relief lined his face. “I’m so glad. She will be in good hands, for you have outgrown your penchant for scandal years ago.”

A sad laugh escaped her throat. “Unfortunately, that is true. I sometimes miss those days.” When she’d sneaked about with Francis Bright, her life had been nothing but thrilling excitement and heady sensations. In a way, she’d enjoyed much more freedom than she now had as a widow, but then, she was far too old to want a return of such a life.

“Don’t be a goose, Mary.” William released her hand. “The life you lead is nothing to sneeze at. Quite frankly, Adelaide and I would fall to pieces if not for your nurturing and bossing.”

A smile tugged at the corners of her mouth as she once more regarded the invitation still held in her hand. “If all of our personal history were to suddenly vanish, we wouldn’t be the people we are today.” Then she looked at her brother. “Will you arrange transportation? Likely, we’ll need to overnight at a posting inn if the rain continues. Six days until the house party begins sounds like a large swath of time, but it truly is not if we are to prepare correctly.”

William groaned. “Why do I have the feeling this is going to cost me precious coin?”

“Because, dear brother, it will.” With a sigh, she stood and left the invitation on her vacated chair. The viscount was in her past. There was no more cause to give him thought or even think about him. He chose his life; she had hers... more or less. “Adelaide will require a few new gowns, as will I. I have been a widow far too long these past four years. It is time to enjoy life as it is now.”

“Quite a bold statement for a widow,” he teased as he also rose to his feet.

“My darling brother, I am a woman of four and thirty. How much trouble could a woman my age possibly get into while chaperoning her niece at a house party?” It seemed absurd to even think about. “I shall be consigned to the other chaperones, none of us gentry by any stretch, and we will watch from the sidelines as the young people take to the glittering ballroom or fill the time with asinine parlor games and activities in the snow, all in the elaborate dance of finding a mate.”

“Surely it won’t be as dull as all that. You might find that someone asks you to dance. After all, you still have your looks.”

“Oh, you poor, sweet, deluded brother of mine.” She giggled as she retrieved her Gothic novel. “I am not in the market for love and romance. And if all the above fails as entertainment for us unfortunates who are neither servants nor guests, there is *always* reading.” On her way out of the room, Mary gave him a wink. “Murder in a fictional sense is quite thrilling, and will be my saving grace, I have a feeling when I’ve nearly gone mad at listening to Adelaide’s glowing reports on various young men.”

In fact, I should probably make certain I bring a handful of books with me, for being a companion will undoubtedly prove quite a boring stint. Thank the stars William’s library was eclectic, progressive, and covered many topics of interest.

Chapter Two



*December 21, 1818
Stanwick Hall
Near Chalgrove
South Oxfordshire, England*

The Honorable Gabriel Bright, or rather Inspector Bright if one was in or around Whitehall and Bow Street, stared morosely out the window of the traveling coach he'd borrowed from his brother, the Viscount of Stanwick.

He and his son had been traveling since midday yesterday, spending the night at a posting inn and continuing on at sunrise this morning. The destination was Stanwick Hall, which was his family's country seat and where his older brother, in all his infinite wisdom, had decided to throw a house party to appease his daughter this Christmastide season. Gabriel's niece wasn't exactly the spoiled sort, but she had already managed to learn how to manipulate men with tears and a quiver in her voice, and she was just nineteen. Once she was done with finishing school, he shuddered to think what else she would learn.

Across the narrow aisle, his son lay sprawled on the bench, once more asleep as only a twenty-year-old young man could do. Gabriel leaned forward, reached out a hand, and then gave Henry's shoulder a good jostling. "Wake up. We've a half hour left of the journey before we arrive."

"Then why are you waking me now?" his son grouched as he peered at Gabriel from sleep-bleary eyes before finally righting himself on the bench. "I was up rather late last night at the tavern."

"Oh, I'm well aware of your nocturnal activities." While he was all for his son growing up and finding his own way as a young man, there were rules of etiquette and manners. "Chasing a pretty tavern maid will see you

into trouble if you're not careful. I want more for your future than all of that."

Henry rolled his eyes to the ceiling of the coach before settling his gaze on his father once more. "What difference does it make? I'm careful."

"It matters in how you treat people—women especially. That is what will set you apart from other young men in the *ton*. It is what will help to build your reputation, gain you connections, provide the avenues needed to make your way through society." Unfortunately for Gabriel, since his brother was throwing this Christmastide house party predominantly geared toward the young set, he'd been tasked with the responsibility of escorting his son there and acting as chaperone to the young gentleman. Yes, it was a family affair, but he didn't trust the boy by half. However, because it was the Christmastide holidays, whatever mischief they should all fall into would be contained to the estate.

As long as Henry didn't do something foolish.

"Please don't tell me you weren't randy and willing when you were my age." Henry shoved a hand through his hair as he stared. "Granted, that was an eternity ago."

"Sooner or later, you will need to procure a different joke." Gabriel shook his head and once more glanced out the window. A thin blanket of snow covered the landscape, but the roads remained clear enough for travel. "I am two and forty, not an ancient. And yes, when I was your age, there were certain... indiscretions made, wild oats sown, but eventually I settled."

"By going into the military." His son gave into a shiver. "I would rather not do that."

"No, and I don't want you to either, unless you are passionate about such work." Fighting for England, doing one's civic duty was all well and good, but war was dangerous and there was always some sort of uprising or upheaval within England's vast network that needed put down. "Once you finish university you can decide the course of your life. There are no wrong answers, but I do hope you'll land on something that brings you satisfaction." When he looked at Henry again, he held up a hand. "Beyond bedding anything in skirts."

His son's expression fell, for he had no doubt wished to make a joke or pun out of that particular choice of words. "I'm not certain what I wish to do yet."

"There is no rush at this point. You have two years until you finish university, unless you wish to go into law, then there is a bit more schooling

involved.”

“Mama always said I could argue like a barrister,” he mentioned with a crooked grin that would no doubt help him charm the ladies once he learned how to harness that power.

“She wasn’t wrong.”

That conversation had been one of the last before the woman had decided motherhood and being a wife to a Bow Street runner wasn’t what she’d wanted from her life, and she’d left him for one of the most notorious rogues of the *ton*. Henry had been a boy of ten.

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

As his thoughts drifted to his late wife, Gabriel frowned and stared out the window. Damn that had been an angry, embarrassing time in his life. Every dream he’d had died when Sarah had left, and quite frankly, they hadn’t been resurrected. Years later, he’d accidentally run into her at the opera. It had been an awkward meeting at best that had ripped open the wounds and scars on his heart, but then she’d solidified his anger and retreat by telling him Swynford was everything he was not, better at everything, including efforts in the sheets.

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

Never again.

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

“Papa?”

“Hmm?” He flicked his gaze to his son, who was the only good thing to come out of that union.

“Why are we going to Stanwick Hall for Christmas? You and Uncle Francis haven’t gotten along in years, and from what I remember of my cousins, the girls are nothing but trouble.”

That pulled a grin from him. His brother had three daughters, the oldest of which was nineteen and in finishing school. In a couple of years, that girl would be launched into society, and while that worried Gabriel more than he cared to admit, he was also glad he’d had a son instead of daughters. Much easier to raise.

Most of the time.

“I’m at a time in my life that I feel connecting with family is important. Your uncle never cared for me signing on with Bow Street and having a career with that organization. He would have much preferred me, as the son of a viscount, to be a careless gentleman about Town, not dirtying my hands with a position, but since I was never one to be bossed, we fell out with each other.”

“Then why did you accept the invitation?”

“This party and string of society events they’ve no doubt planned will be good for you and your future. If you put down the right roots now, whatever path you’ve chosen will be easier, and as much as I think my brother is a prick at times, he does have solid connections.”

Growing up as the spare, there had been very little responsibility or expectations placed upon his shoulders. It had always been assumed he’d either go into the military or the church, and since his military career ended once his commission expired and his wife left him, he decided to forge his own path through life, do something he enjoyed so he wouldn’t have to think about what a mess that existence truly was.

By the time his brother had taken the title a few years ago, Gabriel had seen far too much, studied human nature far too long to remain comfortable with his own privilege and place in society. People killed each other out of whims at times, and social status or wealth made no difference. But what working his way through the Bow Street hierarchy taught him that hard work made a man satisfied at the end of the night, and it was his sworn duty to uphold the laws, such as they were.

Murder was wrong, and he wouldn’t allow peers with more coin than

sense to get away with such crimes.

Now, as an inspector, he could be choosy as to what cases he wished to work on, and had even considered retirement, for he was one of the oldest in the field working for that particular branch of Whitehall, and he wasn't as quick as some of the younger men. Besides, he had a feeling that in the coming years, there would be a shift as to how law enforcement was handled, and as London grew, those needs would change with it. Bow Street would soon become an institution of the past.

"How am I supposed to form connections if I don't know anyone?"

It was a valid concern. Gabriel sighed. "Be nice. Be charming. And always be on alert. Talk to people. Make a connection. Give them little tidbits about yourself to keep them interested but not enough to make you vulnerable."

"Will there be a Christmas ball? I fear I'm rather rubbish at dance steps." Worry threaded through his son's voice.

"I would imagine there will be a ball at some point, as well as a rout and formal dinner, but we shall practice those steps you feel nervous about, and I'll be there the whole time." He offered a grin he hoped would set the boy at ease. "Truly, things will be well."

"Thank you." Henry heaved a sigh. "I shall try not to cock things up."

"Oh, you will no doubt do that at some point, but everyone does at your age." His grin widened. "Just don't behave like a scoundrel and you'll be remembered."

"Right. No hint of scandal."

Gabriel nodded. "That means no going into the village and getting into your cups at the tavern. You are here on my brother's good will, which reflects on his name."

"I understand, and I'll do my best." Henry's grin was on the weak side. "How will you pass the time while I'm doing the pretty?"

"What do you mean? I have brought reading material, and Francis has a stocked stable so I can ride whenever it pleases me." It was one of the things he enjoyed most from life but didn't have much time to do with his schedule.

"Will you search for a new wife?" A shrewd expression crossed his son's face. "After all, those social events will pull many guests from the surrounding communities."

He snorted. "I am not in the market for a wife."

Henry shrugged. "You should be."

"Why?" Over the years, they hadn't talked of his mother's defection, and only when the boy had brought up the subject.

"You are old, Papa. Do you want to die alone?"

"Where will you be?"

"I am not certain in this moment, but I want excitement and adventure like you've had with Bow Street." His eyes shone with that fervor. "I'm sure you've had women over the years who were impressed with your career."

Damn and blast. Heat crept up the back of Gabriel's neck. "That subject is not up for discussion, and men do not find their purpose in things that might impress women." Had he failed his son in more ways than he could guess?

"You shouldn't go through the rest of your life lonely, Papa." Henry's dark eyes bored into his. "If I must suffer through social conventions and making connections, so should you."

Ah, his son was maturing. His chest swelled with pride. "I shall consider it. Perhaps you should talk with your uncle about your future prospects. He might be able to shed new light on things that interest you." When it came down to brass tacks, there was more to life than living in a rented townhouse and working at a position because thinking when alone stirred up too many demons inside a man.

"I will. Thank you."

By the time the traveling coach pulled up the long lane that led to Stanwick Hall, night had fallen once again, and snow flurries fell from the dark skies.

Immediately, Henry exited the coach with the explanation of wanting to find his aunt and uncle and do the pretty with them first. Which was probably code for he had to piss and would hunt up food the moment he could get away with it.

There was something to be said for the efficiency of Francis' staff, for they made short work of the trunks and bags, but after being shown to his room, he realized he'd left a valise with a few books and notes from his last case in the interior of the coach. Not wishing to bother one of the footmen—for dinner was underway—he made his way back down to the large carriage house, which was situated off the stable yard and toward one side of the manor. It was the largest of the outbuildings on the property with the stables located across the large expanse of the yard.

Hunching his shoulders into his greatcoat against the chilly wind, he entered the carriage house and let his eyes grow accustomed to the darkness. Noise and laughter above told him some of the staff had returned to their own dinner. It was just as well. He'd return to the house in short order and then seek out sustenance of his own.

It took no more than a handful of minutes to locate the coach and retrieve his valise. On his way back through the carriage house toward the door, he crashed bodily into the form of someone else. As his bag slipped from his fingers, he quickly wrapped his arms about the other person, and immediately discerned it was a woman he held, for beneath the woolen cloak, a woman's form met his fingers as he steadied her.

"My apologies. Difficult to see here in the dark." Bloody hell but she smelled good, like violets on a summer day beneath some of the oak trees on this very property, and the warmth of her summoned him closer.

"Think nothing of it." She rested a hand on his chest. Her heated exhalation skated over his chin as she laughed, and the sound held a tinge of nervousness about it. "I have lost my reticule and thought I might have left it in the coach."

"Would you like assistance looking for it?" As he talked, he slid a hand up her side, lightly skimming the swell of her hip, the flare of her breast. What the devil was wrong with him? Especially after he'd just given his son a lecture about acting like a gentleman.

A shallow gasp served as an indication she'd felt the caress. "I'm quite certain I can do it myself, but thank you."

"Are you certain? It's rather dark out here."

That provoked a laugh, and the uplifting sound seemed to dance over his skin. "I am not afraid of the dark but rather what people do under cover of it."

What an interesting response. Would that they were anywhere else besides a carriage house, for he would enjoy bantering with her. "If you won't allow me to help, perhaps you might allow this instead." Then he apparently lost his mind, for Gabriel put his hand to her nape, dragged her against his body, and then bent his head and fit his lips to hers.

For a moment, the woman in his arms froze. He expected a slap for his effrontery, and for the space of a few heartbeats they stared at each other in the pitch darkness, but then she uttered a soft sigh. "Buggar it," she whispered, and lifting onto her toes, the woman pressed her lips to his as her

hand slipped up his chest and her arm rested along his shoulder.

With a groan, Gabriel gave into the unexpected and immediate connection between them. He kissed her, moved over her mouth as a way of introducing himself without words, and the bold woman kissed him back with an ardor and skill that not only surprised him, but had him deepening the embrace much sooner than he would have done organically.

Several satisfying seconds passed as they drank from each other as if they'd both been longing for a kiss all their lives and never had the opportunity. He dared to briefly cup a breast beneath her cloak. She must have come to her senses first, for she shoved at his chest, and immediately he released her.

Her breathless pants matched the throb of his pulse through his veins and aroused shaft. "Mind yourself, sir. I am not of a mind for scandal just now, for I will most certainly be missed from dinner." Then, with the flash of her eyes in the darkness, she fled the carriage house. The soft *snick* of the door closing let him know she'd truly left.

How exceedingly odd. Perhaps he'd been overwrought or maudlin after thinking about the collapse and failure of his union, or perhaps he'd been too damned randy after discussing the same with his son, but he didn't regret the impromptu embrace. Her words echoed through his mind, "... not of a mind of scandal just now..." Did that mean she would welcome it later? For that matter, was she a guest at the house party or was she a servant?

It definitely bore investigation. Grinning like the fool he was, Gabriel retrieved his dropped valise and then winded his way through the vehicles toward the door. Perhaps the next few weeks wouldn't be as dreadful as he'd originally assumed.

Chapter Three



*December 22, 1818
Stanwick Hall
Near Chalgrove
South Oxfordshire, England*

Mary came into the drawing room that evening with a mixture of feelings knotting in her belly. Uppermost on her mind twenty-four hours after that kiss with the stranger in the carriage house was the identity of the mystery man. She'd not recognized his voice, and neither of them had offered up an introduction.

Why had she allowed the kiss, and more to the point, why had she let it continue? There were no easy answers, but perhaps because it had been years since she'd had a proper kiss? Or because his scent had been so intoxicating. Did it matter? That embrace had been quite delicious, as her niece would put it, but it didn't mean there as anything between her and the mystery man.

After that incident last night, she hadn't returned to dinner. Instead, she'd gone directly to her room, for she hadn't wished to cause a stir. The viscount had stared at her with open curiosity, and it was all she could do to sit demurely at the opposite end of the table. It wouldn't do at all to explain away why she had been acquainted with him previously, and if he continued to stare, people would start to assume stories regardless.

Guests continued to arrive throughout the evening. Her niece had come into her room a couple of times after dinner announcing that this person or the other had finally joined the party. Mary wasn't familiar with any of those names, but after discovering her reticule had been returned to her room a few hours later—apparently she'd dropped it somewhere between the

carriage house and the manor—she was able to relax and listen with more of her mind.

“Oh, and apparently Belle’s cousin—Henry—came in during dinner. I haven’t met him yet, but she says he is quite handsome. Perhaps he’ll be in the drawing room later!” her niece had enthused that first evening. “His father didn’t join the company, so I don’t know what he looks like, but Belle said he has something to do with Bow Street.”

That had been an interesting tidbit, but then it flew right out of her mind as she worried that playing companion to her niece might just be more of a handful than she’d anticipated. *Please don’t let that boy be trouble.*

Now, a full night later, Mary stood just inside the door to the drawing room, and was slightly ill-at-ease within the party. The buzz of talking and laughter filled the air, for there were at least twenty people in the space, all waiting for the dinner bell to ring. Other guests were no doubt milling about the corridor and rooms nearby. Mixed in with the adults was a bevy of young people around Adelaide’s age, and from all indications, one of the young men must be the viscount’s nephew. She didn’t know much about Francis’ younger brother, for he had already entered the military when she’d known the viscount.

A fire roared cheerfully behind an ornate screen shaped like a peacock. Spirits flowed freely from a sideboard where a footman had been dispatched to serve. At her side, Adelaide fidgeted, which was a clear indication the girl was nervous.

“This is hardly a lion’s den, dearest,” Mary whispered to her niece. With the exception of the viscount himself, there wasn’t anyone threatening here. “If you see someone of interest, go over and talk with them. Otherwise, you have missed the point of being social.”

“What if they don’t like me?” She clutched at Mary’s arm. “What if I’m not as sophisticated as they are?” For what seemed like the fifth time, she smoothed gloved hands down the front of her pale blue gown with a few flounces at the hem.

At the last second, she tamped the urge to laugh, for she didn’t want the girl to think she made jest of her. “If they don’t like you, then at least you’ll know, and you can move on to another group. As for sophistication? You are all very young. None of you have that as of yet.” Movement near that side of the room caught her attention, and when her gaze landed on a man with a head of thick brown hair that had refused to be tamed from a

valet's comb, a shiver went down her spine.

"Isn't he divinely gorgeous?" Adelaide asked in a dreamy sort of voice.

"He is indeed," Mary responded, and her voice was far too breathless for her liking.

Adelaide nudged her in the ribs with an elbow. "Not him. The *young* man. Belle's cousin. His name is Henry."

"Ah." Briefly, she glanced at the young man in question. Yes, he was handsome enough, but not nearly like the other man she'd glimpsed. Oddly, they resembled each other. When she once more peered at him, he laughed at something one of the men nearby said, and as he responded, tingles raced over her skin and the hairs on her nape quivered.

Oh, dear lord, he is the man who kissed me!

"Adelaide." She gripped the girl's arm. "The man standing near the handsome Henry. Who is he?"

Her niece glanced across the room. "I assume that he is father. Belle didn't tell me his name last night and I forgot to ask today, as I didn't see any of them until now. He is always watching everyone as if we're about to do something wrong."

Of course it would have to be a Bright man. In fact, if he was truly Henry's father, that would make him Francis' brother, Gabriel. A man she knew nothing about except that she'd shamelessly returned his kisses last night in the carriage house. "That's probably not far from the truth at a house party." For long moments, she retreated into her thoughts, but everything kept circling around that kiss.

"Aunt Mary? Is there something amiss?"

The concern in her niece's voice brought her out of her thoughts. She focused on Adelaide's face. "Uh, everything is well. Why?"

"Your cheeks were just red, but now you are pale as if you'll faint."

"Perhaps the crush in here coupled with the fire are making me a tad uncomfortable." She resisted the urge to fan her face with her hand, for she'd inadvertently left her fan in her room. Nothing good could come from being here surrounded by Brights. When she sent another glance about the space, her gaze careened into the viscount's. He stood within a group of other men while his wife chatted with a knot of ladies. "Yes, a tad uncomfortable." Why the devil wouldn't Francis stop looking at her?

"I wouldn't blame you if you went upstairs to lie down."

“What?” She snapped her focus back to Adelaide. “And leave you here to flirt with everyone? Not a chance.” William would have her head.

“Oh! There’s Belle. She’s waving me over. May I?”

“Please go ahead. Enjoy yourself.” Oddly enough, Mary felt far too exposed and vulnerable when her niece left her side. By the time she focused her attention back on where the man had stood, she frowned for he was no longer there. How very disappointing.

“Looking for me?”

She startled at the sound of his voice from at her shoulder. How had he moved so quickly and quietly as to slip behind her? When she turned about to face him, she was struck again by that head of thick hair that waved from a part over his left eye and was a bit too long than fashion demanded, for it curled at his collar. The hazel hue of both those eyes was compelling enough to keep peering into them long enough to see tiny golden flecks floating in the irises. “I...” What to say? He’d obviously caught her staring. “Why yes, I was, actually.” No sense in denying it, for she was well past the age of flirting or the dance of social convention.

“Then, you’ve found me and now you have my undivided attention.” His low voice, a baritone that sent tiny flutters through her lower belly, had awareness dancing over her skin. “Can I assume that from your interest, you were the lady I kissed last night?”

Heat went through her cheeks. Kissed last night, willing to have another go of it again... “I was, but I’m not a lady nor am I member of the *ton*, in the event that was your next question.” Why did she feel the need to tell him that?

A slow grin curved those sensuous lips, and for one second, her gaze dropped to his mouth. “That hardly matters for a kiss.”

“True, but then you have the air of a man who asks more questions than answers them.”

“You have no idea.” When more people came into the drawing room, he and she were jostled together, which only made her more aware of him and the heat of his body. He put a hand to the small of her back and ushered her out of the room and into the corridor beyond but close enough to the door she could still keep an eye on her niece. “If you are expecting me to apologize, I will not.” Amusement twinkled in those hazel depths as if he considered the kiss—or the entire house party—a joke.

“Ah, good, and if you wish for the same from me, you will be

destined for disappointment.” There was something about this man that made her feel more alive than she had in years. And dear heavens, he smelled as wonderful now as he had last night. Sandalwood, orange, with a hint of spice, and in the requisite evening clothing, his tall, lean form was set off to perfection. When his grin widened, she couldn’t help but smile as well. “I suppose that means we should formally introduce ourselves.”

“Perhaps.” Yet he made no effort to begin.

Mary huffed. “I’m Mrs. Mary Tomlinson, here as a companion to my niece, Miss Adelaide Swanson.”

“You are a companion.” It wasn’t a question, but a muscle in his cheek ticced. Oh, lord, did he recognize her name from her short-lived affair with his brother all those years ago? Suddenly, she hoped he did not. “You are married?”

Ah, so that’s where his concern stemmed from. “No. Widowed for about four years.”

“Still devastated over your loss?” His eyes were intense as he looked at her.

“I wasn’t all that devastated when I was in mourning.” She couldn’t help the penchant for bold speaking. It saved so much time over dancing about an issue. “Trust me when I say that is a rather long story.”

One of his finely feathered eyebrows rose in surprise, and that maddening grin flirted again with his lips. “There is no doubt, and I’ll wager mine is just as long.”

“Oh? Are you widowed?”

“In a roundabout way, but suffice it to say, I am quite familiar with the sentiment you’ve expressed.”

“Divorced?” Instantly, he was an enigma.

“Hardly.” His rugged jaw tightened, and a hard glint came into his eyes. “Nothing hurts more acutely than the wounds given to us by the ones who supposedly love us.”

Why would he say that? Did he know of the sometimes-sordid history of her union? Or worse yet, was he making a reference to her relationship with his brother?

“I, uh, why would you say that?” It bore repeating.

“No reason.” A low-timbred chuckle left his throat. “Looking to wed again?”

“Not particularly. You?” As conversations went, this one was

decidedly odd, but it touched important points in rapid-fire succession that would usually take weeks to get at.

“Definitely not, but I wouldn’t be averse to a dalliance if the stars aligned.” Either it was a distraction or over-the-top gallantry, but he took her hand and brought it to his lips, where those two pieces of flesh lingered a second too long over her middle knuckle. When she peered into his eyes once again, she had the sudden need to swim in those dark pools, take refuge there for a while. “Charmed to make your acquaintance, Mary Tomlinson. I am Gabriel Bright, and unfortunately, I am the viscount’s brother, come home after an extended absence to spend the Christmastide holidays with my family.”

Clearly, he was the more intelligent brother. “Were you estranged by choice or by force?”

“Does it matter?” He released her hand, and she immediately missed that warmth.

“No, I suppose not, though knowing who your brother is, I’d be willing to wager his behavior caused much of the friction.”

“How do you know Francis?”

Oh, dear. Now she’d truly spoken out of turn. “Does it matter?” She chose to use his own words against him.

“I suppose it doesn’t just now.” Slowly, he nodded. “You may refer to me as Inspector Bright or merely Bright when we’re in public. I work for Bow Street.”

“How interesting.” No wonder he was intense at times, or why he was surveilling the room as Adelaide had said. “I’m sure you have plenty of stories.”

His shrug was eloquent. “I’ve garnered a few over the years.” Remarkably, he winked, and she rather enjoyed their bantering. “But when we are alone, you may call me Gabriel.”

“That assumes we will be alone again. Aren’t house parties generally heavily monitored with people underfoot?”

The grin was back, drawing her attention to his mouth once more. “That largely depends on how the company wishes to spend their time. From what I understand of the schedule, there are so many activities, it will be easy to thin the herd, and you can be assured that we will most certainly be alone again.”

“How very cunning of you, Inspector.” Already, she liked him more

than was proper, for she hadn't had this much fun in years, but she was also practical enough to know this was all an act, a flirtation, nothing more. Soon enough she would return to her books and lose herself in those fictional worlds.

"I try." Then he lowered his voice again. "In the event you wondered, the only reason I'm here is to act as a chaperone to my son. He needs guidance on how to move through society and how *not* to chase scandal."

"You have your hands full, it seems. Logic would dictate, then, that we will be thrown together quite often. Along with the other chaperones, of course." She looked forward to that, for he was proving to be an interesting person and would perhaps help her to forget the odd feelings emanating from viscount.

"I look forward to it. In fact, if you will let me, I'd like to escort you to dinner. Surely, they will call us in any moment now."

"That would be lovely." Before she could say anything else, a blood-curdling scream rent the air from the direction of the dining room just on the other side of the drawing room quickly followed by the horrific crash of crystal and silver against a hard surface.

"What the devil was that?" Inspector Bright glanced at her and then frowned as he hurried back into the room with Mary on his heels.

Immediately, heavy silence permeated the room.

"Don't everyone move at once," Bright murmured as he shoved his way through the crowded space. "Perhaps it's an everyday occurrence here that females scream, but in my life, that generally means a crime has been committed." Eventually guests moved and made a path, and when he reached the double doors on the other side of the room, he burst the panels open and surged into the dining room beyond.

"What do you think—" Mary's inquiry stalled in her chest as she drew even with the inspector. "Oh dear. It's *him*."

A maid stood in the midst of dozens of broken wineglasses and silverware strewn about like a child's game of Spillikins. Tears streaked her face, and she visibly shook from the shock. No doubt it had been her who'd found the body.

"Oh, my dear, here, come and sit before you faint away," Mary murmured as she guided the young girl into one of the chairs at the table.

"He... I... Is he dead?" she whispered as the blood left her face.

"I'm afraid so." She glanced at the body.

To one side of the long dining table was Mr. Alderson, the butler, lying on his back with a rapidly expanding pool of blood seeping from beneath his still form. Blood had soaked through his shirt and stained his waistcoat, and when she peered closer, there was a gaping hole where his heart was. Even more horrifying was the fact that the young man who Adelaide was preoccupied with, stood over the body with a knife clutched in his hand, a knife that looked to be an antique with jewels and gilding on the hilt.

“Uh, Inspector Bright?”

When she gestured at the boy, the Bow Street man finally glanced up from the body. “Damn it all, Henry, what have you done?”

“Nothing!” A drop of blood dripped from the tip of the blade even as he said that. He glanced at the maid, who blushed. “I had come into the room seeking a glass of water, for the brandy offered was too strong.” He turned his head and blanched at the gathering of people in the doorway who gawked at the scene. After that, he wilted and was in danger of dropping the knife. “I’d only been here long enough to say hello to the maid when I saw him...”

“Stop talking.” Inspector Bright retrieved his handkerchief from an interior pocket of his tailcoat and then gently took the knife from his son’s hand. Then he wrapped the handkerchief around the weapon. “Please go sit over there. Mrs. Tomlinson can fetch you a glass of water.”

“Come here.” Mary’s heart went out to the young man, who looked rather green around the gills. No doubt he’d cast up his accounts and soon. She more or less shoved him into a chair next to the maid, found a pitcher of water resting on the nearby sideboard, poured out a glass, and then put it firmly into the boy’s hand.

Inspector Bright looked at her. His lips were set in a hard line. “Unless Mr. Alderson fell on that ceremonial knife from the Ottoman Empire from twenty years ago which used to rest in one of the curio cabinets in the drawing room, I’m afraid the butler has been murdered.”

Mary’s heart felt as if it had dropped into her slippers. “Surely it is too early to declare that.” Especially since his own son had been found with the murder weapon.

“What else can we assume from this situation?”

“Perhaps we shouldn’t assume anything just now until we can ask a few questions.”

“Good.” He allowed a small grin. “We will need to summon a

magistrate, though.”

It was then that Viscount Stanwick pushed his way into the room. He took one look around and then rested his angry gaze on his brother. “You just couldn’t resist finding a way to bring your grisly work here, could you?”

“I had nothing to do with this.” The inspector drew himself up to his full height and glared. “Have someone fetch the nearest magistrate.”

“The last time I checked, it was snowing too hard to risk anyone on the roads tonight, and no doubt said man is away during this time of year.”

For long moments, the Bright brothers glared at each other as tension and resentment fairly crackled in the air between them.

“Fine. I’ll need a few footmen to remove the butler.”

“To where? If you haven’t noticed, we are in the middle of a house party.”

By willpower alone, Mary stopped herself from rolling her eyes. “You can put the body in the icehouse. It is close enough that the roads won’t need utilized but far enough from the house that you can investigate in peace.”

The viscount stiffened. “What the devil do you mean? Old men die all the time. Why is there a need for anyone to investigate? This isn’t like your London cases, you know.”

Inspector Bright snorted. He held up the knife. “Unless Mr. Alderson suddenly had the thought to remove himself from this mortal coil, I rather doubt this was from natural causes. Now, summon the footmen.”

While the viscount moved back into the drawing room to yank on a bellpull, Mary looked at the Bow Street man. “Do you truly think it was murder?” she asked in a low voice, for party guests still gawked from the doorway, and his son sat slouched in a nearby chair.

“What else could it possibly be, Mrs. Tomlinson? You have seen the evidence with your own eyes, and for the moment, the only suspect is my son.” Anguish reflected in his eyes as he shook his head. “That is what I cannot square with.”

“Understandable, but surely it won’t be difficult to ascertain the real killer? After all, everyone who is a suspect has been contained to the house, right? Especially if the snow is an impairment to travel.”

“In my experience, it is never that easy.”

She frowned. “How often is someone killed in a wealthy, titled man’s manor house?”

Inspector Bright sent her a glance that brimmed with annoyance and sadness. “Only once, Mrs. Tomlinson, for after that, the victims are rendered quite irrevocably dead.”

“Ah.” Mary bit her bottom lip to keep from snickering at his unintended joke. “Then perhaps we should start the investigation, hmm?”

At least if she were to be embroiled in a murder, she would have firsthand knowledge of how to conduct a proper investigation. Would it prove better than reading about murder in her novels? Only time would tell.

Chapter Four



Why did he ever think he could have a holiday away from murder?

As Gabriel stared at the very dead body of the family butler, Mr. Alderson, he placed his hands on his hips and frowned. It was deuced cold in the icehouse by its very nature, and while he agreed it was the best possible choice to store the corpse, he couldn't help but feel a variety of emotions.

Obviously, he'd known the deceased, for Alderson had been employed by the Bright family for as long as he could remember. However, that didn't mean he liked or even particularly enjoyed interacting with the man. The butler has always affected strong opinions, and he wasn't shy about passing judgment onto anyone he felt made wrong decisions. To say nothing of the fact that he treated the rest of the staff as if they were so well beneath him they deserved horrid treatment.

Blocks of ice lined the walls since it was cold enough to support not melting. Crowded into the small space along with him were his brother, his sister-in-law, as well as Mrs. Tomlinson. He'd sent his son to his room until such time he could begin a proper investigation. The maid who'd found the body was also sent to her room for the same reasons, as well as her being overwrought. The remainder of the guests were distributed to the ballroom, where the staff had been instructed to set up tables and chairs where dinner would be served.

Above all, no one was allowed to leave the manor house, and certainly no one was allowed to leave the property.

"Surely you cannot expect to interrupt my house party by running an investigation." Incredulity rang in his brother's voice as Francis scowled at him. "This is highly irregular."

"So is murder." The butler's body had been placed on a plank of wood that rested on blocks of ice the footmen had fashioned into a makeshift

table. Currently, a bedsheet had been thrown over his body so that it was hidden from view. “And yes, until a county magistrate can arrive—the housekeeper informed me he lives on the other side of the county and that his schedule is quite busy—I will be conducting an investigation into the unlawful murder of Mr. Alderson. If you think to berate my qualifications, you can think again. I did not reach the level of inspector with Bow Street for lack of skill.”

“This is quite unsettling,” the viscountess murmured as she wrung her hands. “Whatever will we tell the neighbors?”

“That is not my concern just now,” Gabriel said, and no matter that he didn’t wish to appear or sound uncaring, the words in such an instance always sounded that way. “My first and foremost obligation is to the deceased, to determine who killed him, and to suggest to the magistrate that he or she be brought to justice.”

“I wouldn’t put it past you to have planned all of this just to spite me, Gabe.” His brother crossed his arms at his chest. “You were always jealous of me.”

Now was not the time to air the family’s dirty linens. “Let me disabuse you of that straight away. I have never been jealous of you. Your life and your decisions were never mine, and for that I’m exceedingly grateful. Second, murder is well within my purview, so unless you can provide me with the name of the person who murdered your butler, I will kindly ask that you and Lady Stanwick return to your guests.”

Francis huffed out a breath of apparent frustration. “Then you won’t be questioning either of us?”

“I didn’t say that.” Acutely aware of Mrs. Tomlinson’s presence as she stood quietly off to one side, he shook his head. “Everyone is considered a suspect until I can interview each and every person currently residing on this property.”

With her blonde hair pulled back into a simple chignon and an equally simple gown of navy taffeta that was devoid of any ornamentation, she had the look of a companion. But it was her cornflower blue eyes that caused a man to arrest their attention. Well, the eyes and her nearly full lips. The top one was slightly smaller than the lower, and he wouldn’t mind tasting them once more.

For long moments, silence reigned as their breath clouded about their heads in the frigid atmosphere. Finally, Francis nodded. “What of Mrs.

Tomlinson? Why are you allowing her to remain here? Who is to say she won't molest the body or remove clues that would damn her?"

A gasp of outrage escaped the widow, but to her credit, she said nothing. Instead, she stood there, her petite height of perhaps a couple of inches past five feet quivering with indignation, and he didn't blame her. Francis had gone out of his way to be rude.

Why?

This was outside of enough. "Quite frankly, Mrs. Tomlinson is the first intelligent woman I have met during this house party, and since she hasn't fallen into hysterics at the sight of blood or death, that is a good indication she has much common sense. I'll require an assistant, so I shall ask that of her." He held up a hand when his brother would have protested. "Is she a suspect? Yes, of course. The only person I can guarantee that didn't do this crime is myself."

His brother scoffed. "That is exactly what a guilty man would say."

Gabriel clenched his teeth so hard his jaw hurt. "I'm sworn to uphold the law, so I wouldn't lie about something like this." He blew out a breath. "Having people in and out of the drawing room is a fluid situation in which someone could have easily slipped away to do the deed. Will I question her during the night? Of course. Now, return to your guests and I would advise you to appear calm and collected so as to not incite a panic."

Francis' gaze roved to the widow, and there was a certain familiarity and hunger in his eyes that puzzled Gabriel. Had they known each other prior to this event? "You won't interrupt my schedule?"

"Not as much as I can help. I will set up my base of operations in your study and will call various guests and staff in for interviews until I can solve the case." Oddly enough, knowing he had work to occupy his time during the house party cheered him. But then, he was well accustomed to the subject of murder.

Then the viscount delivered his parting shot. "Your son was standing over the body with a bloody knife in his hand. One would think that is damning enough evidence that you won't need an investigation."

Heat went up the back of Gabriel's neck. "While that is true, what we see is often not enough to tell the correct story."

"I don't have much expectation of your talents, Gabe, for we both remember how you failed Penny."

Well, damn. He'd wondered when his brother would mention their

dead sister. “She has no bearing on this case, and you know it.” That time in his life had nearly broken him, but it had also put him on the path he currently walked. Firmly, he escorted Francis and his wife to the door. “Now, if you will excuse me? I shall begin.”

Once the door was closed behind them, Gabriel turned to the widow. “Mrs. Tomlinson, what I told the viscount of your character is true.” He crossed his arms at his chest. “I also do require an assistant. However, that being said, murder is no place for a genteel lady, so if you truly don’t have the fortitude or stomach for what the investigation will entail, tell me now.”

She gave in to a shiver, and belatedly he realized she had no protection from the cold. “Even though you managed to flatter me and then consign me to the helpless multitudes of feathers-for-brains females, I will indeed help you.”

“Thank you.” His grin of thanks only lifted one corner of his mouth.

As she came toward the body, she glanced between the sheet-covered corpse and him. “How is your son?”

“He’s upset, of course. I’ve confined him to his bedchamber until I can question him.”

“Perhaps that is for the best. I’ll speak with Mrs. Harley and ask that she send up regular trays for him. No doubt he’ll be hungry.”

“He will be if he indeed didn’t do the crime. Thank you for the kindness.” While he spoke, Gabriel removed the knife from the interior pocket of his jacket. He laid it atop the body and then carefully unfolded the handkerchief from around it. “This antique was brought back by my father from one of his multiple travels around the world.”

“It’s pretty.” She came closer, and as she rubbed her arms with her hands, he continued.

“When it rested in the curio cabinet on the left-hand side of the drawing room, the blade lay in a matching jewel-encrusted scabbard.”

“Yet when we saw Henry, he only held the knife.” The widow peered at the knife and the stain of blood on the blade. “Shortly before the maid screamed, I could have sworn Henry was in the drawing room talking with my niece and others of their age.”

“But were you watching them the whole time?” One of his eyebrows quirked. “There was much going on in the drawing room. Crowds constantly shifted and everyone moved throughout the room. Henry could have been there, or he could have slipped away.” Though it pained him to admit that his

son could be caught up in this murder, he had to consider all angles.

“While that is true, to what end, though? Did your son not get along with Mr. Alderson?”

“I would have no idea. It wasn’t something I thought about, and from all I knew, they only dealt with each other in passing.”

“Yes, but consider this. There is no blood splatter on his clothing, so it’s unlikely he stabbed Mr. Alderson.”

“There is that.” He relaxed his posture slightly. “The butler has always been... intrusive.”

“Sometimes that is the nature of such positions.” Mrs. Tomlinson put her face closer to the blade and then frowned. “Are you aware there are no teeth on this knife?”

“What difference does that make? If it was plunged into the man’s chest with enough force, not only would it have pierced the skin but would have done damage to internal organs.” He appreciated where her mind was going.

“Not necessarily. May I?” She looked between the knife and his face. When he nodded, she picked up the knife with the handkerchief. With a gloved fingertip, she touched the tip of the knife. “See? It is quite dull.” Again and again, she poked her fingertip, but the blade neither pierced the kid nor did it draw blood. “I’ll wager it is nothing but a ceremonial dagger used in social customs or at dinners and affairs of state.”

Despite the circumstances, relief twisted down Gabriel’s spine. “Henry couldn’t have stabbed Alderson, even in a fit of pique.” It wasn’t a question.

“One wonders how much force it would take to drive a blunt blade into a man’s body, through several layers of clothing, as well.” Carefully, she wrapped the handkerchief around the knife and then gave it back to him. “Was Henry given to fits of rage?”

“Not recently, and certainly not from something the butler might have said to him.” He tucked the knife back into his interior jacket pocket. “Yet how did the blood come to be on this blade?”

The widow shrugged. “It would be easy enough to dip the blade in the puddle of blood. There were certainly copious amounts.” With the flick of her wrist, she edged the sheet down the butler’s body. Though she paled slightly, she bent down to examine the wound. “Ah, see how the edges here are ragged as if ripped by a serrated blade?” She pointed to the gaping wound

in Alderson's chest. "The fabric has also been similarly treated, as if someone had seconds of opportunity and rammed a blade through his chest, straight into his heart."

His admiration and respect for this woman rose. "And possibly a knowledge of anatomy."

"Perhaps, but that doesn't mean anything, for if this was an emotion-based killing, the murderer could have been stabbing blindly."

Why did she know so much about crime? "Where did your knowledge come from?"

A faint blush spread over her cheeks, and he found it fascinating. "I am well read."

"Ah." His imagination caught fire, for he adored books too, and he suddenly wished to know what her reading appetite included. Then his gaze fell to the butler's clothing. The buttons of his frontfalls had been done up haphazardly. One was mismatched with its corresponding hole. "That's odd."

"What?"

He indicated the buttons. "Why would he have been in the drawing room in such a state? Surely a man who had gained the butler's position would pay more attention to his own presentation."

"I'll admit, it is strange, but perhaps we shall discover why as the investigation goes on." When she shivered again, he replaced the sheet over the butler's body.

"Come. You are freezing. Let us return to the house and get settled into my brother's study."

"Thank you. Remind me next time to bring a shawl or pelisse."

As he escorted her from the icehouse, he made certain to lock the door and then he pocketed the key. He wouldn't put it past anyone to come in and steal the body for some perverted reason.

"What's next with this investigation? Do we begin tomorrow morning?" Interest wove through her tones.

Gabriel grunted. "We will begin immediately, as soon as we gain the study." Deuced snow and cold! He shivered, braced himself against the driving snow, slipped twice for the precipitation had blanketed the pathway between the outbuildings and the manor house, and he wasn't wearing his boots.

"That is quite ambitious of you." The wind clawed at the widow's skirting as they slowly made their way to the rear door.

“Murder doesn’t wait.”

“Why are you so driven, I wonder?” she asked as they entered the manor and then brushed the snow from their persons. “Does it have anything to do with what your brother said about a sister?”

Bloody hell.

He hadn’t spoken about that incident in a long time. “That is not a subject up for discussion.” Wrapping his hand around her upper arm, he quickly marched her through the corridors and then up the grand staircase to the second level. The low buzz of conversation and laughter reached his ears from the direction of the ballroom, but he ignored it, for he didn’t need a thousand questions from members of the house party.

Finally, they arrived at the study. He pushed open the door and then shivered again, for the room held an air of disuse about it. Where the devil did his brother’s man-of-affairs work on the ledgers? For that matter, where did Francis reply to his correspondence or any other sort of paperwork? “Let me start a fire.”

“I’ll light some candles.” As she busied herself searching through the desk drawers in the hunt of candles for the empty brass holders, she asked, “So, you wish to present yourself as the aloof man of mystery, hmm?”

“What do you mean?” Gabriel made short work of coaxing a fire into the grate. Once it was roaring, he replaced the ornate metal grate.

“Since you didn’t answer me when I asked why you were so determined, I’m going to hazard a guess.” A match flared in the semi-darkness, and when she lit a couple of candles, the golden light illuminated her face while the flames danced in her eyes. “Somewhere deep in your past someone you cared about, nay loved, died, and if I further my guess, quite violently.” She came around the side of the desk to join him in front of the fireplace.

“Is that all?” He cocked one of his eyebrows, curious as to how she’d end the speech.

“I also think since that time, you haven’t been able to forgive yourself for whatever happened, even if it wasn’t your fault.” The widow held out her hands to the fire. “Due to that time in your life, you set out with every case to make sure you solve it in honor of the victim... because you couldn’t save that one person—your sister.”

Shock roiled through his chest. Gabriel stared at her in both awe and a little fear. They would either rub along famously during the course of this

investigation or they would argue toe-to-toe the entire time. Either way, various portions of his anatomy were entirely too interested, and he couldn't allow himself to be distracted by her.

Perhaps he needed to have this out of the way so it wouldn't hamper their investigation. "Twenty years ago, my sister Penelope was snatched by a criminal in London while shopping with her maid. I'd been recently married, so my attention wasn't on anything except my wife at the time. Though we called in Bow Street and even hired a man to privately investigate her disappearance, there were simply no leads." A muscle in his cheek ticced from the memory, and the loss of his sister still had the power to tear up his chest.

"Yet you eventually discovered the truth."

"Yes, unfortunately." His throat constricted. "Late one night, a constable called at my father's townhouse with the news that they'd found Penny's body, dumped into the Thames, with obvious signs of strangulation and rape."

"Oh, Inspector, I am so sorry." When she briefly touched his arm, heat twined up to his elbow. "Did they ever find the perpetrator?"

"They did not. She was lost to the hundreds of women killed in London for the same reasons." He shook his head. "It was a terrible time in my life—in my family's life—and my brother always blamed me, especially once I changed the whole course of my thinking in order to join Bow Street."

"And solving that case was your motivation to climbing the ranks of Bow Street." Admiration reflected in her eyes. "With each case you are handed, you wish to alter the results of what happened to your sister."

"Yes." How could she know that about him? "You are quite something, aren't you Mrs. Tomlinson? Losing Penny became my motivator, and I try to honor her memory with every case I take, but perhaps we should return to the task at hand." He removed the bloody knife from the interior pocket of his tailcoat and then laid it on the desk, still wrapped in the linen.

When she flashed him a smile, need ricocheted down his spine. "If we are to investigate this murder, I assume we will spend copious amounts of time together. Please, call me Mary when we're alone like this."

"Very well." He nodded. "If you have further questions regarding my sister, you may ask them when we are not engaged in searching for clues."

"What a wonderful boon." This second grin entirely transformed her face, and he stared again but for a different reason, for she was no longer a

plain-looking widow, and those eyes of hers were enough to make a man hit his knees before her. “I will certainly make the time, Inspector Bright.”

“Gabriel.” He put a hand to his chest. “After all, we *are* alone.”

“True.” She glanced at the open door. “Perhaps you should tell me your story now.”

“Oh, no.” Though he wanted nothing more than to hole up here and sit next to her on the leather sofa, he had a job to do. “For the moment, you will be the first party guest I interview, and you can start with how you seem to know my brother.”

“What?” A gasp escaped her, and she sat swiftly down on the sofa as if the strength had left her knees. Some of the color leached from her face. “What makes you think I know the viscount?”

“Don’t play coy, Mary.” More intrigued than he cared to admit, Gabriel settled into a matching chair near to her location. “I observed enough looks shot your way from my brother to realize there is a familiarity there. Additionally, he went out of his way to be nasty toward you in the icehouse, while you act as if you wish to run from whatever room he enters that you happen to be in. There is an awkward tension between the two of you that speaks of personal involvement.”

For several long moments, she stared at him with stony silence as their only companion. Uncertainty clouded her eyes, then her chin edged up a notch in a move he was beginning to know signaled stubbornness on her part. “What you first need to understand is the fact I was quite young and naïve. Much like my niece and your son are now.”

Hell’s bells. That didn’t bode well. “I’ll keep that in mind.” So saying, he removed a small, leatherbound notebook from his pocket as well as the nub of a pencil. Once he’d flipped to a fresh page, he inclined an eyebrow. “Feel free to begin any time.”

Chapter Five



Dear lord. I expected him to ask questions of me, but I never thought it would be so soon or about this particular topic.

Mary clutched her hands tightly together in her lap and chose to stare into the fire's flames instead of looking at the inspector, for she couldn't bear to see the judgment or disappointment in his eyes.

"I met Francis, or rather Lord Stanwick, by accident."

"How so?" With a frown at her, the inspector stood, crossed the room, and then softly closed the door. The fact he didn't return to his chair spoke volumes. Did he truly not know who she was?

"Fourteen years ago, I was riding in a carriage with a friend on Rotten Row when he was driving his high perch phaeton recklessly and at a high rate of speed down the same thoroughfare. He barely got control of his cattle before his vehicle crashed into mine."

Realization dawned on his chiseled face. "I remember that incident. I was living in London, had a position as a Bow Street Principal Officer. My son had just turned six, and the familial outrage regarding my brother's escapades was at an all-time high." Bright shook his head. "My father dressed him down after that incident, telling him he was a man of thirty who needed to settle down and make something of himself."

"Yes, well, I'm not sure how much of that infiltrated his brain, considering what happened next." The heat in her cheeks had nothing to do with the fire in the room. "For he was quite the rogue."

"Francis has always been such. It's a wonder to me that his marriage has remained intact so long without a whisper of scandal."

She uttered an unladylike snort. "Just because you haven't heard about it doesn't mean scandal isn't present." It was nearly a paraphrase of what she'd told William before agreeing to come to this house party.

“Hell’s bells, never say that you and he—”

Never had she regretted her past indiscretion more. “We did. As I said, I was young and foolish, had my head turned by a handsome man about Town who promised the world.” She kept her gaze on the flames dancing in the hearth. “After the carriage incident, Lord Stanwick invited me to a masquerade ball his parents threw.”

Inspector Bright shoved a hand through that gloriously thick hair. “Christ, but I was at that event. My wife and I both were.”

“No doubt you were splendid in costume.” Perhaps she shouldn’t have said that, but then, she’d always found plain speaking to be more succinct and to the point than not. “I’d agonized over whether to attend, but my brother urged me to go, for in the event I could land the heir to a viscounty, my future would be set.” Oh, what a mistake that had been! “You see, at the time, I hadn’t known your brother had already made plans for an engagement with someone else.” She shrugged. “I was twenty and naïve and men hadn’t paid me any mind before. Well, certainly not men of consequence.”

“He led you down the garden path.” Again, it wasn’t a question, but his voice was guarded, as if he were well-practiced in not giving away his thoughts when he spoke.

“Oh, yes. Midway through the ball, he encouraged me into the butler’s pantry, and that is where we began our trysts.”

“I’d wondered where he’d got off to, but just assumed it was to further his courtship with Vivian—who is now his wife.”

For long moments, Mary remained quiet as thoughts of that time in her life flitted through her mind. She appreciated that Bright didn’t push for her to continue before she was ready. “We were together in that way for the summer, all of our meetings were of a clandestine nature. I’d thought it was because he didn’t want anyone to know he was courting me, but as I said, my head had been turned by him, and I fancied myself in love with him by the end of the summer.”

“I should call him out for what he did to you.” The words were propelled in a low thrilling growl that sent flutters dancing through her belly. “That was beyond the pale.”

Finally, she glanced at the inspector, surprised by his defense. “It was a long time ago, but I appreciate the sentiment. Over the years, I realized it wasn’t love at all, but an infatuation enhanced by physical intimacy. Yet it

took years of maturing on my part to discover that.”

“Yet it didn’t help what happened,” he said, and his soft tones were like a soothing balm to the still ragged pieces of her spirit. “Whereas my arse of a brother has never done that, for I suspect he’s kept fancy pieces on the side, just cleverly away from his wife’s knowledge.”

Mary shook her head. “Do you honestly believe a woman wouldn’t know if her husband’s attentions were split?” Perhaps her own marriage had been different in the fact that her spouse had made no secret of his philandering.

An odd expression crossed his face that made her even more curious about him. “If the other person in the relationship is skilled enough, their partner will be none the wiser.”

“Perhaps.” It was a good reminder that men were naught but liars who preyed upon innocent women. After both of those relationships, trust of the opposite sex was difficult to come by. “Well, what your brother and I had came to a crashing and abrupt end the night your parents hosted a rout, where they announced Francis’ engagement to the daughter of a marquess.”

“Well, damn. I’ve always known he was a bounder, but to have his, his...” He floundered for words.

She took pity on him, for it truly had been a long time ago. “His whore?” When he choked at the word, Mary shook her head. “Call a spade a spade, Inspector. I wasn’t his mistress, for he didn’t pay me or put me under his protection or give me gifts.”

“But... at least a prostitute has some sort of payment.” Shock reflected in his eyes at the summation.

“When one is a con man at heart, why should one part with his coin if the woman in the puzzle doesn’t know better?” Surprised at the emotion in her voice, she shook her head. “Yes, the whole thing was in bad taste. I was devastated and humiliated. Of course, no one else in that room knew why, so I had to internalize the pain, but your brother dismissed me that evening as if I were dirt on the bottom of his boots.”

Inspector Bright sucked in a breath. He came to rest at the fireplace and put a hand on the mantel with a small notebook in hand. Had he been jotting notes this whole time? “You were dressed as some sort of Greek goddess.” When she nodded, his eyes flashed with anger. “I saw you as you ran from the room with tears on your cheeks. No wonder you caught Francis’ attention, for your looks were stunning.”

Oddly, the compliment helped to scrub the shame from the memories. “Fat lot of good that did me, hmm?” But she gave him a small smile, nonetheless. “Your brother’s world was the glittering environs of the *ton* whereas I’d been ruined, used, and discarded, tossed aside like rubbish to get on with my life the best I could.”

Life after Francis had been fraught with worry and struggle. It had taken months to work herself beyond the pain, and even then her parents had been concerned.

“I’m sorry. For everything that happened.” His eyes were kind as he held her gaze.

“I’ll wager you are. Especially since you kissed me in the carriage house.” She bounced her attention away from him, unable to see confirmation of what she said. “Now that you know who I am, you probably regret that.”

“Hardly. If anything, your history intrigues me even more.” When he returned to the chair he’d occupied earlier, Mary let out a tiny sigh of relief. Having him close was somewhat calming. “Now that we’ve settled that secret to my satisfaction, I can begin the official investigation. Did you have prior knowledge of Mr. Alderson before tonight?”

Had she? Mary thought back to the time with Francis. “I believe I’d only met him once.” She frowned and then felt her eyes widen. “It wasn’t especially pleasant.”

“How so?”

Heat went through her cheeks. “After I ran from the drawing room that night of the rout, he caught me at the front door. Told me that ‘men of the aristocracy find their entertainment cheaply but marry dear.’ Then he escorted me out of the house and put me in a hack. Sent me away with the warning that I shouldn’t hang about your brother or tempt him further.”

“How did that make you feel?”

She snorted. “How do you think, Inspector? I was humiliated by your brother. The butler’s added words threw fuel onto the fire, and I was angry that he would assume *I* was the one who’d led Francis astray.”

The inspector made a notation in his notebook. “Did Mr. Alderson and you exchange words when you came here yesterday?”

The heat in her cheeks engulfed her chest. “He warned me to stay away from the viscount, as if I have a wish to be anywhere near the man now.”

Another scribble went into his notebook. “I can imagine that might

have reignited your anger for the situation.” When she remained quiet, he tried again. “Did you say anything to him after that?”

“I told him I had no intentions of seeing or even speaking with the viscount. When he didn’t appear to believe me, I asked Mr. Alderson to leave me alone, that my life and what I did with it was not his business.” Truly, the butler had overstepped his bounds, and she hadn’t appreciated it, especially since he’d made the comments while Adelaide had been nearly within earshot.

“I see.” The inspector scribbled another note on his page. “Which means you had motive to kill the butler.”

“What?” Surprise shot through her body, and she launched to her feet. “Are you accusing me of killing Mr. Alderson?” When he said nothing, she huffed. “I was standing beside you when he was killed!”

“While this is true, you could have had someone plunge a blade into his chest on your behalf.” He tucked his notebook and pencil into his pocket. “I have been looking into cases for many years, Mary, and I have seen people do much worse for less.”

“How would killing a butler benefit me?” Even she heard the incredulity in her voice. Shock coiled through her insides. “Why would you think such a thing?”

“That is not my concern; I only wish to know why you wanted him dead.” He shrugged. “Because of this, I rescind my offer to engage you as my assistant on this case. It would prove a conflict of interest and could skew my results.” Disappointment reflected in his eyes as he crossed the room and wrenched open the door. “This interview has concluded. Don’t think about leaving the manor house. There might be further questioning needed later.”

“Of course.”

“Go back to being a companion to your niece, Mrs. Tomlinson. Shield her from the worst of this, for as time goes on, truths uncovered won’t be pleasant.”

She nodded. “I assumed you weren’t one of those arrogant, self-serving men who dismissed women as if we’re stupid.” Since there was nothing else to say, she lifted her chin and swept from the room.

Hot anger cycled through her veins. How dare he insinuate that she might have killed Mr. Alderson! Could he not tell from her body language and her story that she was innocent? Then she berated herself, for she’d enjoyed their verbal bantering with him far too much and had thought he was

different.

Never again.



Mary fumed in the bedchamber she shared with Adelaide for a good portion of the night. When her niece came in to retire, she asked what was amiss, but Mary waved her away, saying something hadn't agreed with her over the course of the evening.

She wished she had Admiral Nelson with her, for petting the often-purring Persian cat had a way of soothing her that nothing else could, but she'd left the animal with William. It had been a mistake, for she could have sent the cat after that dratted Inspector Bright with the hopes that the feline would bite his ankles.

Why had she thought coming here was a good idea? Nothing good could ever happen when tangling with one of the Bright family.

An hour after her niece had fallen asleep, Mary still fumed. "If he thinks he can just dismiss me out of hand as if I haven't a brain in my head or that I'm a criminal mastermind, he can think again, and he's richly deserving of a dressing down." Despite the fact the carriage-style clock on her bedside table softly chimed the midnight hour or the fact that she was clad in a thin muslin nightgown, she slid out of bed. The floor was chilly against her bare feet, but she didn't wish to waste time in finding her slippers. Grabbing up a matching robe trimmed with soft lace and blue satin ribbons, she donned the garment and left the relative safety of her room, closing the door behind her.

All the candles in the corridor holders had been snuffed out already, which meant most of the household had retired for the night. Then it occurred to her that she hadn't a clue which room had been assigned to the inspector. And what if he shared the room with his son? She hadn't wished for an audience when she vented her spleen. Or worse yet, what if he hadn't retired for the night at all, and instead was downstairs in the study, interviewing potential suspects?

Then a string of muffled curses erupted behind one of the doors midway down the corridor, and that voice could only belong to one man—Gabriel. But her anger wouldn't settle until she'd had words with him, so, daring much, she pressed the brass handle, pushed open the door, and then

quickly darted inside the room, closing the door softly behind her.

The sight that greeted her was one she hadn't expected in a hundred years, for the inspector was utterly and completely naked as he lounged in a porcelain bathtub. A bar of soap lay on the floor along with a sponge. Perhaps he'd dropped those things and couldn't retrieve them from his position in the tub.

Oh, dear. "Pardon me." Though she quickly turned about, the expanse of his nude chest she'd had in that fleeting glance had sent heat into her blood. The dratted man was quite a toothsome specimen, and she couldn't stop thinking about the mat of dark hair that covered his upper torso in an abstract butterfly-shaped pattern. "I didn't expect to find you in such... undress."

"Right." He blew out a sharp breath. "I mean, here in my private room, behind a closed door, who would have thought I might be doing something I didn't wish for anyone else to be privy to?" The water splashed as he shifted in the water.

Was he even now reaching for the soap?

She couldn't help but snicker at the heavy sarcasm in his voice. "I came here to give you a dressing down, but considering the circumstances, I should go." The longer she stood there wondering what the rest of his form looked like, the more heated she grew. Unexpected need tingled down her spine while her nipples tightened with the beginnings of arousal.

"Then why haven't you? Most ladies would faint dead away at the sight of an unclothed man." Annoyance mixed with sarcasm, but in his baritone, it was a heady mix, and didn't scream the warning that it would have.

"I am a widow. I have seen a naked man." But she had to admit, he was easy on the eyes, and remarkably, he looked nothing like his brother. In fact, the inspector was muscled and lean and hard in all the right places, while Francis—when she'd known him like that—hadn't been nearly as fit or as hairy.

"True, but this is still quite scandalous, yet you linger here." More splashing ensued, and curious, she turned around.

Oh, dear God. Her knees were in danger of buckling, for the man had stood up in the tub. Rivulets of water ran down his body, through the wet mat of hair on his chest, down his torso, and those drops continued on down his muscled thighs and legs. *And oh heavens,* his shaft was half-erect even

though he'd been in the water.

"Mercy," she couldn't help but whisper, and since she was naturally curious and definitely not a shrinking violet, she continued to look her fill as that lovely appendage twitched. "You are quite... something."

"Ha." The inspector grinned, and he was slow to reach for a towel that waited on the side of the porcelain tub, even slower in wrapping it about his waist. "I don't know that I've ever had that reaction before."

Heat slapped at her cheeks. "I apologize."

"No, you don't. From what little I know of you, the first thing you say is the most honest." He stepped out of the tub. "What do you want, Mary, and please don't say you came here to chase scandal with me."

She glanced about the room. It was much like the one she shared with Adelaide, but instead of two narrow beds in hers, there was only one in this space. "I did not, and suffice it to say, I don't know that I could trust a man again to allow for such intimacy." When his gaze roved from her face to her bosom, she quickly wrapped her robe more firmly about her body and crossed her arms over her breasts to hide the evidence of her interest in him. "But I did come here for a purpose."

"Oh?" One of his dratted eyebrows cocked in challenge. "I cannot wait to hear it."

"Don't be more of an arse than you already are." Remembering why she'd come, she narrowed her eyes on him. "I don't appreciate the fact you dismissed me out of hand earlier this evening. You and I both know I didn't kill the butler, so if you've withdrawn your offer of being your assistant, I can only think it is because of my history with your brother." Emotion crowded her throat, but she swallowed it down. "If that is what you are basing my character upon, I have obviously misjudged you."

"Yet by your own admission, your head was turned by my brother, which means you might become distracted during an investigation, and you also admitted there was no love lost between you and Mr. Alderson. That hints at motive, and I would be remiss if I didn't keep you on my suspect list."

"How dare you." Once more, her anger flared, and perhaps it was residual annoyance left over from living beneath her husband's thumb or finding herself right back in the snare with Francis, but she would unleash her ire on the brother. Quickly closing the distance between them, she drilled a forefinger into his chest, his naked, hard, wet chest that temporarily robbed

her of the ability to breathe. “I am more than capable of handling myself in these situations. I am well read. I am articulate. I am able to converse in social settings without angering people like you seem to do.” Poke, poke. “And while I don’t regret anything that happened in my past, those choices have helped to shape me into the woman I am today.”

“Surely you can see the situation from my perspective.”

She rolled her eyes. “I can, of course, but you are wrong.” Without fear, she held his gaze while ignoring the gold flecks in those gorgeous hazel depths. “If you can tell me that you didn’t have feelings of animosity toward Mr. Alderson, or if you never had your head turned by a woman who later ripped out your heart, I will gladly leave this room and let you go about your investigation without a peep, but if those two things are true, you have no right to pass erroneous judgment on me.”

For long moments, he stared at her, but she refused to back down. He was wrong, and he needed to understand that. “I will concede that you might have a point.”

“Good.” When she let her hand drop, he caught it in one of his. “Does this mean I can assist on the case?” Despite warning herself not to look at his chest, she did it anyway. What she wouldn’t give to lick at one of those water drops that clung heroically to the hair on his chest. *Snap out of it! He is not for you.*

“I think that we can perhaps come to an arrangement.” There was an intensity in his eyes that had a wave of awareness rolling over her, and slowly he moved his head toward hers.

Dear heavens! Did he intend to kiss her? She watched him for as long as she dared before her eyes shuttered closed.

But when he did no such thing, they popped open to find him regarding her with amusement in those hazel depths. Then he put his lips to the shell of her ear. “We shall resume our investigation directly after breakfast has concluded.” The heat of his breath skated over her cheek and ear. “But unless you would enjoy finding yourself embroiled in hot, torrid, and quite pleasurable endeavors, you need to remove yourself from my room.”

“Oh.” Mary slid her gaze down his body to linger at his groin where the towel was quite blatantly tented. “Oh!” Heat rushed into her cheeks, but she nodded and scuttled across the room to the door. “At breakfast, then.” Never had she exited a bedchamber so quickly nor had she let a man

discomfit her so roundly since the long-ago day when she'd met his brother. Her feet made no sound as she made her way along the corridor. "Mary Katherine Tomlinson, you have no business flirting or doing anything else with a man," she reminded herself in a whisper as she gained her own room. Quickly, she flung herself into her bed and pulled the covers up to her chin.

It doesn't matter that he looks like scandal and sin or that you might wish to ride him into exhaustion. Men will ruin your life, and you've already experienced that twice. No more!

Yet it would be a long time indeed until she could fall asleep, for she couldn't evict the image of Inspector Bright's naked form from her mind.

Chapter Six



December 23, 1818

I almost kissed the woman last night. And it was a good thing he hadn't, for he wasn't quite certain he could have stopped with kisses if that had occurred. There was just something about the widow that fascinated him, intrigued him, that went beyond them both being guests at the same house party or them playing chaperone to young people. There was a startling connection there he hadn't felt for a woman in a long time. The fact that she'd been so bold as to come into his room after midnight merely to dress him down without a thought to scandal or safety both amused and concerned him, and above all captivated him, for she was like no other woman he'd met before.

And he couldn't have enough even though he did not need the distraction.

Had her admission from the night before regarding her relationship with his brother shocked the hell out of him? Of course, but then he knew his brother better than anyone, and Mary wasn't the first woman he'd charmed, teased, and then used and discarded in his lifetime. Had he wanted to beat the stuffing out of Francis after the tale had concluded? Oh, yes, for the widow had deserved more than life had given her, and he barely knew anything else about her. Did he madly respect and admire her determination and resolve to even come to Stanwick Hall bearing the history that she did? Without a doubt, which was why she truly was the best person to assist on this case.

And she wouldn't leave his mind.

Barely had he settled into the leather chair behind the oak desk when the widow arrived at the study door. "Good morning, Mrs. Tomlinson. I trust you slept well." As a matter of course, he had not, for once she'd left his

room, he'd been obliged to continue his bath—which had been interrupted with her arrival—and when that banal chore hadn't willed his cockstand away, he'd taken himself in hand and finished the job. Sleep was elusive at best, for thoughts of Mary, as well as who killed the butler, had bounced through his mind most of the night.

“Thank you for asking, Inspector, but I slept fitfully.”

“I'm sorry to hear that. Guilty conscience?” he couldn't help but ask.

“Hardly.” She eyed him askance, as she should. “I worried that Adelaide's first foray into society is less than enjoyable, and I'm worried there is a killer among us.” Those dulcet tones sent awareness skittering over his skin. A faint blush stole over her cheeks, and he couldn't help but wonder if she'd thought of him last night.

“Those are valid concerns. I, too, am concerned about the safety of the party.”

She nodded, and he became fascinated with a thin wisp of a golden curl that hung at her temple. “Did you already enjoy breakfast?” She came into the room and perched on the edge of a leather chair that sat in front of the desk. “When I arrived in the breakfast room, I was alone.”

Had she hoped to dine with him? He hadn't given that much thought. “I did, but I ate quickly so I could return to the case. And you?” God, he hated the stilted way they were interacting. He wouldn't apologize for his first assessment of her, for when murder was at play, everyone was guilty until proven otherwise, and neither would he apologize for the risqué words he'd said to her that had propelled her from his room. Except, at the rate his mind was deteriorating when around her, that veiled carnal threat might soon come to pass if he couldn't get himself under control.

What the hell is wrong with me? I'm acting like Henry, for lord's sake!

“I picked at it, for my appetite isn't strong right now.”

Did that include her appetite for merely food? If he were to come around the desk, take her into his arms, and kiss her, would she return the overture? By willpower alone, Gabriel tamped down on the lustful thoughts and refocused his attention on her face. Tiredness reflected in her eyes. “Perhaps you can enjoy an early tea if you prove peckish.”

“That would be lovely.” She held her hands tightly in her lap. “What is the first task on your agenda this morning?”

“I intend to interview another two suspects.”

She huffed, and a wisp of blonde hair with a wont to curl ruffled at her forehead. "I'm sure you meant guests. They are not suspects unless you have evidence against them."

Oh, she *would* be a challenge, and one he most certainly looked forward to. To temper his next words, he offered a small grin. "As you said yourself, there is a killer among us, and since everyone was within the house when Mr. Alderson was killed, everyone is suspect. Whether or not they had motive is up to us to puzzle out."

When she gave an equally small smile herself, his world was in danger of tilting. "Then who shall be our next interviewee? I assume you have finished your questioning of me?" One of her blonde eyebrows rose in question, but faint amusement danced in her lake blue eyes.

"For the case? Yes." He couldn't promise anything else, though, for he was all too curious about her.

As a subtle blush spread across her cheeks, Mary nodded. "Very well. Would you like me to fetch someone?"

Gabriel consulted his list of potential suspects then tapped a fingertip on one. "There is a guest by the name of Miss Peterson. I'd like to interview her."

"Why?"

"She was in the drawing room at the time, but while everyone else was shocked when the butler's death was announced, her expression suggested she thought he had it coming." He shrugged. "I would like to speak with her."

"Then I shall go find her." When she made to rise, he shook his head.

"No need." Gabriel tugged on the brocade bell pull that hung behind him. "We shall have a footman fetch her." Then he trained his gaze onto her face once more. "In the meanwhile, you and I can chat."

Was it his imagination or did she pale ever so slightly? Before he could select a subject, a young footman came to the door.

"You rang, sir?" The boy was barely over nineteen if he was a day, but with his good looks, he'd probably been promoted to footman instead of assigned stable duties.

"I'm conducting interviews of all the guests and some of the staff and would like to begin with Miss Peterson. Please escort her to the study, post haste."

"At once, sir." Then, with a glance of curiosity between them, the

footman bounded off.

“How long were you married, Mrs. Tomlinson—Mary?” God, it felt lovely to make use of her Christian name again.

A sigh escaped her. “Long enough, seemingly an eternity at times.” She shrugged. “After the incident with your brother,” she lowered her voice, “my parents doubled their efforts in finding me a match. They were concerned I would go down a path that would destroy my reputation and theirs.”

“They sound sensible, your parents. Are they both still alive?”

She huffed again. “Are you asking in an inspector capacity, or do you truly wish to know about me for yourself?”

“Touché.” It was merely another thing he admired about her. “For myself, in the event you might wish to begin a friendship.”

For long moments, she held his gaze. Unreadable emotion shadowed her eyes, but there was an intensity about her that arrested his attention. “Is friendship the *only* thing you wish from me, Inspector?”

Before he could answer, the footman had returned and softly cleared his throat at the door. “Miss Peterson, as you requested, sir.”

Gabriel rose as a young woman entered the room. “Thank you, Thomas. Please close the door and wait in the corridor so you can escort her back.” Once the wooden panel swung closed and latched with a barely audible *snick*, he resumed his seat. “Please, take a seat, Miss Peterson. I’m Inspector Bright with Bow Street.” With a hand, he indicated the chair beside Mary’s. “This is Mrs. Tomlinson. She is acting as my assistant for this case.” Then he studied the newcomer. “I understand you were in the drawing room when the butler’s death was revealed to the company.”

“Hullo.” She greeted the widow and gave her a pretty smile. “I was, indeed, in the drawing room.” Perhaps five and twenty, the young woman had pleasant looks and light brown hair that trended toward caramel in the anemic light coming into the room. “Such a shocking scene, that.”

“Indeed. Murder usually is.” He scribbled a few notes on his paper beneath her name. “What did you think about Mr. Alderson?”

The woman frowned. It was a pretty gesture, but he wasn’t compelled to stare at her lips like he was with Mary’s. “I don’t know that I’d ever *given* him a thought, Inspector Bright.”

Of course not. “Come now, Miss Peterson. This is not a threatening place. You may tell me the truth.” He stared expectantly at the young woman.

“I’d glimpsed your face when the news came out. While everyone else was shocked, you didn’t seem such. Why?”

She darted her gaze between him and Mary before finally looking at him once more. “I swear I didn’t kill that man.”

“That remains to be seen. Explain yourself.”

Her swallow was audible. “Fine.” With a shake of her head, her horrified innocent expression changed to something more hardened. “I had been in this house all of two hours before I began to feel... odd.”

Mary turned toward her. “Odd, how? Can you explain it better?”

“Yes.” She nodded and ignored him completely. “There was something... creepy about Mr. Alderson that I didn’t care for. When I was shown up to my room, I had the distinct feeling that he was studying me, as if looking at me through my clothing. Does that make sense?”

“I know exactly what you mean, yes.” Mary took one of the young woman’s hands and patted it. “Please continue.”

“Then later, when my maid and I were unpacking, I had the unmistakable feeling that someone was watching me, spying on me in my room which was supposed to be private.”

“Are you certain?” Gabriel frowned as he stared at her.

“Oh, yes.” Miss Peterson nodded. “The feeling made the hairs on my arms stand on end.”

Mary took up the questioning again. “Did you ever find proof that someone was indeed spying?”

“Unfortunately, we did.” The woman managed to look stricken, which appeared genuine. “My maid was poking about, and what she discovered made my blood run cold.” Perhaps it was the power of suggestion, but she shivered, and the urge to do the same went down Gabriel’s spine. “One of the paintings had a hollowed-out eye.”

“The devil you say!” He couldn’t help his outrage, for nothing of the sort had happened during the years he’d resided here.

“It’s true.” Miss Peterson focused on him. “Behind the painting was a square of wood in the wall where it had been removed.”

Mary glanced at him. “In some old manors that have been restored over the bones of another structure, there are passageways behind the walls that allow servants to traverse more easily one end of the manor to the other.”

Dear God. “I had no idea, but I assume it’s not out of the realm of possibility.” He scribbled another note. “What did you and the maid do after

that?”

“We put a sheet over the painting. Immediately, I summoned the housekeeper and told her our thoughts about being watched. She assured us she would talk to the staff, and then that was the end of our interaction.”

“Yet if you suspected Mr. Alderson was spying on your private space, you no doubt felt angry. Perhaps angry enough to plunge a knife into his chest?”

“No!” Miss Peterson vehemently shook her head. “I was angry, yes, but I could never kill anyone let alone put a knife into a human form.” She shivered again. “Just the thought of having to do... that in order to kill him? I would surely faint.”

Mary exchanged a glance with him, and he shrugged.

“Thank you, Miss Peterson. You may go.”

“I only wanted to come here and enjoy Christmastide!” The young woman bolted from her chair. When she wrenched open the door, she gave a weak smile to the footman. “I’m done.”

“Thomas, after you take Miss Peterson back, please bring Lord Ceardon here.”

“I will, sir.”

For a few moments after she and the footman departed, Gabriel wrote a few notes. Then he rested his pen in the holder. “Do you believe her?”

“Oddly enough, I do, and what she said is very disconcerting.”

“Will you now go through your room?”

“Absolutely, I will.” She gave into a shiver. “If Mr. Alderson was spying on guests, he should have been sacked. There is no excuse for that.”

“Agreed. I’ll talk to my brother about the problem.” For the space of a few heartbeats, he remained silent. Then, “In answer to your previous question, no. Friendship is not the only thing I am interested in with you.” There was no use in lying. Surely, she felt that underlying tension between them. Would she bolt or act affronted?

One of her eyebrows went upward. “Interesting. Do you refer to my assisting on this case... or something else entirely?”

“Definitely something beyond this. Does that discomfit you?”

For the space of a few heartbeats, she paused. “No, actually. You saw how our interaction of last night went, and we are both of an age to not dance around a subject.”

“Indeed.” Every response she gave rendered her more intriguing.

Damn it all. “Let us return to our previous conversation. Are your parents still alive?”

“No. My father died in a fight with one of his partners three years ago while my mother expired from an illness five years into my marriage.”

There was no opportunity to say more, for Thomas had returned with a man probably in his mid-thirties and a head of thinning black hair. Though rigged out in the latest style with a jacket that had been expertly tailored, there was a desperate air about him as if he was nearing dun territory but didn't wish for anyone to know it.

“Lord Ceardon?” When he met Thomas' gaze, he lifted an eyebrow, and the footman gently closed the door.

“Yes.”

Gabriel nodded. “Please come in and sit down. This is Mrs. Tomlinson and I'm Inspector Bright from Bow Street. We have a few questions regarding your experience with Mr. Alderson.”

“I had nothing to do with that man's demise,” the other man said as he sat heavily in the chair next to Mary. “But you should know, Alderson was a right proper bounder.”

“How so?” It was always interesting what one discovered about the deceased once people were eager to spill secrets.

“Just this.” The peer leaned forward, rested his forearms on his knees, and let his hands dangle between his splayed knees. “Didn't know his place. It wasn't his business if I wanted to chase a couple of maids. Stanwick's got one on his staff who's a real looker.” He shrugged as if what he was after wasn't over the line. “Wanted to see if she'd let me get a peek beneath her skirts.” Then he glanced at Gabriel. “Tell me this doesn't happen all over the country in all the manor houses.”

God, this man was a pig. Even Mary eyed his askance. “That's neither here nor there, Lord Ceardon, but shift your focus back to the butler. I assume he butted in to your near-activities?”

“He made it a point to warn me off chasing the maids. As if I were a leach.”

That was debatable. Interesting how Alderson took exception to a man chasing skirts while he, himself, spied on them in secret. “Did the two of you have words about it?”

“I called him out, told him it wasn't his business what I did or with whom, but he told me the staff was off limits, and that if I took issue with

that, I could speak with Stanwick about it.”

“Did you?”

“Of course not. Maids aren’t worth the hassle. There are always skirts to chase at the local tavern, but the damned snow won’t stop.”

“Why the devil did my brother invite you to this house party? You are hardly the sort of man he’d want his daughter hanging about.” Perhaps that was outside of enough, but he couldn’t figure out why this man was here. Definitely not in Francis’ style.

Lord Ceardon shrugged. “Let’s just say I know a few things about Stanwick he doesn’t want coming to light, so he invited me.”

Gabriel shared a glance with Mary, who said nothing, and he could almost hear what she was thinking. He’d known his brother liked women more than what was good for him, but he assumed that once he’d married, some of that philandering would have been curtailed.

“Is there anything else you can tell me about Mr. Alderson that might help us find his killer?”

The peer stood. “Alderson always made it seem he was better than the rest of us. He looked down his nose at everyone in judgment, yet behind that façade of a butler? He was a bounder, plain and simple. The man indulged in vices, and I’ll wager he had predilections that would shock and disgust us all.” He made his way to the door, and when he put his hand on the latch looked back over his shoulder. “You want to find out who put an end to him? Start with where he lived.”

Then he left the room before he was officially dismissed.

“Well, damn.” After scribbling another few notes, Gabriel set the pen in its holder and stood. “While I might be apt to believe Miss Peterson’s innocence, I’m not so certain about our Lord Ceardon.”

“Neither am I.” Mary rose to her feet. “He and Mr. Alderson seemed to be cut from the same cloth.” She blew out a breath. “Which isn’t surprising, since most men are quite... disappointing.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.” When he reached the door, he dismissed Thomas. “I’ll call you when we resume the interviews.”

“Of course, sir.”

Only then did Gabriel close the panel once more before he turned back to face Mary. “However, I should hope you don’t tar all of us with the same brush that you have Francis, Alderson, and I assume the late Mr. Tomlinson?” He prowled toward her with slow, even steps.

She watched him the whole time. There was a certain hunger shadowing her eyes that mirrored what pulsed through his blood. “Ah, the way you did me when you lumped me in with a pool of potential murderers?” Her voice lowered. “Or how you’ve closed yourself off because you have difficulties trusting women due to something that might have happened in your past?”

“You are far too intelligent for your own good.” When he finally reached her location, he snaked a hand around her nape and slowly dragged her to him. “I do have a difficult time trusting anyone—women especially.”

Mary peered up at him with the same distrust in the blue pools of her eyes. “As do I with men. After a while, one grows weary of being lied to or fed empty promises one doesn’t have any intention of keeping.” With every word, the warmth of her breath skated over his chin.

“One could say you haven’t met the right man,” he whispered as he lowered his head until their lips nearly touched.

“Or you haven’t met the right woman.”

“It *is* quite the conundrum.” Then, because he’d apparently lost his damn mind, Gabriel caught her in his arms and brought his lips crashing down on hers. A thrill careened down his spine, for they could be found out at any time, but he didn’t care—he needed this physical manifestation of the tension and banter they’d indulged in since the night before.

For a fleeting second, Mary met his gaze with surprise in her eyes, but then she uttered a sigh, slipped her hands up his chest to loop them about his shoulders, and applied herself to kissing him back with as much enthusiasm.

If this potential scandal was wrong, he never wished to be right again. Like a match set to tinder, in next to no time, the heat of an inferno consumed him. Needing so much more, Gabriel walked her backward, guided her between the leather chairs, until the edge of the desk prevented further movement. When that contact wasn’t enough, he slipped his hands beneath her thighs and hefted her upward, never breaking the kiss, and then he planted her arse on the desktop, scattering papers and ledgers as he went. Damnation, she tasted faintly of the sugar she took in her tea as well as daring; it was a heady combination he chased with every frantic meeting of their mouths.

“Good heavens, Bright, so potent.” Her whisper urged him to new heights.

“Flattery will gain you many lovely things, my dear widow.” It took

very little coaxing before her lips parted and she welcomed a deepening of the embrace. When the glide of satin and silk of their tongues made the connection with his brain, he was lost. Over and over again, he fenced with her, explored her mouth, tangled with her tongue, drank from her as if every kiss he'd ever shared in the past were but practice for this moment.

To her credit, Mary gave to him as good as she got. Her legs went about his waist, her ankles locked at the small of his back. The insistent pulse of his erection pressed tight into the front of his breeches, and desperate to alleviate the tension, he ground his hips into hers. Would the friction give her a hint of pleasure? A tiny moan escaped her throat. Both combined provided only a modicum of relief, and if anything sent more intense need pinwheeling through his shaft.

How was it that meeting this one broken woman with shadows in her eyes had shaken the foundations of his world?

“If this is the best interview you can give to tempt me into something beyond a friendship, Inspector, I’m afraid I’m going to require more evidence.”

Oh, she was good, and he was incredibly captivated. “I’ll show you the best.” At the slightest pressure of her fingers on his nape, the last vestiges of his sanity wavered. She nibbled and nipped at his bottom lip then left his mouth entirely to press feather weighted kisses beneath his jaw. When she found a particularly sensitive spot he never knew he possessed, desire exploded throughout his body. The rightness of having her in his arms, of kissing her without care for the consequences plowed into him with the force of a blow.

What the hell is this woman doing to me?

For he knew only the bare minimum about her. There were no answers, not in that moment where he fell through heat and passion and want, and it didn't matter, for the connection between them had to mean something. He only knew this wasn't nearly enough.

“Dear God, I want you.”

Remarkably, a giggle escaped her, and the mirth barely penetrated the passionate haze in his mind. “You aren't the same sort as the unsavory Lord Ceardon, are you, Bright?”

“What do you think?” As he encouraged her backward over the desk and settled himself between her splayed thighs, Gabriel dragged his lips down the side of her silky throat. The faint scent of violets infiltrated his nose

and urged him onward. Tracing the bodice of her dress with his fingertips, he followed that trail with his lips, and all the while, Mary manipulated his cravat, had it unknotted in a twinkling. Her lips were at the hollow of his throat, her breath steaming the skin of his chest she'd uncovered, and the sensations further worked to drive him toward the brink.

This was incredibly foolish; it was unethical and a distraction, but he didn't care. When was the last time he'd felt like this? It was impossible!

Desire guided him; he no longer thought with caution or common sense. A few tugs of fabric and the top half of her dress and the shift beneath came down her body, baring her breasts the more he pulled the garment down her arms. The globes of her full breasts beckoned, and there was only so much willpower he had. He kneaded the soft flesh, and when a surprised moan pulled from her throat, he grinned against her mouth, dared to brush the pads of his thumbs over the hardening dark pink nipples. The pebbled surface of those tips nearly separated him from the remainder of his sanity, and each brush of his finger pulled faint sounds of pleasure and encouragement from her. As Mary's back arched, Gabriel took one of those tempting buds into his mouth.

"Oh, yes!" The low-pitched utterance spurred him onward. While he continued to torment the nipple with his lips and teeth, he teased the other with his thumb. Would that he could lay her out on a sofa or even the desk and divest her of the clothes to better kiss every centimeter of her skin, feel the heat of her on his fingers. Wouldn't his damn brother have an apoplexy about that? "It's been so long, and even then, my husband never..." Her words dissolved beneath another moan of pleasure.

Hell, but he adored how responsive she was, even as his curiosity about her marriage grew larger. "See? I'm not the same, hmm?" A chuckle escaped as he again flicked his tongue over that taut, tempting tip. Urgency tingled through his hardened length as well as his stones. There was nothing else he'd rather do than claim this woman's body. And if he did, he might get her out of his system and destroy the distraction. Mary shivered from his attention even as she held him close with an arm at his shoulder while she slipped a hand down his body to trace her fingers along his arousal.

"You have made your case, certainly," she managed to gasp.

As he moved to take her other nipple into his mouth, knocking on the study door prevented further exploration and scandal. The noise skittered through his passion-soaked brain, and he pulled away from the oh-so-erotic

image of her sprawled over that damned desk. “Who the hell is that?” As quickly as he could, Gabriel set his cravat in to a loose, sloppy knot.

“I couldn’t venture a guess.” Her voice was low and breathy as she put her clothing to rights and then slipped off the desk.

He strode to the door, and as he wrenched it open, praying the evidence of their kisses wasn’t immediately visible, he glanced back at Mary, who was busy gathering the fallen papers and ledgers. When he frowned at the young lady standing in the corridor, it took an extraordinarily long time for his brain to realize who it was. “Ah, Miss Swanson. I assume you’ve come to speak with your aunt?”

“Is she here? I’ve looked everywhere.” The girl’s eyes were rounded as she moved past him to come into the room. When her gaze alighted on Mary, she smiled. “Aunt Mary. Is all well?”

“Of course. I’m helping Inspector Bright with his investigation, and we’ve just finished a couple of interviews,” she said as she stood with the papers and ledgers in hand, clutched to her chest. “What did you need?”

“Some of the ladies are assembling a decorating party. Since it’s still snowing, a group of the young men have gone off with a sleigh to cut down evergreen branches and gather holly.” With speculation in her expression, she bounced her gaze between the two of them. “Would you like to help us with the decorating?”

“Oh...” Turning away, the widow placed the armful on the desk. “The inspector has a few more interviews to conduct yet, and I believe we’re on our way to poke about Mr. Alderson’s rooms for clues.” When she turned back to her niece, her composure was back in place. “Perhaps afterward I’ll come in and help. Then we can have tea.”

“All right.” Miss Swanson nodded.

“Are you enjoying the house party thus far, despite the unfortunate incident?” he couldn’t help but ask, merely to redirect the girl’s attention from Mary.

“It has been... interesting,” she said, and the comment was vague enough that he couldn’t puzzle it out. “But there is potential for the remainder of the time.” When she bestowed a smile on him while going to the door, he said vestiges of Mary in her expression. “Perhaps you’ll pause your investigation to take tea with us, Inspector Bright?”

“I wouldn’t miss it.” How long had it been since he’d done the pretty with anyone outside of Whitehall and Bow Street? But perhaps if it would

give him an insight into the girl's aunt, he should make the effort.

Mary waved and then the girl left them alone. She sighed. "Nicely done, Bright. I'm one step closer to trusting you."

The fact she used his last name made her all the more intriguing. He nodded, but internally, he was thrilled. "As am I with you. Shall we continue our investigation in Alderson's room?"

This was certainly one case he would never forget.

Chapter Seven



While Mary was thoroughly enjoying watching the inspector work, her head was still spinning from the kisses and caresses they'd shared not ten minutes ago.

As they walked through the manor house to the servants' hall, she tried to make sense of the odd connection between her and the Bow Street inspector. When was the last time she'd felt that sort of thing with a man? Desire was present, of course, yet there was something else beyond that, an understanding, a link through life's struggles, perhaps. Obviously, he'd had a difficult marriage, and so did she, but they were both insecure and untrusting to be the first to show vulnerability or to even talk about it.

Not that they'd had the chance, but were they both too broken deep down?

In the basement level of the manor, the corridors were narrower than they were above stairs. As soon as Mrs. Harley, the housekeeper, became aware the inspector and a guest were visiting, she immediately intercepted them.

"Oh, dear, Inspector Bright, what are you doing down here? You could have rung for one of us." She wrung her hands while concern and anxiety warred for dominance through her expression. "And Mrs. Tomlinson? Is something amiss?"

"Calm yourself, Mrs. Harley." Mary laid a hand on his arm. "We are merely here to go through Mr. Alderson's room in the event there are clues to who killed him. You and your staff have done a lovely job of tending to the house party guests and keeping their minds off this tragedy." When Bright shot her a look of gratitude, she allowed a small smile.

"That makes sense." The housekeeper nodded. "Follow me. I'll show you his room. It's at the end of the hall."

Gabriel fell into step behind her with Mary bringing up the rear. “Are there any plans to replace Mr. Alderson at the moment?”

“Lord Stanwick hasn’t informed me thusly, but with the snow, no one could arrive here for an interview regardless.”

“Of course. How did Mr. Alderson treat the staff?”

Mary’s focus on the conversation faded as she swept her gaze over the breadth of his shoulders, exquisitely made on display by the jacket of bottle green superfine stretched over his torso. She remembered what every centimeter of those shoulders felt like, how the strength in his arms had been around her when he’d embraced her. Then her gaze dropped, and she stared at his firm backside. Dear heavens, what was wrong with her that she wanted to squeeze his arse and see for herself how taut those cheeks were? Because she wasn’t paying attention, when he stopped at the door to the butler’s room, she nearly crashed into him, but at the last second got control of herself.

Bright glanced at her from over his shoulder with slight amusement in his eyes. Could he know what she’d been thinking? “Is all well, Mrs. Tomlinson?”

“Yes, of course.” Heat burned through her cheeks as she entered the small room that had once belonged to Mr. Alderson.

There was very little in the way of furniture contained in the space. A long narrow bed beneath a small window that let in very little light, a bureau whose top hosted a silver vanity case and a decanter of brandy, and there was a small round table with only one straight-backed wooden chair. A braided rug in faded shades of blue covered the stone flooring at the side of the bed as well as the foot. Also at the foot was an unassuming cedar trunk.

“Thank you, Mrs. Harley,” the inspector said. “We shouldn’t be long.” When he came into the room once the housekeeper departed, he looked at Mary. “Woolgathering, were you?”

“Perhaps. There have been a few distractions of late.”

“Can I assume they have been welcome distractions?”

Cheeky man, trolling for compliments. “They have, and it will be interesting to discover if anything comes from them.” It was so natural to enter into verbal banter with him, for he didn’t constantly attempt to make her into something she was not. Try as she might to tamp the urge to grin, it tugged at the corners of her mouth anyway, but she avoided his gaze. They had a case to solve. “Mr. Alderson had no personal items to make his room more homey.”

“Interesting, that. I’ll wager he didn’t have any real friends in the household either since the housekeeper said he was a proper prick to most of them.” Bright rested his hands on his hips as he scanned the room with a glance. “At least we’ll make quick work of it. I’ll take the trunk if you’ll search through the bureau.”

“All right.” Mary kept her own counsel while she pulled open the first drawer.

“Your niece seems like a lovely girl. I hope she and the other young people will find enjoyment here even through the pall of death.”

She nodded. “As do I, but Adelaide is a sunny girl. Eventually, they’ll all come out of the shock and make the best of their time here.” As quickly as she could, she poked through the orderly stacks of folded and starched handkerchiefs, lengths of cravats, cuffs, collars, and the like. “Lady Stanwick has much on the agenda for everyone to do. Soon, no one will remember the butler.”

“True enough. Time does march onward.” He knelt on the floor in front of the cedar trunk and opened the lid. “Though I am worried about Henry. Most of the guests are avoiding him due to the fact he might have killed Mr. Alderson.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. Children—even ones who are almost adults—can be cruel and go with a crowd mentality.” She frowned. “Do *you* think Henry is guilty?” If he could assume that she might have killed the butler, no doubt he’d thought the same of his son.

“No, at least I would like to hope not, but to clear him, we need to find the real murder weapon.” He turned his attention to the contents of the trunk, pulling out a few books and extra blankets.

“It is good the two of you are so close.” And it provided an interesting insight into the inspector’s private life. “I suppose losing your wife drew you together?”

“In a roundabout way.” The words were clipped, and once more he closed himself off to further questioning or probing.

With a silent huff, Mary concentrated on searching through the next drawer, where pristinely folded pairs of breeches and trousers were located. She needed a different tact to find out Gabriel’s secrets, but how to convince him she was trustworthy? Then she gasped.

“What’s wrong?” Instantly on alert, Bright sprang to his feet.

“This was hidden beneath folded pairs of breeches.” She held up the

jewel-studded sheath for the antique knife. “Why would he have this?”

“Why was the decorative knife near his body? These are questions we need answers to, but this is good. I rather doubt either piece was ever in Mr. Alderson’s possession, but placed here by the killer or someone else wishing to deflect scrutiny.”

“Do you think, perhaps, someone is trying to frame the viscount? After all, the antiquities belong to him.”

“It’s another avenue we will need to explore.”

The mystery deepened. After setting the sheath on the bureau’s top, Mary continued searching the rest of the drawers while the inspector returned to the contents of the trunk. “Did he keep a journal or anything that would provide insight into his private life?”

“Not that I can tell.” Seconds later, he uttered a soft curse. When Mary came near, he held up a brooch set in silver, studded with sapphires with emeralds for eyes. The whole thing was in the shape of an elephant, and had the same look as the knife sheath. “Now why the devil would the butler have this in his possession?”

“Who does it belong to?”

“Lady Stanwick.” His mouth was set into a hard line.

“How do you know?”

“I gave this to her as a wedding gift when she wed my brother.”

“How interesting.” And somewhat disturbing. “Either Mr. Alderson was blackmailing both of them or someone is trying overly much to throw us off their trail.”

“Indeed.” He tucked the jewelry into his waistcoat pocket then went back to rooting through the trunk. Eventually, he returned everything to the interior. “Nothing else of importance.”

“Neither is there anything here. Merely clothing, and quite frankly, some of these things are rather too fine for what a butler could afford on his income.” She closed the final drawer with a decided *click*.

“None of this is adding up to a clear picture of his daily life.” With a frown, Bright moved to the narrow bed. He peered beneath that piece of furniture, but there was nothing there, yet when he pulled up the mattress tick, they both gasped. Nestled within the ropes of the frame was a pistol. “Well, now. What is this, then?”

Mary stared at the weapon with open-mouthed shock. “More to the point, why would a butler have need for a pistol to begin with? Especially

Mr. Alderson. He didn't appear the type to defend the household with his last breath."

"Indeed not, which is why this is quite puzzling." The inspector retrieved the pistol. After he replaced the mattress tick, he checked the mechanism of the pistol. "It is loaded with one ball ready to go."

She met his gaze. "Was it for personal defense or did he merely con it from someone else, like he accumulated the rest of his belongings?"

"It's something I'll aim to discover." In silence, he tucked the pistol into the waist of his breeches at the small of his back. "Come. There is nothing else here. We will now conduct an interview with Lady Stanwick."

Cold apprehension coiled in her gut. "Perhaps you should interview her by yourself. My presence could present a problem if Francis has told her..."

"We are partners, Mrs. Tomlinson," Bright said as they left the butler's room and closed the door firmly behind them. "Where I go, you go as well." Then he handed her a small leatherbound notebook and the nub of a pencil. Both of which she recognized from yesterday when he'd highhandedly interviewed her. "I need you to jot down notes. It is sometimes beyond me to do so while forming questions."

It might have been a lie, so she felt better about the situation, but remarkably, it did ease her mind. "Very well, but don't be surprised if she doesn't welcome me with open arms. Everything has been exceedingly... odd ever since I stepped foot in this manor."

"All will be well." When he glanced at her from over his shoulder, he gave her an encouraging nod. "Trust me?"

"Oddly enough, I am beginning to." And she never thought that would happen again in her life when it came to men.

"I'll consider that a victory, then."

Once they quit the servants' hall, the inspector led the way to the grand staircase, where he took the treads two at a time. Mary appreciated the athleticism in his form as he did so; he certainly didn't act like a man who was a couple of years past forty. Still, she was obliged to trot to keep pace with his long-legged strides on the second floor. The buzz of conversation and laughter coming from the drawing room gave credence to Adelaide's mention that a decorating party was forming for the afternoon, and part of her yearned to be there with her niece, for she missed spending time with the girl. However, she would be lying to herself if she didn't admit that working to

solve a crime with the handsome inspector was the most thrilling thing she'd ever done in her life.

Finally, Bright paused at the open door to the morning room, where he rapped peremptorily at the frame before entering. "Pardon the interruption, my lady, but this visit cannot be helped."

The viscountess glanced up from the handiwork in her lap. She frowned at the inspector. "Why are you here, Gabriel?" she asked, and there was slight annoyance in her tone, but when her gaze fell on Mary as Bright moved further into the room, her reception was much frostier. "Mrs. Tomlinson."

"We have just come from Mr. Alderson's room," he started off without preamble as he perched on the arm of a low sofa. "How was your relationship with the butler?"

Lady Stanwick shrugged. "I don't know that I had a relationship with him," she said with a shrug. "Why would you ask such a question?"

"Because we found *this* in his room." Bright pulled the elephant brooch from his waistcoat pocket. The jewels glimmered in the overcast light coming in from the windows as the snow continued to come down. "Why did Mr. Alderson have this in his possession when I know for a fact it belongs to you."

For one second, the viscountess' face paled as she stared at the brooch in Bright's hand. Then she huffed in annoyance and set aside her embroidery in order to glare at him. "I rather think that is none of your business."

"It is if it has bearing on the butler's death." One of his brown eyebrows rose in question. "I think, perhaps, you should explain."

Quietly, Mary seated herself on the sofa near Bright's location and waited with her pencil.

Eventually, Lady Stanwick sighed. "Alderson was a nosy arse who couldn't stay out of everyone's business, and he had the bad habit of tattling on some of my actions to Stanwick."

"Such as?" This from the inspector while Mary took notes. "Is it enough to give you the motivation to kill the man?"

"Of course not!" She cut the air with a hand. "How dare you even accuse me of such, Gabriel."

"Murder is a great equalizer. No one is above the law." Again, he flashed the brooch. "How did the butler come to have this in his room?"

With a scathing glance to Mary, the viscountess then focused on the

inspector. “Mr. Alderson inadvertently came into a room where I was otherwise occupied with a footman.” At least she had the grace to blush. “In exchange for the man’s discretion and silence with regards to my husband, I paid him with the brooch. He wasn’t above blackmail at any given time.”

“Ah, so you and he went ‘round with the same subject before?” Nothing in Bright’s tone gave away his thoughts on the hinted at infidelity.

“A time or two, and no doubt he did the same to everyone he’s ever met.” Lady Stanwick shook her head. “He wasn’t a good man. I don’t know why Stanwick continued to employ him.”

As Mary wrote a few notes, she would wager she knew why Francis did it. If he suspected she’d been unfaithful, he was the type of man to hold that over her head even though he’d no doubt done the same regularly. But she held her tongue.

“I’m sure I would have no idea, so let us keep this conversation going in the direction I need it to, hmm?” He held up the knife’s sheath. “Why would Alderson have had this in his room?”

She gasped. “That goes with the knife used to murder him.”

The inspector didn’t confirm or deny the statement. “We also found this.” When he pulled out the pistol, the viscountess recoiled. “Why would your butler need a pistol? Had he been threatened by someone on your staff?”

“I would have no idea, Gabriel. You will need to speak with Stanwick.” Then, as regally as a queen, she rose to her feet, which made Bright scramble to his. “I believe this interview has concluded. There is nothing more I can tell you, but I did not murder Alderson, and I will remind you it is a dangerous thing to accuse someone in the *beau monde* of such, even if we are related by marriage.”

A frown pulled at the corners of his mouth. “I am merely doing my due diligence, but if you *are* guilty, I’ll discover that as well.”

“Hmph.” She flicked her gaze to Mary as she stood. “Stay away from Lord Stanwick, Mrs. Tomlinson.” When surprise jolted through her, the viscountess nodded and stared with narrowed eyes. “Oh, yes, he told me about you.”

“Pot calling the kettle black, hmm Vivian?” Bright asked softly as he tucked the pistol back into the waist of his breeches.

The viscountess ignored him, while hot anger cycled through Mary’s blood.

“I want nothing to do with your husband, my lady.” She clenched her

fingers about the notebook and pencil so hard the edges bit into her palm. “I am here as companion for my niece, who is roommate to your daughter. That is all.”

“Ha!” Lady Stanwick shook her head while taking a menacing step toward her. “I know you are trouble, and once the roads are passable, I want you gone from this house.”

Mary’s lower jaw dropped. “If I go, Adelaide comes with me, and that will sadden your daughter. I rather think you don’t wish to do that.”

“Enough.” Bright gave the knife sheath to Mary then wrapped a hand about her upper arm. “Thank you for your time. If we have more questions, we will come back, but until this case is solved, Mrs. Tomlinson remains here in this manor with everyone else.”

“Fine.” Fury lined Lady Stanwick’s face. “I suggest you look elsewhere for your suspect, Gabriel, and leave me alone.”

As Mary left the room at Bright’s side, she shook with anger. “I am sick unto death of being looked down on by the aristocracy for whatever the reason.”

“I understand.” He led her along the corridor and then into the butler’s pantry located across from the dining room. After he released her arm, he pulled the sliding pocket door closed. Seconds later, he lit a candle and laid the copper holder on a work counter where Mr. Alderson had no doubt counted out silver and polished stemware before meals. “I know this is a difficult time for you—”

“—while I *will* take responsibility for my part in the affair fourteen years ago,” she interrupted in a low voice that shook with outrage, “I refuse to continue to pay for those sins. Especially when he isn’t willing to acknowledge *his* fault in them.” To her mortification, tears of anger sprang into her eyes. She couldn’t show weakness in front of this man!

“Agreed.” He put a finger beneath her chin and raised her head until their gazes connected. Compassion shadowed his eyes, that were more green than brown in that moment. “I will talk to them both on your behalf.”

“No.” Mary shook her head, temporarily breaking that connection, for it felt as if she might drown in those hazel pools. “It is not your place nor your fight.”

“Stanwick and his wife are my family, so I can dress them down more easily and without societal consequences.”

She uttered a huff of frustration. “I can take care of myself, have done

so for years.” *Ever since your brother ensured my ruin.*

“Of that I have no doubt, but you and I are partners as I’ve stated before.” When he cupped her cheek, drew the pad of his thumb along her bottom lip, she trembled. “You are helping me with the case. Let me do the same for you with this,” he said in a whisper that had flutters moving through her lower belly.

“I am afraid that if you introduce the subject, one or the other of them will retaliate, then everyone here—including my niece—will know of that time in my life.” Mary shook her head, breaking their connection. “I don’t want Adelaide disappointed in me.” What she really wanted, needed in this moment was his arms around her and to kiss him until she didn’t feel so unsettled, but if she did that, there was every chance she’d be carried away by the disconcerting passion brewing between them.

“While that is understandable, I’ll make certain that doesn’t happen.”

She snorted. “You might be a lovely investigator, but you can’t control people, Gabriel.” To ensure she wouldn’t do something stupid like rush into his arms, she sprang away from him as if burned, and in the process cracked her elbow on the counter. “Ow!”

“Silly goose,” he said softly, but when he reached for her, she moved farther from him in the small space. “All right. I’ll concede to the walls you’ve thrown up.”

“They rather match yours, don’t you think?”

“Indeed, they do.” A half grin quirked up one side of his mouth. “We have an investigation to continue in any event.”

When he poked about the room, she breathed a sigh of relief, for that meant his attention was no longer focused solely on her. After opening and closing drawers beneath the counter, Bright uttered a curse.

“What is it?”

He held up a man’s handkerchief. “Look here.” Pointing to a corner, he traced a forefinger over the initials HAB done in embroidered script. “This belongs to my son—Henry Andrew Bright. His grandmother made these for him right before she died.” Concern etched his face, making it appear far older in the flickering candlelight. “Why is this here? It would take no time for him to cross the corridor, gain the dining room and then kill Alderson.”

The poor man. “Don’t jump to conclusions, Inspector.” Daring much, she laid her free hand on his arm. The muscles flexed beneath her fingertips. “It could be innocent.”

“I hope so.”

“Go back down to the study. I’ll find Henry and escort him down.” She thrust the notebook, pencil, and sheath into his hands. “Lock these in the desk.” Then she slid open the pocket door.

“Mary?”

“Hmm?” When she turned back to him, gratitude warred with the concern in his eyes.

“Thank you for keeping me company and making certain I’m calm during these proceedings.” He cleared his throat then blew out the candle. “Though I’m still becoming acclimated to working with a partner, I’m finding that I rather enjoy this unexpected side of investigating.”

She gave him an honest smile. “As am I, Inspector.” Then she left the butler’s pantry and set out to find his son.

It took very little time to locate Henry, for he hadn’t gone down to the drawing room or billiards room with the other members of the party, nor had he made up the numbers to retrieve Christmas greenery. In fact, he was tucked away in the library a few doors down from the study on the first level of the manor house.

“Henry? Your father would like to interview you now,” she said softly so she wouldn’t startle him.

The poor young man blanched. His eyes rounded and grew dark in the flickering candlelight. Slowly, he stood, and the book resting in his lap fell unheeded to the thick Aubusson carpeting at his feet. “I’d wondered when he would get to me.”

“It is merely part of the investigation. We have already conducted three interviews.” Mary offered a smile as he joined her at the door. “Try not to worry.” In many ways, he was the mirror image of his father, and she suspected he’d break hearts in a few years.

His Adam’s apple bobbed with a hard swallow as he tugged on the knot of his cravat. “I didn’t do this, Mrs. Tomlinson,” he said in a choked whisper while she escorted him into the corridor.

“I know, but your father has a job to do. As he has stated a few times today, no one is above the law, but don’t you think you’ll feel better once this is out of the way?”

“Everyone at the house party already hates me.”

She glanced at him. “They are fearful. There is a difference. Once your father clears you of the crime, you’ll see how their behavior changes.”

Though, why he'd want to be friends with that sort of fickle group, she had no idea.

"Will you stay during the interview?" His tone had the ring of a frightened child.

"Of course I will." It would seem the son was as broken and yearning as the father.

Once the young man seated himself across from the inspector at the desk, she perched on the matching chair. "Henry, when we were in the butler's pantry, we found a handkerchief bearing your initials." She leaned forward and accepted the pocket square when Bright handed it to her. "Can you tell me how it ended up there?"

For long moments, he rested his gaze on the handkerchief before training his attention on her face. "One of the maids was rushing down the corridor just outside the drawing room shortly before Mr. Alderson was killed. She was in tears."

Mary glanced at Bright. He motioned at her to continue. "Why was she upset?"

"She'd just been reprimanded by the butler for something inconsequential, something that wasn't even one of her duties." Henry traced his finger over the embroidery. "She crashed into me since she was running blind. I didn't know what to do, but Papa always said to err on the side of gallantry."

Again, she looked at the inspector. Oddly enough, a mottled flush crept over his collar to color his neck. Stifling a grin, she nodded at the young man to continue. "There is nothing wrong with that. What happened next?"

"I encouraged her into a chair and poured her a glass of water from a pitcher I found on the counter then gave her my handkerchief because she was crying."

"You did the right thing." Mary patted his hand. "Did she not take the handkerchief when she left the butler's pantry?"

"I couldn't say."

"Why not?"

A flush that matched his father's colored his neck and cheeks. "I left her there to search out Mr. Alderson. He deserved a dressing down for his treatment of her."

She looked at Bright, and his expression fell. *What now?* she mouthed in confusion.

The inspector sighed. "You wished to teach the butler a lesson." It wasn't a question.

"I did, because what he did wasn't right." He stared at his father, and they were so much alike her heart squeezed. "So, I went into the dining room."

Bright nodded. "Where did you find your uncle's antique knife? When everyone arrived in the drawing room, it was still in the curio cabinet."

"I don't know." The young man shrugged and seemed a bit green around the gills. "As soon as I entered the dining room, I knew something wasn't right. Mr. Alderson was lying on the floor. When I saw the puddle of blood, I froze. The antique knife was lying there beside him, half in the blood pool." His swallow was audible. "I didn't think, just picked up the knife to move it away on the off chance he was still alive..."

"Then the maid screamed," Mary finished for him as she took his hand. "You intended to help the man who'd been nothing but horrible to everyone." Her heart went out to him. "That was a brave and compassionate thing to do."

For a few seconds, his face screwed up as if he were fighting his emotions, then he gave into a sob. "I've never seen a dead body, Mrs. Tomlinson; didn't know what to do, and I was afraid I would disappoint Papa because this is what he does every day."

When it appeared he would crumple, she quickly gained her feet and crossed over to him. He hugged her about the waist and rested his cheek on her belly. "It's all right, Henry. I am quite certain your father wasn't that brave when he was your age." Over the young man's head, she met Bright's gaze, surprised that he struggled with his own emotions.

The inspector cleared his throat. "Seeing your first dead body, especially when life has been stolen from it by violent murder, is much to digest, but you remained composed. For that you have my admiration."

Oh, he'd come up to the mark beautifully! "You see?" she asked Henry in a soothing voice. "You were trying to do the right thing, and your father knows you didn't kill Mr. Alderson. Once that word gets out, the members of the house party will take you back within their fold."

"One last thing, Henry," Bright said as he held up the sheath. "Was there another knife somewhere on the butler's person that might have disappeared between the time you found his body, when the maid screamed, and when we came into the room?"

He lifted his head. “Not that I can remember, but when I was talking to the maid in the butler’s pantry, she said it was odd Mr. Alderson was even here because he’d told a few of them in the servants’ hall he had a meeting with someone out at the old mill.”

“The mill?” Mary asked with a frown.

“Yes.” The young man nodded. “It’s only used in the summer. Halfway between Stanwick Hall and the village.”

“Very well.” The inspector nodded. “You may go.”

Henry looked at her, and when she nodded, he stumbled from the room as if the hounds of hell were after him.

For long moments, silence reigned in the room. Then Bright sighed. “It was amazing how you connected with him. He and I have been... stunted in that for a long time.”

“It only takes one person to make that first move.” She shrugged but hoped this would help him break down his own walls. “Now, if you will excuse me? I’m going to spend some time with Adelaide, take tea, and help with decorating efforts.”

“Of course.” He scrambled to his feet. “But after that?”

“Yes?”

Wagging his eyebrows, he asked, “Care to take a sled out and visit the mill? We can go out there and come back before the sun sets without being late for dinner.”

She offered a grin, for the opportunity to be alone with him was far too tempting. “I look forward to it.”

Chapter Eight



Would it never stop snowing?

Gabriel stared up into darkening skies as the flakes continued to come down at a steady pace. The chilly breeze snatched at his greatcoat, and he hunkered down further into the garment. The only thing keeping the snow from going down his collar was the woolen muffler he'd donned at the last second, and he rather wished he could wrap it about his ears. Lord knew the beaver felt top hat wasn't keeping those appendages warm. As he waited for Mary to join him on the drive, he stamped his feet to keep the circulation going. Though he looked forward to being alone with the widow once more, he was also apprehensive. They'd conducted four interviews already and were still no closer to finding out who killed the butler than they'd been yesterday, and he'd managed to annoy his sister-in-law along the way.

Yet, with Mary's gentle encouragement, he'd connected with his son more genuinely than he'd ever done before. While she'd taken tea and helped with decorating the drawing room, he'd sought Henry out and they'd had an honest conversation about many different subjects, none of which had anything to do with the murder. That hadn't happened since the trauma of his wife leaving him.

She was quite surprising when she assisted him in questioning during the interview process and thoroughly amazing in how she related to people—him included—and if he wasn't careful, he'd go tip over tail for her instead of merely drowning in desire for her. *Mind yourself, Bright. Women are naught but trouble.*

Then she appeared at the top of the steps, clad in a black cloak with the hood over her head. The breeze flirted with the edges and clawed at the hem of her gown as she descended the steps, for after the quick visit to the old mill, they would walk right into dinner so they were both dressed for it.

That glimpse of her stocking clad ankle as well as the peek of green fabric captivated his imagination.

“Deuced horrible weather,” he said as she joined him. “I’ll be driving tonight, so would you rather sit next to me on the box or in the sleigh proper?”

Her eyebrows rose in surprise. “You have skill enough to handle the ribbons?”

“Of course.” Gabriel snorted. “I do have other talents beyond investigations.”

The faint smile that curved her kissable lips was quite distracting, but he tamped his reaction. “So I have cause to witness.” The emotions in her eyes were inscrutable as she glanced up at him. “I shall sit beside you.”

“Ah, good.” He couldn’t help his own grin as he handed her into the sleigh.

“I cannot wait to be impressed with your skill in driving.” A shiver shook her frame as he climbed onto the spring-loaded bench beside her. As he took up the reins, his left shoulder brushed her right and warmth curled through his body. “Who do you suppose Alderson planned on meeting at the mill? He’s not exactly the roguish sort.”

She shrugged and clasped her gloved hands in her lap. “He might not be a rogue—which assumes a handsome womanizer—but from all accounts, he was not a decent fellow. If it was for an assignation, I shudder to think how he manipulated that.”

“True. He was definitely not a ladies’ man. Which begs the question, what was he doing at the mill?”

“Nothing good I’d imagine.” Mary shook her head. “The more I hear about the butler, the more I dislike him.” A swift intake of breath betrayed her thoughts. “That doesn’t mean I killed him in the event you wondered.”

“I’m well aware that you didn’t.” He couldn’t help but chuckle. “However, I tend to agree with you on Alderson’s character. The man was a bounder.” It wasn’t an excuse for someone to off him, but Gabriel couldn’t fault the emotions behind the crime. “Still, murder is wrong, and it is not up to us to become the judge of someone else’s life.”

“While I agree with you to a certain extent, there are times when a situation isn’t so very black or white. As of yet, you don’t know what led up to the killing or even what prompted it. Perhaps it was a matter of self-defense.”

The fact she challenged him instead of agreeing blindly with his assessment had his admiration for her rising. “True, but the stab wounds indicate it was done quickly and since the cuts went deep, force was used, which alludes to an emotional killing. Right now, I haven’t seen evidence on anyone we’ve interviewed that they fought against the butler.”

“There are many others still to go, Bright. Sooner or later, we’ll narrow it down.”

“I’m not worried.” In fact, it was a delight to work the case thus far, and that largely had everything to do with the intriguing widow sitting beside him. As he guided the horse with a gentle tug to the reins, he cleared his throat. “I wanted to thank you for your guidance earlier with my son. It opened an avenue to dialogue we didn’t have before.”

“Oh?” When she turned toward him, elation lit the blue depths of her eyes. “I’m glad I could help. He’s a lovely young man who merely needs his father to help him navigate the muddy social waters just now.”

Gabriel nodded. “Turns out he’s been angry about things from the past, as have I, and since we never truly discussed them, doing so at least a little bit has given us both new understanding of each other.” None of that would have been possible without Mary’s quiet guidance.

“My brother likes to say I’m a nurturer of broken things.”

“How so?”

When she shrugged, her shoulder brushed his and set off another wave of acute awareness through his person. “Whether it’s people, animals, or objects, whatever is broken or hurting or discarded always seem to find its way into my life.” Her eyes took on a faraway look as she stared straight ahead while her breath clouded around her. “I nurture and fix and coddle and encourage until everything is back to good. It is oddly satisfying.”

“You do have quite the knack.” And it was almost as if he’d been waiting the whole of his life for her to come along and shine her light into the dark recesses of his soul. Shaking his head to clear the fanciful—and dangerous—thoughts, Gabriel sighed. “Now that Henry’s name has been cleared, it was exactly as you said. The house party guests have accepted him back, but they remain wary of each other.”

“It will continue to be so until the killer is caught, unfortunately, and human nature being what it is, they can turn on each other in an instant.”

“Indeed. It’s a baffling and troubling phenomenon.”

“Not really. Trust that is easily given is easily broken, and once that

occurs, it is difficult to recover.”

“You speak from your own experience.” Would she finally talk to him about her marriage?

“Yes.” She didn’t offer up any other information.

“You can trust me, Mary.”

“Perhaps, but why are you so interested in my life, Inspector, my history?”

“Sometimes it is far easier to ferret out other people’s secrets than it is to analyze and release our own.”

Finally, she turned her head and caught his gaze with hers. “That is quite insightful, but when I am ready, I will disclose everything... as long as you promise to do the same for me.”

“I will—” Whatever he’d been about to say flew out of his head when one of the sleigh runners hit a hidden stump in the snow. A loud cracking noise split the air, and then in fast succession, the horse screamed out a warning and reared, the sleigh tipped over, and he and Mary were thrown out of the vehicle into the snow.

At some point in the overturning, his left temple was struck by the edge of the vehicle, and for a few moments, he saw stars as he lay in the cold snow with the sleigh over his lower half. Then clarity returned and he was able to assess the situation. “Mary?” The jingling of the horse’s harness filtered into his brain. “Mary?” Panic filled his chest as he dug his way out from beneath the vehicle.

“Bright?” Her voice was weak and sounded a bit away from his location, but the snow continued to swirl about him as he scrambled to his feet. A cry of pain increased the urgency of his actions. “I think my ankle is either broken or sprained.”

“Damn.” As he gazed up at the drunkenly tilting sleigh, he frowned as he caught sight of the horse, jogging away from the accident scene. Somehow, he’d become unhitched and had wasted no time in putting distance between them. After a quick inventory of his own health and finding it more or less normal, he came around to the other side of the sleigh. One of the runners had split into two, no doubt as a result of hitting the stump, of which he couldn’t immediately see. Not finding Mary, he cast his gaze about. There! About ten feet away she sat like a dejected black crow against the white of the snow. “Mary!”

The hood of her cloak fell away when she jerked her head up.

“Gabriel!” As she attempted to stand, another cry of pain escaped her, and she collapsed back onto the snow.

He gained her location as quickly as the deep snow would allow. “Can you move the ankle?”

“Yes, but it pains me to do so.” That was fairly evident in her voice.

“Then it isn’t broken, so that is all to the good.” Gabriel bent and assisted her into a standing position while she favored her left ankle. “The bad news is that the horse has run off and the sleigh is damaged so badly we cannot use it even if the equine had stuck around.”

“What do we do now?” She clutched at his arm to remain upright.

“Uh, the mill isn’t far from here.” Thank God he was familiar with the area, for he and his brother and sister had often used the mill as a waypoint during summers and winters prowling around the countryside. “I’ll carry you there and we’ll break in. At least we’ll have shelter from the cold and snow.”

She snorted. “And hope the horse makes its way back to the house so they can send a rescue party?”

“It’s a fat lot better than staying with the sleigh in the dark and wishing upon a star.” Though the reality of the situation was unless the horse went directly back to the stables, it could very well be hours before anyone missed them, even if they never made it to dinner. Everyone would assume they were busy with the investigation. He cocked an eyebrow. “Do you have a better plan?”

“No.” Her eyelashes fluttered when snowflakes landed on them. “I suppose I’ll need to elevate the ankle in any event, and it will be nice to get out of the snow.”

“Good.” Without giving her warning, Gabriel put an arm beneath her knees and scooped her up by supporting her back. As she squealed in surprise, he offered a grin. “Pardon the familiarity. There was no other way.”

“Your feet will freeze,” she said as she looped her arms loosely about his shoulders.

“Good thing I hadn’t yet donned the shoes. I vastly prefer the boots.”

“I wish I’d thought about our destination instead of dinner later.” There was a forlorn note in her voice. “If I’d worn my half-boots, my ankle might have been protected.”

“No sense in worrying about it now.” She was quite the armful and he rather enjoyed having her so close with him in the role of rescuer. Not that it was a stretch. Ever since he’d met the winsome widow, he’d felt protective of

her. Thank goodness the shadow of the mill loomed in the distance. “Almost there,” he said as he rearranged her weight in his hold.

“I’m sorry.” Her breath warmed the side of his neck.

“For what?” Even in this he would find a distraction in her.

“Being a burden. It’s difficult enough trooping through the snow without carrying someone.”

“Never a burden.” Though they were in the snow, in the dark, in less-than-ideal circumstances, the intimacy and trust required in the moment had the ability to steal his breath. “Perhaps we can find a way to build a fire once inside.” Though those odds were long. The mill had been closed since early autumn after all the flour had been ground for the year.

“Being out of the wind will make a big difference.”

Fifteen minutes later saw them at the mill. Gabriel left her standing at the front door, leaning against the wooden panel while he went to explore the perimeter of the building. Not finding any of the doors unlocked, he finally resorted to using a large rock to break one of the windows on the front façade.

When she gasped, he shrugged. “Nothing for it. I’ll tell my brother to pay for the damages.” Continuing to knock out the glass with the rock, he glanced at her. “I’m going inside. Once I unlock the door, I’ll help you in.”

“All right.” Mary nodded. “Be careful.”

The fact she worried about him left him humbled. It had been a long time, indeed, since a woman had cared. “I always am.” Then he dropped the rock, climbed inelegantly through the window, and tumbled to the floor inside what appeared to be a storage room.

It took more time than he’d thought to navigate the interior of the building in the complete darkness. He’d knocked into a few walls, tripped over a couple of grain bags, shivered at the scratching of rodent claws as he went, but eventually, he found the door. Once he’d turned the latch that threw the locking mechanism into the open position, he tugged at the door. Snow swirled inside as soon as he did.

“Temporary shelter is ours,” he said with a flourish as he escorted her inside.

She giggled, leaning heavily on his arm. “So resourceful. You are more than just a handsome face after all, Inspector.”

It flattered him she enjoyed his looks, but he kept his own counsel. Once the door was shut, absolute darkness encompassed them. “Let’s move

to an interior room. Might be a bit warmer there.”

“Hopefully we can find some candles or even matches.”

His chuckle echoed eerily. “Are you afraid of the dark, Mary?”

“Rather I am frightened of what people do to each other in the dark.”

What had occurred in her life, and why did he wish to beat the shit out of the men who’d harmed her? “Not everything done under cover of night is unpleasant,” he whispered, and pulled her closer to his body while holding her tighter about the waist.

“That is very true.” Was it his imagination, or did she just let her fingers glance across his buttocks in a fleeting caress? However it came about, interest shivered through his shaft.

After a few wrong turns where he’d stubbed a toe and smacked the end of his nose against a door, they finally entered a room that might be used as a parlor or a waiting area for guests visiting the mill when it was operational or even a foreman’s office. He left Mary on a low sofa and then went in search of candles and holders.

“Aha!” Victory was his, for in a drawer of a desk, he located a store of thick candles and even a tin of matches. No holders were immediately uncovered. Blinking against the flare of the match, he quickly lit a few candles and then ferried them across the room to rest them on a small, round table near the sofa where Mary waited. “There is something comforting about light in the darkness.”

“I quite agree.” She undid the clasp of her cloak and let the folds fall away from her shoulders. A sigh escaped her throat. “I’m glad you’re here, though. For all my forthrightness, the dark has a way of discomfiting me.”

“Due to your past.” It wasn’t a question as he seated himself next to her.

“Yes.” When he would have pursued the line of inquiry, she turned toward him and laid a palm against his chest. “I don’t wish to talk about it at this time.”

“Fair enough.” After he shrugged out of his greatcoat, he removed his muffler, top hat, and gloves. “How is your ankle?”

“Throbbing dully but not overly distracting.” With a rueful glance at him, Mary removed her gloves and moved into a more comfortable position on the sofa.

“I’m sorry.” Since there was nothing else to do for the moment and her close proximity had heightened his awareness of her, Gabriel slipped to

the floor and kneeled before her. "Let me take a look."

"Please get off the floor. There is no need..." Her words trailed off the moment he coaxed her foot out of the dainty satin slipper that matched her gown and then trailed his fingers over her stocking-covered ankle. "Oh!"

Dear God, the warmth of her seeped into his fingers, the subtle violet scent of her started tiny fires within his blood. "Does it hurt when I explore the ankle bone?"

"No." The one-word answer was propelled by a whisper. "No doubt the muscle or tendon has been torn or twisted." Her trembles transferred to him, and oddly, that simple, visceral reaction excited him in ways he hadn't anticipated. "Perhaps I should tear a strip from my petticoat and wrap it."

"Such useful garments, those. Always a must in emergencies." Daring much, Gabriel removed her other slipper and let it fall to the bare wooden floor. "I rather think you'll make a quick recovery if you rest a couple of days." As he spoke, he trailed his fingers over her foot with the high arch then moved to explore her splendidly turned calf.

"If you think I shall consent to staying in bed while you continue the investigation, you can think again. I refuse to be left at the sidelines." The only sign his caresses affected her was her fingers curling into the folds of the cloak on the cushion beside her.

"Well, Mrs. Tomlinson, staying in bed does have advantages..." Was that really him, asking her to read between the lines at the hint he gave? When she didn't slap his face or pull away, he pushed her skirting up to her knees in order to caress the silky skin above the beribboned garters.

She watched him with shadows in her eyes, but there was no mistaking the need, the desire in those lake blue depths. "A pity we don't have that piece of furniture now," she said in an equally soft voice, fraught with hidden meaning of her own.

"Surely you know it's not needed if a quick tupp is what you're after." They'd been dancing about this attraction since they met. Giving into the temptation was the natural progression of that. He drew his fingers along her inner thigh. "If you continue to look at me with that come hither glance, we'll both fall into scandal."

After all, he was only so strong.

That need in her eyes intensified, matched the hunger circling relentless through his gut. "How long do you think it will be before someone from the house sends out a search party?"

“It’s difficult to say.” Gabriel shrugged. When his knuckles barely brushed the curls shrouding her sex, she stifled a sigh and he grinned. “But we’d have enough time for a tryst.” God, he was far too randy to leave her alone like a proper gentleman should, but then, he’d never proclaimed that was what he was. “What do you want of me, Mary?”

For now, or in the future? In that moment, he couldn’t say. They’d barely known each other two days!

“You, Inspector.” She tugged on his cravat, pulled him closer so he was leaning over her body. “Right now, no matter the consequences, I want you, for you will drive me mad soon with your teasing, and if I’m to go insane, I want it to be on my own terms.”

Chapter Nine



I do believe I'm in a spot of bother. Shoving all thoughts from his mind except what he wanted to do to—and with—the pretty widow, Gabriel quickly resumed his position on the sofa. It took very little effort for him to tug her onto his lap so that she straddled him with the fabric of her skirting pillowed between them.

When she winced, he opened his mouth to protest in regard to her injury, she pressed the fingers of one hand to his lips. “The ankle will not prevent me from doing this.”

“Very well.” Needing to touch her, he skimmed his palms up her legs, over her hips to cup her breasts. “You’re certain?” Already, his shaft was pressed so painfully tight against his silken breeches that he couldn’t imagine further delay.

“I wouldn’t have let you touch me if I wasn’t.” Trust reflected in her eyes, and he didn’t take that lightly. “Don’t make me regret the decision.” When he lightly brushed the pads of his thumbs over her nipples through the fabric of her gown, her eyelashes fluttered and a tiny sigh left her throat.

The fact she would even extend him this boon swelled his chest with pride. “I won’t.” Then he held her head between his hands, claimed her lips in a kiss designed to flirt, to tease, to stoke that hunger flaring between them. Never had he met a woman like Mary before nor had a woman managed to captivate him so utterly and completely so quickly, not even his wife. This was new territory for him; he was both excited to see where this connection would lead but alternately fearful he would be hurt if he opened himself up to her fully.

There was no time to ponder that in this moment.

Her hand was at his cravat again, this time worrying the knot, undoing his valet’s careful precision while Gabriel dragged his lips beneath the

underside of her jaw, down the column of her throat, licking the satiny skin as he went. Dear lord, what sort of hold did this woman have over him that he'd lost his mind enough to contemplate taking her in an old grain mill closed for the season? Then it didn't matter, for she'd tugged the length of silk from about his neck and pressed her lips to the skin she'd just uncovered.

Truly, he was lost, already drunk on her, this widow that he knew next to nothing about.

The warmth of her, the scent of her, the vibrancy of her in his arms went directly to his head, and as she kissed every part of him she could uncover, he did the same to her, following the bodice of her gown with his lips, licking the tops of those glorious breasts he'd already sampled earlier that afternoon.

When the need to see her nearly overwhelmed him, Gabriel made quick work of undoing the laces at the back of her taffeta gown. As the bodice gaped, he wasted no time in tugging the garment down her body, freeing her arms from the short, puffed sleeves as he went. The stays only slowed him incrementally, then the soft lawn of her shift provided little resistance as he pulled it down too until her glorious breasts were bared to his inspection.

"This feels all too familiar," she whispered as she peered at him with passion-drugged eyes. She yanked the tails of his shirt from the waist of his evening breeches, and when she shoved her hands beneath his lawn shirt, the heat of her nearly seared him.

"Which is exactly why we must investigate further," he whispered against her lips as he held those quivering charms in his palms. Over and over again, Gabriel teased and tormented those dark pink buds until she writhed on his lap. Then it was he who fell beneath the spell, for he encouraged her onto her knees so he could better take a pebbled nipple into his mouth. "So damned beautiful. I hope the departed Mr. Tomlinson appreciated you as a woman, for I'd be hard-pressed not to try and commit you to canvas with oil paints."

"You are an artist?" Surprise wove through the inquiry.

"Not even a little, but you make me want to take up the hobby."

"Waxing poetic doesn't go with your no-nonsense personality, Bright," she whispered, and there was amusement in her tones that disappeared on the heels of a moan when he indeed took one of those buds into his mouth.

The statement tugged a chuckle from him. “Neither does taking leave of my senses in order to claim your body because I cannot think of anything else I want more in this moment.” Then he spent copious moments fondling one breast while leisurely licking and nipping the nipple of the other. A man could lose himself in her lush curves, and the fact he was in danger of doing just that wasn’t lost on him.

She threw back her head, and a tendril of hair escaped its pins. “There are times when events are unexplainable.” The fingers resting on his shoulders dug into his skin through the layers of his clothing. “I have thought about this since I accidentally saw you naked in that bath and—” a moan interrupted her words when he rolled the other tempting pink bud, gave it a playful pinch while applying firm suction to the bud he’d already latched onto.

“Then you and I are of the same accord, for I wanted to pull you down into that water with me and have my wicked way, even more so when we kissed this afternoon in my brother’s study.” There was no shame in admitting such. It wasn’t as if he were a green boy out of university or she an innocent.

“Which is why this attraction stymies me; I’ve never had that before in my life.” Honesty reflected in her face. “It... disconcerts me.”

“Why?”

“It is much like waiting for the other shoe to drop,” she said in a whisper as she furrowed her fingers into his hair and held his lips to her breast.

“I understand all too well.” With a certain smugness to his grin, Gabriel spent the next several minutes pleasuring her breasts, and as her breathing shallowed, he kissed her again, for how could he not?

The warmth of her in his hands, on his lap, the violet scent of her, the faint sounds of pleasure she made, the way her fingers curled into the hair at his nape and how she brushed her body against his all worked to hurtle him close to the edge and they’d yet to couple. How was it that meeting this one woman had managed to not only turn his world upside down?

“Gabriel...” Mary pressed a line of tiny kisses to the underside of his jaw, the hollow of his throat, the upper portion of his chest.

“Hmm?”

When she worried a specific spot where his jaws connected, he gave into a shudder and nearly came prematurely, but he eased backward to meet

her gaze in the flickering candlelight. “Show me that I’m more than a broken window, that you cannot wait to possess me.”

The urgency in her whisper matched the hunger prowling restlessly through him. “Broken windows still let the light shine in.” Not knowing what else to say, he spent the next several seconds kissing her lips, licking her neck, nibbling the slope of her shoulder, exploring the curves of her breasts until she quivered with need, moaned her approval.

“Careful, Inspector, lest those words begin to charm me.” Mary delved a hand beneath his shirt once more to tangle her fingers in the mat of hair on his chest.

“Then you don’t wish to be charmed?” He was moments away from exploding, but he wanted to prolong the foreplay, merely because she captivated him. Yet still he craved her, couldn’t have enough of her, so he burrowed a hand beneath her skirting and didn’t stop until he brushed his fingers through the curls hiding that swollen bud at her center.

“I’m not entirely certain.” Her eyes briefly closed but she held him tighter, nipped and nibbled at place where his neck joined his shoulder, and when she lightly bit that skin, it was his turn to moan and hover on that razor’s edge of pleasure.

Was it wicked to tease her like this where a rescue party could come upon them at any time? Yes, yes it was. Did he care? Not in the least, for once they finally gave in to the passion and desire that had crackled between them since the first, perhaps he could have her out of his blood and could fully concentrate on the case.

With one hand playing her breast, he strummed the fingers of his other hand along the swelling button at her center, and as she gyrated her hips against his hand, he continued to kiss her, their moans blending into the all-encompassing silence around them. No longer did he notice the chill in the air.

“Oh, yes. Oh, yes!” A shiver went through the gorgeous widow on his lap. All too soon, Mary hit release, and it was the most beautiful thing he’d ever seen. She threw back her head and arched her spine, giving into a keening cry. Her body shook, and desire-laden man that he was, Gabriel took full advantage of her slip from reality. He suckled her nipple over and over until he’d brought her to the brink once more, and all the while, he never let up on the firm friction he put against that all-important nubbin.

I am so damned fortunate.

“Bloody hell, Mary,” he whispered against the soft skin of her neck. “I want you laid out on my bed, clad in nothing except your stockings and garters, for I’ve yet to see you naked.”

“Enjoy *this* moment, Inspector,” she said, her dulcet tones breathless as she trembled on his lap. “Enjoy *me*, now.”

Gabriel chuckled. “Oh, I intend to, but if this is too much—”

“No!” She fought her way through yards of skirting before her fingers fumbled at the buttons of his frontfalls. “Don’t you dare leave me feeling as if I’ll explode with no recourse. I shall dress you down as I did at the first.”

“You are quite skilled in that.” While he marveled over her enthusiasm, he batted her hand away in order to complete the task of freeing his hardened, straining shaft. “Never would I have guessed at your appetite.”

“I wasn’t always like this, but when I married, when I was introduced to intercourse, I grew to adore it.”

“Ah, then your husband was particularly skilled in that?” Threads of jealousy went through his chest as he paused in his erotic explorations.

“No, Inspector.” For a second, Mary sobered as she met his gaze. “Only at the first, then those couples became a chore, were used as punishments of sorts for my enjoyment until he stopped visiting my bed altogether, for he had plenty of other feminine interest to take care of his needs.” There was no bitterness in her voice, only sadness and perhaps regret.

For the space of a heartbeat, Gabriel froze, for she’d given him an insight into her past he couldn’t ignore. He cupped her cheek, peered into her face, made certain she could see into his eyes. “That is *not* your fault or a failure of your looks or charms.” Dragging the pad of his thumb along her lower lip, he whispered, “There is no crime in enjoying sex for sex’s sake, for the physical release or the exit of tension.”

Remarkably, tears rushed into her eyes. “Thank you.” But then those blue pools winked with wicked promise. “Shall we get on with it?”

“Certainly.” There was every possibility he wouldn’t survive to solve this case, not with this woman infecting his blood. “Let us hope I can still manage to satisfy a woman, for I am not a young man any longer.” The new worry lodged in his head and wouldn’t fade.

“I don’t think you will have any trouble.” She nipped at his chin, pressed tiny kisses to his cheeks, his forehead, the side of his neck. “Not with *this*.” Her fingers went gently around his aroused length, and when she squeezed his shaft, his whole world upended itself.

“Dear God, leave off unless you wish for me to embarrass myself. I promise to be at your mercy and let you play at a later time.” That assumed they would do this again instead of this being a one-off coupling.

“A fair compromise.” Her smile could have lit the whole of England with its brilliance, and suddenly he wanted to be the man who could make her do that always. “I need to feel you inside me, Inspector. No more delays.”

“Agreed.” When she rose onto her knees, he guided the head of his member to her opening, and as she slowly, oh so damned slowly, impaled herself on his length, a shuddering sigh left his throat. “Bloody hell, it has been far too long.”

She made a sound much like the purr of a contented cat. “You are quite satisfying,” she whispered as she wriggled on his length to fully seat him. “So amazing.” Then she moved, up and down, sliding along his shaft, over and over and over, her fingers digging into his shoulders as she held his gaze. “In the event you wondered, Gabriel, age has no bearing on your performance,” she whispered against his lips and then was apparently distracted in kissing him or learning the secrets of his mouth.

Soon he would be lost, drifting aimlessly in the wonder that was her. He widened his legs, thrust upward with each of her downstrokes, and with every pass, sanity slipped away.

As she bounced, a sound of frustration escaped her throat. “I need more, though, more than this position allows.”

“Agreed.” Quickly, urgently, he urged her off his lap. If he weren’t careful, he’d explode, and their tryst would end in embarrassment, but he encouraged her onto her back against the sofa cushions. With his lips at the shell of her ear, he said, “Knees to your chest. Let me go as deep into you as I can.” Then he followed her down, settled between her splayed knees, planted his elbows on either side of her to encompass her body within the cage of his arms while holding her head in his palms. “Better?”

“I couldn’t say, Inspector, until you claim me.”

“Ha!” God, how much did he adore her sharp mind and tart mouth? With one powerful thrust of his hips, he speared into her, burying himself in her tight heat until they were irrevocably joined.

“Yes! Oh, dear heavens, yes.” Surprise filled her eyes as she wrapped her arms about his shoulders and cradled his hips with her thighs. Her breath came in soft pants. “I can feel all of you now; you fill me so marvelously. This is... this is so...” She thrashed her head on the sofa cushion.

“I know.” The fact he could give her such pleasure where her husband had failed wasn’t lost on him, but now was not the time for words. Gabriel would show her that not all men were bounders, that he was worthy of her trust, and perhaps her continuing regard.

Again and again, he stroked into her body, thrilled that her honeyed heat sucked greedily at his shaft. Over and over, he lost himself in the glory of this charming widow who held countless secrets in her eyes. She held him close, encouraged him even closer with the subtle tightening of her fingers and legs, and he obeyed—how could he not? She was like a siren of old, and he couldn’t have enough. They moved together as one, as if they had been doing this very thing for years, and he marveled at that too.

As he stared into her eyes and she looked back, a piece of his heart unexpectedly flew into her keeping. What the hell was happening to him? This was merely a quick tryst, a coupling to assuage mutual desire and need. How could it become something entirely different in that same space of time?

Foreign emotions clogged his throat. His pulse roared in his ears while he continued to penetrate her. Not able to find the appropriate words, he pressed his forehead to hers, and when a moan escaped her, that tiny little sound broke the hold on his control. Need tingled through his stones, drawing them tight to his body. His rhythm changed, quickened, and he shifted his stance so that the root of his member rubbed against her nubbin. The acceleration of her breathing guided him, reassured him all was well, and he stroked into her with more authority.

Already primed, Mary slipped over the edge into bliss with a cry that echoed in the quiet. With another forceful thrust, Gabriel was thrown into the abyss where the vortex sucked him under, and bright stars burst behind his closed eyelids. Never had he found release so quickly or so strongly, but damn, it seemed appropriate that he did with her.

“Bloody hell, Mary.” She was incredible as well as beautiful. “You have nearly killed me.” He ground his hips into hers in an effort to prolong the wild sensations coursing through his body.

“I certainly hope not,” she whispered as she shivered from the release that still trembled about his member. “We have already established I am not a murderer.”

“No, you are not.” He kissed her because he could, and eventually, his shaft ceased to pump, and he lay still with her cradled beneath him while her arms remained looped about his shoulders. “Well, this is certainly a first for

me, taking a woman in a building that I was obliged to break into.”

When she giggled, the sensations that washed over him, from the root of his length to the tips of his hair, had him gasping. Would that she always remained in a good humor. “Life is unexplainable at times, as I said before.” With a sigh, she relaxed her legs but didn’t try to separate herself from him. “That was completely satisfying and just what I needed in that moment.” When she gave one of his buttocks a pinch, he almost plunged over the edge again. “Lovely performance, Inspector.”

He couldn’t help his grin. “Somehow, I don’t think Whitehall would agree with you.” Luckily, no one there would ever know what happened here.

Chapter Ten



Gabriel didn't know how long they'd laid together on that sofa, but eventually, she shoved at his shoulder, and he moved off her body.

As they both put their clothing to rights, he couldn't help but think what would become of their relationship now that they'd given into desire. He didn't want another marriage, at least not in this moment, but would she? From the little she'd told him about her past, he rather doubted she'd be willing to jump into that much-lauded state either.

If he wished to continue their association, they would need to conduct an affair and she would essentially become his mistress. Not quite a respectable position for a woman of such integrity as the widow, which was why it was a conundrum.

"I can almost hear you thinking, Bright," Mary said as she shifted her position on the sofa with her ankle propped on a decorative pillow.

Whenever she called him by his surname, it was a sure sign she was content or satisfied. It was when she used his title that meant she was angry, annoyed, or frustrated.

"What if I am?"

"Don't ruin what we just shared by thinking."

"I cannot help it. We met two days ago. It has almost been forty-eight hours, and within that time, we've butted heads more often than not. Additionally, there has been a murder." He mulled over his next words carefully. "Yet I have defiled you once and bedded you once. What does that say about me?"

Methodically, she removed the pins from her hair, and he watched in slight fascination as she shook out the blonde waterfall of her tresses. "That you are finally willing to live again after whatever happened in your past to make you retreat from life." She shrugged as she looked at him. "Beyond

that, a man can't defile a woman if she was a willing participant, and I wanted the bedding as much as you. If you are deemed scandalous, so will I be, and I don't care what people think of me."

Damn, but he admired her determination. Right now, he wanted to tangle his fingers in that hair, pull her head back, and kiss her senseless, tell her she'd been an accidental catalyst for the changes he was recently beginning to feel, but he did none of that. Instead, he stood rooted to the floor while the dancing candle flames sent eerie shadows over the walls.

"Neither do I, but I don't want you to think me depraved."

"I don't, and you are an intelligent man, Bright. I'm quite certain you know what I think of you."

Heat went up the back of his neck. "We can only hope I'm right." Obviously, he hadn't gotten her out of his system by bedding her. That was troubling, so he shoved those thoughts away. "Should we discuss the case, then?"

She heaved a sigh. "I am not in the mood for murder, and it would destroy this lovely feeling I'm enjoying from your attentions." As she talked, she gathered her hair, formed it into a twisted rope, wrapped it about itself, and then randomly stuck the hair pins back into the tresses. "And since I have put you off two, possibly three times, when you've asked about my marriage, I am ready to tell you that tale now."

"Only if you're certain." Yet internally, he rejoiced. It was the breakthrough he'd hoped for, and it meant she was comfortable enough in his presence to allow him in. Returning to the sofa, he settled at the opposite end and took her feet as well as the pillow they rested on into his lap. "I don't wish to cause you undue pain." For he'd seen the tears in her eyes when she'd spoken briefly about her physical history with her husband.

"I think it will be good to tell someone. The only person who knows that sordid story is my brother." Mary drew her cloak over her body as she gave into a shiver.

"Then by all means, unburden yourself. You'll have no judgment from me."

"No, I suppose I won't. Despite your penchant for seeing the world in black and white, you are fair, and I appreciate that."

Gabriel snorted. "I don't know about that." He traced his fingers along her left ankle. There was swelling there, but not enough to indicate serious injury.

Apprehension shadowed her face. When he began wrapping his discarded cravat around her ankle, she gave him a smile of gratitude. “Not long after the summer I spent with your brother, my parents started their campaign to marry me off.”

“Fearing you would embark on another quest to see yourself completely ruined,” he added in a soft voice while tying off the makeshift bandage.

“Yes.” She nodded. For long moments, Mary frowned at the space just over his left shoulder. “I was three and twenty when they introduced me to an acquaintance of my father’s. They both worked in the shipping industry, and this man, though rough around the edges, was charming enough to get by in society, but he was ten years my senior and had already been married once.”

Needing something to occupy his hands, Gabriel massaged her other foot. “Did he have children he wished to have mothered?”

“Not that I was aware of.” Her shrug only lifted one shoulder. “I suppose he had looks enough to make him interesting, but I think my heart—my soul—was still numb from being used by Francis.” Briefly, she pressed her lips together in a tight line. “I didn’t care what happened to me, but I did want to make my parents happy and proud after what I’d already done.”

“What did your brother think of this man?”

“William didn’t have much to say about him, for he was busy with his own marriage.” The delicate tendons of her throat worked with a hard swallow. “After some time had passed, I accepted Benjamin’s proposal, for it was easier than fighting, and he had coin enough to secure my future.”

“You were lonely.” He could very well understand her plight.

“Perhaps, but I also didn’t wish to be a burden to my parents. So I married a few months later. We lived in a row house not far from the London docks, since he had a small sloop he used to ferry goods to customers, and for the first few years, our marriage wasn’t bad.”

“Yet it wasn’t good.” It wasn’t a question.

“I’d never been married before, so I hadn’t a clue what a relationship was supposed to be, was supposed to feel like. Ben was attentive in those first years; I didn’t want for physical attention, but as his business expanded and his popularity grew, his time was fractured.”

He remained quiet, for he didn’t wish to disturb her by interrupting.

“With fame and wealth comes bad habits and vices, no matter where a

man stands in society. He took up drinking, which led to carousing.” A sigh escaped her. “When I demanded he give up the vices and be a real husband so that we could perhaps start a family, he was angered, accused me of being jealous of his success.”

“I can imagine what happened next.” And he didn’t wish to hear it, for he would want to summon the dastard back to life merely so he could render him dead all over again.

“Oh, I rather doubt you can.” She trained her over-bright eyes on him, and her smile was a watery affair. “Since I wasn’t able to conceive—either when I was with Francis or my husband—Ben thought I was doing something to prevent it. He accused me of deliberately sabotaging his reproductive efforts by enjoying being bedded too much.” Her fingers clutched at the folds of her cloak. “His answer was to punish me by bringing whores home and having relations with them, making certain I either listened or watched.” A waver went through her voice. “Then he would throw me on the bed and take me against my will, demanding I lie there while he got off his jollies. In his mind, whores enjoyed the act and never fell pregnant...”

“And by that flawed logic, a woman—a wife—shouldn’t enjoy sex which should all but guarantee fertility.” Anger shook his voice. The fact that man had treated her so callously enraged him. Yes, she’d survived a horrid union, but that didn’t mean she wasn’t scarred deeply. “Surely you know life doesn’t operate in that manner.”

“Of course I do,” she snapped and withdrew her feet from his lap. “Long ago I made peace with the possibility that I am barren.” Despite her swollen ankle, Mary stood, wincing. When he reached out a hand to her, she jerked her arm away. “Perhaps it was a failing on my part; perhaps not, but Ben treated me as if I had the plague. The last few years of our doomed marriage, he rarely came home. Not wishing to sit at home with nothing to occupy my mind, I looked after my father’s office and his account books.”

“While he said nothing out of embarrassment for matching you with the scoundrel to begin with,” Gabriel surmised as he stood and paced the floor with her in the event she needed assistance.

“Exactly. As time went on, life became easier. I rarely saw Benjamin, though I did hear about his exploits about London, and each one was a dagger to my heart.” Her chin trembled, and in the candlelight, tears sparkled in her eyes, magnifying the blue depths. “He didn’t die from natural causes or even with honor.”

“How?”

“He was shot in the chest after a brawl at a tavern. No one cared and the owner simply dumped his body out with the rubbish, where I assumed he’d bled out in the gutter. I wasn’t informed by a constable that he had died until a few days after the fact.” She shrugged. “Perhaps a fitting end.”

“But by then, you cared nothing for him, and if you did, it was anger.” Her story ran parallel with his, and he hurt for them both. “I’m sorry all the same. You didn’t deserve any of that, should have been cherished, even more so once your difficulties came to light.”

The sound of a stifled sob echoed fiercely in the silence. Mary turned about to face him as tears fell to her cheeks. “It was all too much, especially after what Francis did to me. I vowed on the day of Ben’s burial that I would no longer give my heart to a man, let alone my trust, because obviously my ability to make good decisions when it came to men is impaired.”

“And then I came along to cast doubt on all of that,” he dared to joke, for he merely wanted to see her in a good humor once more.

“It seems I couldn’t help myself; something about you invited me to trust you, and I inherently know you would never do anything to hurt me, physically or otherwise.”

“Of course I won’t.”

Her chin trembled again, and he lost a piece of his heart to her. “Good, because I don’t believe I am done with you quite yet, Gabriel.”

The sound of his name on her lips left him reeling. Not knowing what else to do, he crossed the room, then gathered her into his arms and simply held her as she cried against his shoulder. It was the first time she’d showed that level of vulnerability in front of him, and his protective instincts rose. If he could, he would keep every bad thing from her life, but he didn’t have that right.

Not yet, at least. That thought shocked the hell out of him, so he ignored that too.

“If your degenerate husband were still alive, I’d take him out to a dark alley and teach him a lesson for ever abusing you to begin with.”

A snort mixed with a laugh came from her. She patted his chest with a hand. “I appreciate the sentiment, but truly, he wasn’t worth your time or effort.” When she pulled back and met his gaze, her moisture-spiked lashes and sheen of moisture on her cheeks nearly had him on his knees, begging her to let him keep the world at bay. “The relief I felt upon receiving the

news was quite freeing, and I often wonder if I'm not a bad person for feeling that way."

"You are not. Trust me on that." He had felt the same when his wife had finally expired. Then he pressed his handkerchief into her hand. "You are better for consigning him to your past." Gently, he led her back to the sofa and urged her onto it. "Stay off your feet for as long as you can." But there was something he was curious to know. "After your unfortunate history with men, would you consider marriage again?"

"Honestly? I don't know." She frowned up at him. "That would largely depend on the man in question."

"Understandable." And provided him a bit of a reprieve to decide what he wanted for his own future as well.

"But..."

"Yes?" He could hardly breathe even though nothing had been discussed between them.

The smile she gave him once more had the power to tilt his world. "I am warning toward the possibility of a torrid affair, if the right man were to ask, for I rather fear I'm horrible at keeping a marriage together, but bed sport is altogether a different animal indeed."

"Ah. I shall bear that in mind." It was something and would keep her in his life until he could puzzle out everything else. And they were more than compatible when it came to passionate couplings. Oddly enough, hearing her say that lifted his spirits. Still, his nerves felt strung too tight. "I, should, ah, have a look around to find out what Mr. Alderson was doing here, since that is why we came out initially."

Mary nodded. "It's just as well you go alone. My ankle is throbbing." She waved him off. "But take a candle. I would like you to return in one piece."

"Right." With a grin he couldn't quite tamp, Gabriel took one of the candles in hand, shielded its flame with his other, and then set out to explore the other rooms in the mill.

There was nothing of interest in most of the rooms, and glimpsing the huge stones that ground wheat into flour while eerie shadows played over the walls was a bit disturbing. However, in one of the narrow corridors, he stepped on something soft. Upon further inspection, it was a man's handkerchief, crumpled and discarded. Not far away was a lace-edged cap that a maid or other domestic household servant would typically wear while

involved in their chores.

How curious. Was that evidence Mr. Alderson had indeed had a tryst with one of the maids from Stanwick Hall? Or had he diddled with a girl from the village? After he'd collected the garments, he brought the handkerchief to his nose and sniffed. Then his blood ran cold. The subtle but lingering scent was unmistakable, and he knew to whom the handkerchief belonged—his brother. It was a blend of scents he ordered especially from a shop in London, one he'd put together himself, and it was quite unique.

“Well, damn.” What the devil was Stanwick thinking in breaking his marriage vows? Though, if the viscountess' own admission was to be believed, she hadn't considered them sacred either. “I wish I didn't know that.” Tucking the evidence into the interior pocket of his tailcoat, he then returned to Mary's location. “Alderson wasn't trysting here.”

“What was the purpose of the visit then?”

He huffed. “He was no doubt setting up a love nest for my brother.” Quickly, he told her of his discoveries. “This means the butler was well aware of Stanwick's secrets and he'd no doubt made Francis pay through the nose to keep them quiet.”

“Which gives the viscount motive to remove Alderson from this life.”

“Exactly.” With every hour that marched on, it seemed as if everyone around him had a reason to do the butler harm.

“If you are waiting for me to express surprise regarding either man, I will not.” There was a hard set to her lips he was beginning to associate with annoyed judgment. “Neither one of them are upstanding members of their respective societies.”

“You will find no argument here, but as a detective, I must maintain a nonpartisan attitude.” It was on the tip of his tongue to say more when the jingle of harnesses reached his ears. “Take heart, Mary. I believe rescue has come, but to be sure, I'll reconnoiter.” Quickly, he left the room once more only to return moments later. “It's the second sleigh from the manor with two groomsmen. Can you walk or shall I carry you out?” He snagged up his greatcoat and shoved his arms into the sleeves. His muffler and top hat followed.

She wriggled to the edge of the sofa and fished about on the floor for her slippers with a foot. “I can attempt to walk, at least to the front door.”

“Independent to the end, hmm?” he murmured softly, but crossed the room to blow out the candles.

“It is how I have always been,” she said with a grin as she stood and then donned her cloak.

Just one of the things he admired about her. Once all three candles were extinguished, Gabriel escorted her through the mill with an arm about her waist until they gained the front door that stood open where the two groomsmen were waiting. “Mrs. Tomlinson was injured in the crash.” Of course it was still snowing. When would this bout of precipitation end? Then, without further conversation, he lifted Mary into his arms, and reveled again at her closeness.

“We’ve brought fur-lined lap blankets thinking you would have nearly frozen by now,” one of the young men said as he led the way to the other sleigh.

Golden illumination from two lanterns gave the scene a cheerful atmosphere and took the sting out of the encompassing darkness.

“Much appreciated,” Gabriel said and hoped to God his expression didn’t reflect the smugness he felt for having bedded the widow and thereby generating their own unique heat. As soon as he had her settled on one of the benches, the groomsmen both tucked blankets around her. “Glad you boys came when you did, though.” He dropped heavily onto the opposite bench and wrapped his greatcoat more tightly about himself.

“When your horse came back without you or the vehicle, everyone was immediately worried,” one of the men explained as he climbed into the driver’s box.

“And what’s more, we examined the broken sleigh when we arrived, and both runners were sawed halfway through. Didn’t matter if you hit a stump or not, that sleigh would have crashed just by hitting a dip in the snow.” The second groomsmen climbed up beside the first.

“The hell you say.” Cold foreboding circled through Gabriel’s gut as he stared at Mary. “Someone tampered with the sleigh.” It wasn’t a question.

“Seems like,” the second groomsmen said while twisting on his bench to address Gabriel. “I guess you questioning everyone has made someone nervous, Inspector.”

“It happens,” he said in a non-committal voice while fear iced his spine. Before it was merely a normal investigation. Now it had become something sinister if someone wished to put their lives in danger. “I have a job to do, so my questions won’t cease.” When he glanced again at Mary, he frowned, for she watched him with rounded eyes.

I cannot have her on this case with me any longer.

The ride back to Stanwick Hall was conducted in silence. He didn't know what Mary was thinking, but his thoughts were in a loop in his head. Above all he needed to keep her safe. If anyone should bear the brunt of this case, it was him.

By the time they arrived at the manor, his hands were freezing, for he'd left his gloves at the mill. When Mary told him not to carry her inside, he gave her a curt nod, for he was distracted by trying to figure out who could have done this and why. He said nothing, only offered his arm to her and adjusted his pace to accommodate her hobbling gait. Nearly to the grand staircase, he drew her to a halt.

"Things have become far too dangerous for you to continue assisting me on this case, so in an effort to keep you safe, I'm removing you from it. Violence is no place of a woman."

Her lower jaw dropped. "You are sacking me from a volunteer position due to my alleged sensibilities?"

Bloody hell. That had gotten twisted around. "No, I am keeping you safe." Why couldn't she see that?

Shock and disappointment warred for dominance in her expressive eyes. "At least you were honest about it," she dropped her voice, "but I had expected better of you after what happened in the mill. It seems the best of men are only men after all once they have what they wanted." With her chin held high, Mary slowly made her way up the first few treads. "Good luck, Inspector Bright. I suspect we won't see much of each other during the remainder of the house party since you'll be wrapped up in the case." Frost was evident in her voice and the straightness of her spine.

Why was she so impossible? "It isn't like that." Shoving a hand through his hair, he watched her ascend the stairs. Never once did she look back, and he couldn't very well bound after her or argue with her, especially not now when the whole of the gathering knew they'd been forced to spend a few hours alone with each other.

"I knew getting involved with a woman would mean trouble for me," he grumbled to himself. The best thing to do was concentrate on the case, and that meant interviewing his damned brother. Yet, exhaustion seeped into his bones. Without Mary at his side, everything was suddenly... less. It was too late tonight, and he simply wasn't in the mood to match wits with the viscount.

Perhaps tomorrow morning would provide new insight and a miracle he sorely needed.

Chapter Eleven



December 24, 1818
Christmas Eve

When Mary awoke that morning, she was still out of temper with Inspector Bright. It didn't matter that they'd come together carnally the night before. It didn't matter that he was fast becoming an addiction. And it certainly didn't matter that she enjoyed spending time with him more than she probably should. If he thought her incapable of being intelligent enough to puzzle out the case with him, then she refused to have anything else to do with him.

I should have known better than to think that any male member of the Bright family was worth redeeming.

By the time she'd completed the necessary morning ablutions and donned a day dress of a maroon wool blend, her niece came into the room with a breakfast tray.

"Good morning, Aunt Mary. I thought you might be hungry and might not wish to hobble downstairs." She gave Mary a grin then rested the tray on the foot of her bed. "Are you excited for the Christmas Eve ball tonight?"

To be honest, she'd forgotten all about it. With a sigh, Mary drifted over and then dropped into the straight-backed wooden chair beside her bed. "It slipped my mind since I've been so busy helping with Inspector Bright's investigation." Among other things she'd done with him.

"You *are* going to attend, aren't you?" Worry shadowed Adelaide's face as she poured out a cup of tea and then handed it over.

"I suppose I ought to though I don't know if I'll be able to dance." Seemingly in another lifetime, she had enjoyed dancing, but once she'd

married, there was none of that in her life, for her husband always maintained he wasn't the society type. More's the pity she wouldn't be able to experience a waltz while partnered with Gabriel...

Stop that, Mary. He doesn't deserve your regard.

"Was it frightening when you were in that accident last night?"

"A bit." And now that she knew the sleigh had been tampered with, it was even more disconcerting. "I did wonder if we would ever be rescued."

"I'm sure the inspector would have set out on foot and brought help himself." The girl sighed. "He is ever so dashing, don't you think?" Before Mary could answer, Adelaide continued. "I never imagined a man from Bow Street would be as handsome as he is, but he is so intimidating as he's going around interviewing all the guests."

She forced the sip of tea down her throat with a hard swallow. "Has he interviewed you?"

"Not yet, but I cannot wait until he does." There was a dreamy expression on her face that Mary didn't quite trust.

"Why?"

"Well, it's quite exciting to be a part of a murder investigation, isn't it?" The girl shrugged. "Belle told me his marriage was horrid and that it's unlikely he will ever marry again."

"Oh?" While she didn't endorse gossip, Gabriel had been uncommonly tight-lipped about his personal history, regardless that she'd finally shared hers. "Why is that?"

"She didn't say, only that his wife treated him poorly." Adelaide glanced at her with interest. "What do *you* think of the inspector?"

"He is very skilled in what he does. No doubt he will ferret out whoever killed Mr. Alderson quite soon." That was all her niece needed to know.

For long moments, Mary indulged in the light repast Adelaide had brought up.

"How will you spend your morning?" the girl wanted to know.

"I'm going to shut myself away in the library. Losing myself in a few books sounds refreshing and it's quite needed, especially to cultivate quiet time before the chaos preparing for the ball will bring." She *would not* think about the inspector or how much he'd disappointed her. "What is on your agenda today?"

Adelaide shrugged. "Belle said something about going down to the

kitchens to steal some Christmas pastries then we're to learn how to play billiards with some of the boys. Right after luncheon, the viscountess is going to have us decorate oranges with cloves and ribbons to set about the house."

"It sounds like your day is truly spoken for." Mary finished her tea. "Promise me you aren't sneaking off to indulge in scandal. Your father will absolutely have my head."

"Of course I'm behaving!" The girl smiled. "But remember, Auntie, there is nothing wrong if *you* wished to chase scandal for yourself."

Heat stung her cheeks. Had she guessed what had occurred between her and the inspector? "I shall bear that in mind."

Adelaide smiled. "Do more than consider it. The inspector is gorgeous. His hair alone is swoon worthy, and those eyes!" A blush went through the girl's cheeks. "More's the pity he is far too old for me, but he might be perfect for you... if you would give a man a chance to be in your life."

Over the years, her niece had no doubt picked up bits and pieces from Mary's past, and while that was to be expected, Mary didn't want the bald truth known. It wasn't flattering. "I appreciate your concern, but there are more avenues to consider than merely that."

The girl nodded. "Then perhaps one of the other men at the house party might catch your eye, especially tonight at the ball." Excitement danced in her eyes. "I am quite looking forward to wearing my Christmas gown and perhaps dancing with a handsome stranger."

"Don't be in a rush to begin that next phase of your life, dearest. You have plenty of time." Would that someone had cautioned her when she'd been Adelaide's age. However, she'd been headstrong then when Francis had turned her head and manipulated her heart. Sage advice probably wouldn't have stopped her from doing what she had.

Now she'd let the other Bright brother couple with her.

What is wrong with me?

"Oh, you poor, sad auntie." Adelaide came close and kissed her cheek. "I still have hope for you, even if you've given up." Then she gave a wave and skipped from the room.

Mary sighed. *To be young again and never worry about the consequences.*

A half hour later saw her in the library, where she was acutely aware that the inspector was no doubt occupying the library a few doors down from

her location.

Had he given any thought to her overnight? Did he care that he'd upset her?

With a huff of annoyance, she attempted to focus on the book in her lap. The fire was cozy enough as it snapped and crackled in the hearth, and miracle of all miracles, it had stopped snowing. Anemic sunlight filtered in through the windows. Perhaps that would mean some members of the house party might try to attend midnight services in the village after the ball. Neither that nor the ball itself appealed to her, for she disliked the cold, and her recent actions were at odds with the proper life one should live if one followed the teachings of the church.

However, she regretted none of it, with the exception of giving into her insecurities, which led to her snapping at the inspector, driving a wedge between them.

The sound of fabric rustling at the doorway alerted her to the presence of another person, but then the intoxicating scents of sandalwood, orange, and spice betrayed the identity of the intruder. Awareness immediately prickled over her skin while flutters went through her lower belly. She turned her head, met Gabriel's gaze as he came into the room, but he gave nothing away of how he was feeling. "I am occupying the room currently so would ask that you come back later."

He softly snorted. "I realize that, but I wanted to talk with you."

"Personally, or for your case?" Did she care either way?

"Perhaps both."

"Ah." Now was the perfect time to drive home her point and show him how wrong he'd been. Setting her book aside, Mary put the back of her wrist to her forehead and pretended she was falling into a swoon as if she were helpless.

Gabriel came further into the room and around the sofa so that he stood before her with a fierce scowl. "What the hell are you doing?" he asked with his hands propped on his hips, which only served to call her attention to that interesting part of him.

She fought off the urge to grin. "Since you obviously feel I'm naught but a helpless female who is incapable of doing anything or defending myself against an attacker, I shall act appropriately." Then she slumped against the back of the sofa while he narrowed his eyes on her. "Life is so much better when I'm the vapid, brainless female that you apparently think I am, for it

takes the pressure of being someone else from me.” Had her performance gone too far?

“Bloody hell, Mary.” An honest to goodness growl issued from him. “That is not what I meant last night, and you know it.”

“How should I? According to you, I don’t have the capacity to think like you.” She continued to recline on the sofa. “And you don’t properly communicate what it is you want from me.” In this issue or any other.

“I’ll concede that you have a point.” Yet annoyance rolled off him in waves. “After the news of the sleigh runners being tampered with and knowing the murderer is still among us, I wanted to be certain you’re protected. In order to do that, I need to keep you safe, and that means pulling you off the case.” Nothing but frank outrage reflected in his hazel eyes.

Mary righted herself on the sofa. “Then you don’t think I’m incapable?”

“I do not. In fact, you are more clever and intelligent than many men I know, some of them even at Whitehall.” He sat on the lip of the low table near her location. “And after our abrupt break last night, oddly, I have missed you,” he added in a low voice that sent silly flutters into her lower belly. A trace of vulnerability went over his face. “Will you please continue to act as my assistant—my partner—in solving this case?”

Somewhat mollified, she nodded. “Are you certain I’m up to such a masculine task?” For whatever reason, she couldn’t stop teasing him.

A faint grin flirted with the corners of his mouth, and she suddenly had the urge to kiss him. “I cannot think of anyone else I’d rather have on the task. Hell, you could probably solve the case quicker than I can if you have no distractions.”

One of her eyebrows lifted. “Well, if someone wasn’t so deliciously distracting...”

Ruddy color went up his neck above his collar, but he nodded. “The same can be said of you, so will you help me? I apologize for my highhanded treatment. It has seemingly been an age since I needed to worry about a woman’s feelings outside of a potential suspect capacity.”

They both had their difficulties brought on by their pasts and would both need to learn how to overcome those things together, but she nodded. “I will. However, you need to be more forthcoming regarding yourself and why you do what you do. Whatever is between us may not be a courtship, but I refuse to let it be a one-sided affair.”

“Agreed.” His Adam’s apple bobbed with a hard swallow. “I am finding that indulging in... whatever this is,” he gestured between them, “will have more of a chance once I stop looking at it through the shadowed lens of the past.”

“But it’s a difficult endeavor since that very history has indelibly shaped our lives,” she said softly, but thrilled that they were back together and on equal footing again. “Regardless, I understand the sentiment.”

“Yes.” For long moments, he regarded her with questions in his hazel eyes, but it wasn’t an unpleasant stare, and it rather warmed her from head to toe. “Do I have your forgiveness?”

“You do.” She wasn’t one of those women who would nurse a grudge or treat him to silence merely to prove a point. That was childish and manipulative behavior and didn’t solve anything. “Bear in mind that your safety is as important as mine.”

A trace of shock went through his eyes. “You are worried for me?”

“Of course.” A frown tugged at the corners of her lips. “Why do you assume I am not? You can be hurt just as easily as I can.”

“No one has ever been concerned about me before.”

“I’m sorry, and that sounds very sad.” She held out a hand to him, and when he took it, the warmth of him, the security in that pedestrian touch lifted her spirits. “I’m sure your son doesn’t want you to be injured either. Now you have two people in your life who cares.”

The grin he flashed could rival a thousand lit candles. “I appreciate that.” When his eyes darkened, her heartbeat accelerated. “Regarding yesterday...”

“It was a lovely evening, and I couldn’t have asked for a better way to spend that time,” she said before he made a cake of himself.

“Agreed.” Then he blew out a breath. “How does your ankle fare today?”

Mary shrugged. “There is a bit of a twinge when I overwork it, but otherwise, all is well.”

“Will you attend the ball tonight?”

“That largely depends on whether you will be there, Inspector.” She offered him a small smile. “Yes, I’ll need to watch over Adelaide, and no doubt your son will need a slight nudge of confidence, but it might be lovely to indulge in a dance if the right man were to ask.” What sort of managing baggage was she to push him into such a thing?

“I will be there, for how better to study our fellow guests than from the sidelines of a ball?” Slowly, he stood, and she assumed he would leave the room. “If you’re of a mind, I’d like to continue the investigation before everyone is too busy preparing for the ball.”

“All right. Who do you have in your crosshairs now?”

“My brother.” His eyes were like hard pieces of glass as he stared down at her. “If he didn’t want his indiscretions for public consumption, he had every reason to kill the butler, and if Alderson was blackmailing him? Even more so.”

She sucked in a breath. “You want me to accompany you to interview the viscount.” It wasn’t a question, yet it put so much apprehension into her chest, she could scarcely breathe.

“I do, because it will make him even more uncomfortable to the point that he might not watch his words as carefully.” Then he sat next to her on the sofa, rearranging her feet into his lap. “However, first, I am going to massage your ankle while you tell me about the gown you’re planning to wear tonight.”

“You care about such things?” How odd yet somewhat gratifying, for her husband never said anything about what she chose to wear.

“I am interested in you, Mary, and whatever you are doing.” Gently, he removed the slipper from her left foot. “Why don’t you read to me from your book while we catch this brief moment to ourselves?”

“All right.” The scene was so domestic, she internally reeled. *I could become all too used to this.* But she also wasn’t a green girl who believed every day going forward would be this blissful, for the sheer fact that men and women would butt heads occasionally, and only the lucky ones wouldn’t turn violent.

Chapter Twelve



Knots of anxiety pulled in Mary's belly as she followed Bright into the private family parlor on the third floor in pursuit of Viscount Stanwick. Decorated in lovely, muted shades of green from the drapes to the upholstery to the thick Aubusson rugs on the floor, it was an oasis of calm in a sometimes hectic household. As with the drawing room, there was a curio cabinet here containing more antiquities on display. An oil painting depicting the viscount, his wife, and two children hung prominently on one wall, perhaps done a couple of years before.

It was bizarre to think this was Christmas Eve, yet they were still investigating a murder. Equally disturbing was the fact that the inspector intended to confront his brother with her in tow. She'd not felt comfortable in Francis' company since the moment she stepped into the house for this party, and now here she was, intentionally stirring up a hornet's nest with him.

"Francis, I demand a moment of your time," he said without pleasantries as he went into the room. "This is about the investigation."

Mary had no choice but to follow. Oh, this wouldn't end well at all, and might just hopelessly drive a wedge between the two brothers.

The viscount sprang up from a low sofa where he'd been enjoying a cup of tea and reading a copy of *The Times*. "What the devil are you about, Gabriel? It's Christmas Eve, and I'm hosting a damned ball later. Surely all of this can wait until at least Boxing Day."

"Crime doesn't wait for days on a calendar, and shouldn't you be at least a bit concerned that someone on your staff was violently murdered not three days past?" He stood close to his brother with his eyes narrowed on him, which gave her an excellent chance to compare the two.

Where Gabriel was an inch or so taller than his older brother, his hair was also thicker and his form more robust. As the years had gone by, Francis

had gained a bit of weight, his sandy-blond hair had thinned somewhat, and he was in danger of having jowls. It was nothing a bit of daily exercise couldn't rectify, but she had the feeling the viscount was a touch lazy since he'd come into the title. Certainly, he wasn't the man she'd had her head turned by in her younger years, and the truth of the matter was, she vastly preferred the inspector, for his soul and personality were infinitely more delightful. Perhaps Gabriel took better care of himself or hadn't fallen to vices like Francis had, but then the inspector knew the value of hard work and doing something for himself. Those values were something the viscount would never have.

She appreciated him all the more now, after only knowing him less than a handful of days. How he treated people was night and day different from how Francis did. It was quite telling.

"Ha! You think to lecture me?" The viscount drilled a forefinger into his brother's chest. "This is bad form, and you know it."

"So is killing someone, and if that person was you, I *will* find that out." He removed his small, leatherbound notebook and pencil nub from the interior pocket of his jacket. "If we could accomplish this interview in a decent manner? The day is proving to be full."

With a fierce glare, Francis returned to the sofa he'd abandoned when they'd come in. "Fine." Once he'd seated himself, he rested an ankle on a knee. "What is it you think you know?"

While the men were still glaring at each other, Mary perched on the edge of a chair that matched Gabriel's. This should be an interesting interview, and part of her hoped Bright put his brother in his place.

"During our trip to the old mill, I did some investigating while we waited for rescue. I found your little love nest."

"Preposterous." The viscount shook his head. "You are trying to trap me." His expression was much like a thundercloud.

Bright heaved out a sigh. "I'm afraid not." He dropped into a chair near his brother's location and consulted a page in his notebook. "I found one of your handkerchiefs at the scene, Francis, along with a maid's lace-trimmed cap." One of his eyebrows rose. "Did you have Mr. Alderson go ahead of you and scout out locations for your trysts?" When Francis remained silent, the inspector continued. "How many times did you encourage Alderson to do that for you?"

The viscount huffed. "That is none of your concern."

“It is since it directly ties you to Alderson and gives you a motive to kill him.”

For long moments, Francis said nothing, but then he waved a hand. “I enjoy the company of women. Alderson was always in my business, second-guessing my decisions, judged me as if he knew best,” he said in a low voice. “I told him to stay out of my life, and since I can’t seem to help myself, yes, I trysted with one of the upstairs maids a few times at the mill.” He shrugged. “There is something about the forbidden that tempts me, and she practically begged for my attentions.”

Both she and Bright rolled their eyes. *Good lord, but the man is a cad!* His tastes for young women had not changed since she’d known him.

“But that damned Alderson couldn’t leave well enough alone. He kept on about it. Every time he set up a meeting place, he threatened to tell Vivian about the trysts unless I gave him various things he asked for.”

“Such as?”

The viscount shrugged. “Items from my curio cases, coin, cravats. For a butler, he had grandiose tastes.” His gaze jogged to Mary, and she didn’t quite trust the look in his eye. “He was the one who’d told me you had arrived.”

She snorted. “He warned me away from you immediately upon arrival, as if I had any intention of talking to you again.”

For long moments, silence reigned in the room. Residual anger circled through Mary’s chest while Bright kept his own counsel.

Gabriel scribbled a note in the book. “Does your wife know you’ve broken your marriage vows?”

His brother snorted. “As if she hasn’t?” Anger rolled through the viscount’s tone. “Do you know how embarrassing it is that she blatantly brags about how manly some of the footmen are, how much more stamina they have over me?”

She and Bright exchanged a glance, and she was hard-pressed not to laugh. “Well, men *do* age, after all.” Except, she had no complaints with the inspector’s performance.

“Besides, from your own admission, you will apparently bed anything in skirts. If your wife knows, why should she remain loyal to you?” Bright asked as he scribbled in his notebook.

The viscount’s face reddened. “It is my prerogative; it is what men in the *ton* do. Expected, even.”

“Not all men, Francis,” he said in a soft voice. “But then, you and I are very different people even if we *are* brothers.”

“My wife hated Alderson much more than I did. Perhaps she had him killed.” The viscount’s glare turned hard. “Whatever else you think of me, I did not off Alderson, so take another look at your damned son since he was there.” Slowly, he rose to his feet. “Now, if we are finished here? My schedule is quite full.”

Knowing they wouldn’t have anything else from the man, Mary also stood. Bright wasn’t far behind. “Thank you for your time, Lord Stanwick. I hope your ball tonight is a success.” Since the snow had stopped yesterday, that meant the roads had a chance of being passable so the gentry could come up to Stanwick Hall.

“Indeed, thank you,” Bright said in a solicitous tone. “If I have further questions, I’ll seek you out.” As she turned to go, he caught her eye and gave her a tiny shrug.

“One moment, if you please, Mrs. Tomlinson. I would like to speak with you. Alone,” Francis added with another hard look at his brother.

Gabriel stuffed his notebook and pencil back into its pocket. “Is that truly necessary?”

“It is, and I will remind you that I am a viscount, so you have no authority to pull rank on me.” Francis waved a hand and dismissed his brother. “This doesn’t concern you or the case.”

The inspector ignored him. Instead, he held her gaze. “I will only go if you are all right with speaking to him alone.”

Slowly, Mary nodded. Best have this out in the open and done with so it wouldn’t continue to fester. “I can look after myself. Regardless, this shouldn’t take long.”

“Very well.” With a nod to her, Bright exited the room, but if she knew the inspector, he only went halfway down the corridor. She was quickly learning that he would protect her no matter what.

It was quite a heady concept and one that was foreign to her. Then, with a frown, she regarded the viscount. “What is it you need?”

“Rumors have reached my ears that you and my brother are spending inappropriate amounts of time together,” he said in a conversational tone as he prowled toward her location. “I’ll admit, that took me by surprise.”

“I am acting as his assistant on this case, so it’s perfectly reasonable I would spend time with him.” She crossed her arms over her chest, for she

didn't trust the man. He didn't bring her peace like his brother did. "It should set your mind at ease that we are working to solve the mystery."

He snorted. "I couldn't care less about Alderson. He was quite a scare, and quite frankly, life at Stanwick Hall will be better for his absence." With a shrug, he easily dismissed the man. "I'll have him replaced in no time."

"I wouldn't know about that." Mary watched him with trepidation. "You still haven't told me why you wished to speak with me."

Then he was there and sliding a fingertip down her arm. "I had no idea you were my daughter's roommate's aunt, but when I saw you in my drawing room, I couldn't help but remember that summer you and I spent together. Do you also recall that time?"

"It is something I haven't been able to forget no matter how hard I try and one reason I don't trust men readily," she said while raising her chin a fraction. No matter if she moved slightly away, he followed and continued to trail his fingers along various portions of her arm, shoulder, or cheek. Highly annoying.

"Stop denying the attraction, Mary. It has never faded." When he dared to slide his hand down her back to brush her arse, she gasped and put distance between them.

"I would caution you from touching me again, Lord Stanwick." There was no mistaking the frost in her voice.

"You would choose my brother over me, after knowing how I could play your body?" He huffed and his eyes flashed with anger. "Gabriel is a large step down and a poor imitation."

This man had learned nothing in the intervening years, and was even more of a problem than he'd been then. "First off, my lord, you are married. Secondly, our history no longer matters. It was a decision I made years ago and taught me things I needed to know about life. Thirdly, Gabriel is rather a step up from you since he respects me as a person as well as takes my needs into consideration, values my mind and what else I bring to this existence beyond the carnal." Heat went through her cheeks when she thought of their coupling at the mill. The difference between the men was startlingly.

The viscount narrowed his eyes. "He won't marry you, if that's what you're thinking."

"I am not in the market to wed again, but I am interested in respect, genuine admiration, and companionship." Mary shook her head. "Perhaps

you should seek that with your wife. If you had from the first, perhaps she wouldn't have strayed."

If possible, he grew even more incensed. "How dare you."

Mary smiled, for she'd made a direct hit. "The truth hurts, doesn't it, Lord Stanwick? Now, if there is nothing else? I have much to do before the ball." When she gained the door and glanced back at the fuming viscount, she said, "The past is best left there, for the future has no connection to it. I will not discuss it again." Without another word or worry, she exited the room. As expected, Bright waited in the corridor. Flutters of sheer giddiness twisted down her spine as he grinned at her, and what was more, the gesture crinkled the delicate corners of his eyes. Never had she seen him so genuine.

"Well done, Mrs. Tomlinson. That was a rather impressive showing."

She returned his grin as she reached his location and fell into step beside him. "Thank you. It was quite nerve-wracking, though."

"And needed, I'd imagine. You seemed as if putting that firmly to rest has been uppermost in your mind for a bit."

"It was."

"Well, I am in awe of you." Playfully, he grabbed her hand and brought it to his lips. "I am glad I met you."

"Do stop, Inspector." But warmth went through her belly. Such teasing or admiration had never come from his brother. It made such a difference.

"Are you sure?" He leaned close and fit his lips to hers. "I'm so damned proud of you for telling off my brother and painting me in a glowing light that I could kiss you senseless right now."

Well, that sounded beyond delicious and a lovely way to pass a few hours. "While I would ordinarily adore that, I should probably bid you nay." She kept her own voice low, for even though they were alone in the corridor, there were always servants about. "I need to spend some time with Adelaide. I feel I'm failing as a companion." Especially since she'd already indulged in scandal with this man.

"If you are, then I am as well, but let me also say this." Once more he grinned, and her world unexpectedly tilted. "At some point we have to let go and trust that our charges will make intelligent, informed decisions because we have taught them at least that."

How much did she appreciate his wisdom? "Thank you for that. What is on your agenda at the present time? More interviewing?"

“Though there are a few people I still need to speak with, it can wait until later. I am for luncheon, and I hope you’ll join me.” When he released her hand, she immediately missed the heat of his fingers on hers. “After that, I suppose we will both be prepping for the ball later.”

“Of course I’ll join you, but don’t forget that you owe me your personal history, Bright.” Surely, he respected her enough to give her at least that.

At the stairs, he nodded. “Sometime tonight. I promise you, and I don’t give that lightly.” Emotions gathered in his hazel eyes, but none of them were dominant enough to read.

“Then by all means, let us go into luncheon. Perhaps the young people will regale us with tales of the holiday, so we can feel even older than we already are.” Yet somehow, in his company, she felt as if she’d regained a part of her life she’d thought she’d lost long ago.

Chapter Thirteen



Christmas Eve ball

“Would it be such a bad thing if I didn’t go downstairs?” Nervousness echoed in Henry’s voice as Gabriel put the final touches on his own cravat.

Since he wanted these last moments with his son, he’d dismissed his valet. “Well, yes, since your presence here is essentially the only reason why we came.” To soften the words, he offered a grin. “However, I well remember how much anxiety I felt when I was forced to attend my first ball.”

“But you were in the military when you were my age.”

“I was, yet there were times on leave when many a hostess invited military men at the last minute to make up numbers.” He brushed lint from the sleeve of Henry’s sleeve. “Trust me when I tell you that staring down an enemy is easier than circulating at a ball and asking a woman to partner me in a dance.”

“It’s quite terrifying,” his son whispered as his face drained of all color. “What if no one wants to dance with me? What if I trip over my feet?”

“Stop.” Gabriel rested his hands on Henry’s shoulders. “Look at me.” When his son met his gaze, he nodded. “Breathe. In the grand scheme of things, this will *not* be the most important thing you ever do, but it *will* help you reach that moment.”

“Right.” The poor lad took a few deep breaths but still appeared a bit green about the gills. “What do I do?”

“Be yourself. You’re a charming enough lad. Go down there and concentrate on having fun, not on selecting a woman to spend the evening with.” He gave his son’s shoulder a good-natured slap. “Above all, relax, and if you need someone to practice with and give you confidence, ask Mrs. Tomlinson, or even her niece, to dance. She can help guide you through the

social waters.”

“Of course!” A modicum of relief went through Henry’s expression. “Mrs. Tomlinson has a way of explaining things that makes sense to me and takes the fear from it.”

“That is good to know.” Indeed, the widow was nurturing and supportive in addition to having captivated him in how she moved and talked, how her lips formed words, how she smelled and felt when he—

“What of you, Papa?” The inquiry yanked him from his thoughts. “Will you dance and flirt tonight, and with Mrs. Tomlinson to boot?”

Shock rolled through his chest, but he ignored it. “I hadn’t planned on it. I’m your chaperone, remember? Designated as such, I’m relegated to the background.”

“Ah, yet why do I have the feeling you will continue your investigation?” Amusement twinkled in Henry’s eyes. “I say you should take the widow onto the floor, for I believe you and she are becoming more than friends or detective partners, but since you’ve dropped pomade onto your evening breeches and have no recourse but to attend a ball in regular breeches, you’ll already cause a sensation.” A knowing grin spread over the young man’s face.

Heat went up the back of his neck. He normally didn’t use the hair aid, but he’d hoped to tame his hair tonight to look respectable... and then he’d dropped a great glob of it before it ever reached his tresses. “How, ah... What makes you think that?” He rather thought they’d been careful enough to evade scrutiny.

“About Mrs. Tomlinson? It’s a feeling I have, and the way you sometimes look at her. Like you did at luncheon.”

Bloody hell. “How’s that, then?”

Henry shrugged. “As if you couldn’t wait for her to speak again, and when she did, everything she said was simply marvelous and unexpected.”

“Ha!” What a silly thing to note. “We were merely talking about our favorite Christmas desserts. I’m hoping there are mince pieces on the buffet tonight.”

“It doesn’t matter the subject, for I suspect you consider her superior to many of us here, and she’s not bad looking either. I mean, for a woman of her advanced years, that is.” When Gabriel attempted a protest, his son shook his head and laid a hand on his shoulder. “There is no crime in liking a woman, Papa.” The young man’s eyes were serious. “After what you went

through with Mama, you deserve a good life, to be happy, and I hope you find it.”

When did his son become so insightful? *Perhaps I am not failing as a father as I thought.* “Thank you.” It humbled him to know Henry didn’t resent the break in his marriage nor blame him for running off his mother. “I shall bear your words in mind.” If he couldn’t wear his evening breeches, he damn well wasn’t going to wear the shoes with the buckles. Good thing he’d brought a new pair of boots and they were already shining.

Decorum and proper etiquette be damned. It wasn’t as if the patronesses of Almack’s would be in attendance.

“Bah.” Henry good-naturedly pointed his gaze to the ceiling. “Drop the proper act for once and live! You are not getting any younger.”

“And thank you for *that* reminder.” Gabriel mock punched Henry’s shoulder. Both of them shared a laugh. “If things feel natural, I shall ask her to dance.”

God help me.

Ten minutes later saw them both in the ballroom that was just beginning to fill with excited happy guests. Since they kept country hours at Stanwick Hall, the ball had begun at seven o’clock and would conclude around eleven so any guests or staff that wished to attend midnight Christmas services could do so.

Men were dressed in the requisite dark evening clothing with tailcoats, but the women’s gowns and glittering jewels gave life to the room. Not immediately seeing Mary or her niece, Gabriel did a slow walk about the perimeter of the room while Henry went off to join a knot of other young men. If anyone thought poorly of him for wearing modified evening dress, they were too well bred to say it.

Everywhere his gaze was drawn, candles twinkled and guttered from holders, sconces, and a grand crystal chandelier hanging from the center of the ceiling. The pungent scent of fir boughs and swag over the windows and doorframes wafted to his nose along with the aromas of cloves and oranges. In one corner, a string quartet tuned their instruments in preparation for the first set of the evening. Truly, the staff as well as the guests had done a wonderful job with their decorating, and he’d been told some of the young men had even found a lovely, full evergreen tree to put in the drawing room that would be decorated later in the evening.

Seeing the room as it was, filled with beautiful couples, it almost

made him believe in the magic of the season... *if* he were looking for romance. But that was a fancy from his past, wasn't it? Not knowing, he continually scanned the room, and still not seeing Mary, when his gaze landed on a female guest he hadn't yet interviewed, he joined her on the sidelines.

"Good evening. Miss Reddington, isn't it?" Her black hair gleamed nearly blue beneath the candlelight, and while she had beautiful blue, almost indigo eyes, her moon-face somewhat detracted from that.

"Yes." One of her finely feathered eyebrows rose in surprise and recognition. "You are that inspector, aren't you?"

"I am. Inspector Bright, in fact. Would it be all right if I asked you a few questions regarding Mr. Alderson?"

"I suppose," she said slowly as her eyes narrowed. "I'm hoping to be asked to dance soon..." Her words trailed off, and *he* hoped she wasn't angling for him to make that sacrifice.

"Did you get along with the butler?"

"I don't believe anyone did, if you want the truth." Her lips were set into a hard line as she stared at him. "That man was horribly nosy and always was so self-righteous. I don't know how he did it, but he seemed to know when anyone was being less than proper." Enough anger propelled the words that he couldn't help but be intrigued.

"Oh? Perhaps you should tell me what you mean."

A trace of a blush went through her cheeks that had been touched with the slightest hint of rouge to give them color. "I arrived at Stanwick Hall four days ago. Many of the guests hadn't come yet, so there wasn't much to do here, and since I don't really care for the viscount or his personality—he is arrogant, you see, and thinks he is God's gift to women—I largely kept to myself except those times when the overly handsome footman was about."

Good lord, was everyone canoodling with the footmen here at the hall? That news would give any man an inferiority complex if he thought overly much about it. For that matter, did Miss Reddington know that he was Lord Stanwick's brother? Perhaps it didn't matter. "I assume you and this footman found solace in each other's arms upon occasion?"

"Where was the harm in it? Neither of us are married, and I've been on the shelf for far longer than I'd anticipated—"

Bright held up a hand. "I don't need to hear of your exploits, Miss Reddington. Can I assume Mr. Alderson interrupted while the two of you

were locked in an embrace?” Either his brother needed to invite a better caliber of people to his house parties, or he needed to hire more properly trained staff.

“He did! Burst right into the library as if he had a desperate need to read a book.” She shook her head as righteous indignation flitted through her eyes. “Not that Mr. Alderson was smart enough to read for enjoyment’s sake.”

He bit back a grin as couples filled the dance floor in anticipation of the first set which was a country reel. “How did that make you feel?”

“Annoyed, obviously.” She looked at him as if she didn’t think he had a brain either. “The footman is quite easy on the eyes, and since we were interrupted, I intend to have him soon.” Her gaze focused on something beyond Gabriel’s left shoulder, and when he glanced in that direction, he caught the object of her desire bringing out a silver tray full of champagne in crystal flutes. Never once did he let the constantly moving couples distract him from his task of circulating with his tray. “Oh, yes, happy Christmas to me,” she added in a low voice.

Despite his wish to remain a professional, Gabriel rolled his eyes to the heavens as if he were Henry’s age. “I wish you luck, Miss Reddington.”

“Though if the footman is unavailable, I could ask you—”

“No, thank you,” he quickly interrupted. “I believe I’ll be otherwise engaged later.” For if all went well, he would be ensconced somewhere private with a certain blonde-haired widow.

Unable to linger in this woman’s company any longer, he turned about and moved toward the top of the room, skirting the dance floor, and as he did so, a flutter of color at the open double doors had his feet rooted to the floor and rendered him utterly speechless.

Clad in a red satin gown with short, puffed sleeves, she was the very personification of Christmastide. A white lacy overskirt sparkled with tiny clear glass beads with every step, and the gold satin ribbon emphasized her waist as well as called his attention to the flare of her hips, but the gold lace trimming the bodice had him devouring her décolletage with his gaze. She was gorgeous; how could he ever think of her as plain?

“Mary.” Why wouldn’t his voice work? The utterance was barely louder than a whisper, but finally his feet became unstuck from the floor, and he stumbled toward her as if he were naught but a green boy in university. “You are beyond gorgeous tonight.” Silver and gold glimmered within the

strands of her upswept blonde hair, but it was the sparkle of amusement and anticipation in her lake blue eyes that held him captive. “It is scandalous for a widow to look as you do.”

A faint blush went through her cheeks, and he adored her for it. After what they’d already shared between them, a few verbal compliments made her flush? “You are certainly no slouch tonight either, Bright. The gold brocade waistcoat is a nice touch though it doesn’t exactly go with the wardrobe choice of your lower half.”

When her gaze roved slowly down his torso to his abdomen, need twisted down his spine to shiver through his shaft. “May I tell you a secret?”

“Always.” One of her blonde eyebrows rose in question, and he wanted nothing more than to kiss that natural arch.

“This waistcoat and tailcoat are the nicest articles of clothing I own.” He held out a gloved hand and when she slipped her hand into it, he brought her fingers to his lips and kissed each one, not caring who might see the gesture. “Also, I unfortunately dropped pomade on my evening breeches, rendering them ruined for the evening.”

The bit of laughter that left her throat wrapped about his chest like a briefest of caresses. “Why do you bother with such a thing?” She squeezed his fingers. “Your hair is perfection already. I adore when it has a mind of its own.”

Why so late in life was he discovering that he thrived on compliments from a woman? Perhaps it was because he’d had so little of them in his pathetic history. “Then I’m doubly glad it’s gone mad tonight.” As they’d talked, the first set of the evening ended and now the dance floor was filling with even more couples, this time eager to dance what would be a waltz. “Will you do me the honor of sharing this dance? Unless your ankle still pains you. In that case, we will sit on the sidelines and watch.”

“There is an occasional twinge in the ankle, and only if I overwork it, so of course I will dance with you. Why else do you think I’m standing here clinging to your hand?” Her lips tipped upward in a smile.

A powerful urge to kiss her senseless came over him, but he was forced to tamp it as they were in a very public venue. “Let us hope I don’t trip over my own feet, for it has been quite some time since these particular skills were tested.”

Another trill of laughter escaped her as she gently pulled him onto the dance floor and into an open spot. “You worry too much, Inspector. Merely

relax and follow the music. We cannot both make fools of ourselves tonight.”

“How would you ever do that?” he asked with a frown as he guided her into the correct posture.

“I haven’t danced in...well probably longer than you. Such things weren’t uppermost in my mind with my reprobate of a husband.”

Oh, this woman deserved much more than life and fate had given her, and he would try his best to change that for her. Then there was no more time for a reply because the string quartet struck the first notes of the waltz, and more’s the pity it was the Viennese variety, but this was more than he’d had before.

Across the floor, his gaze locked that of his son’s, who partnered a pretty young lady full of blushes and giggles. When he nodded his approval, a flush rose up Henry’s neck, and the first steps of the dance shifted all couples on the floor.

It was a novel experience dancing with a woman, but he had to admit, there was merit in the exercise, for Mary’s lush form was warm in his arms, and with each twist and hop, her skirting brushed against his boots. He agonized when the steps demanded that she partner with another man for a bit until she was given back into his care. Then it was as if his whole world had tipped back into focus, and all was right again.

Though there was no point to in-depth conversation within a dance that assumed he’d have to continually give her up to a new partner with alarming regularity, he took every opportunity to tug her a bit closer. As her breasts lightly brushed his chest, he reveled in that tiny contact, and it only made him want her more. Why were they wasting time in a ballroom with so many young people when they could be tucked away in an unused room, twined about each other’s naked bodies, sweaty and sated?

Again, the steps of the waltz separated them, but he watched her the whole time she was gone, almost to the point of angering his temporary partner, the apparently insatiable Miss Reddington. Just as quickly, Mary returned to his arms, and he did indeed miss a step because he’d made the mistake of peering into the blue pools of her eyes.

“If you continue to look at me with that come hither stare, my dear, we will both be discovered as frauds,” he whispered against the shell of her ear.

“Whatever do you mean, Inspector?” But there was a knowing light in her eyes that accelerated his heartbeat. “Why do you assume we are frauds?”

Gabriel nearly yelled in frustration when, once more, the steps of the waltz wrenched her away from him. He could barely tolerate performing the dance partnering another lady, and by the time Mary was back in his arms, he was determined not to let her go again. “In answer to your question, we are frauds for the mere fact we are both here as companions, yet we are enjoying a wild flirtation and so much more than that.”

“Surely such a thing doesn’t frighten you,” she responded with a flutter of her eyelids as the waltz came to an end. “I honestly assumed you could do more than one thing at a time,” she added in a sultry, whispered voice that brushed over his skin like the lightest of kisses.

In his mind’s eye, he slipped a few feet along the edge of a ravine, perilously close to a slippery downhill slope he knew would end in disaster, but no matter what he did, he couldn’t stop the fall. “Oh, I can, and I would be more than happy to show you how.”

As polite clapping broke out around them, Mary rested her hand on his sleeve, squeezing her fingers on his arm slightly to remind him he needed to escort her to the sidelines. Once there, she peered up at him with a smile that had awareness shivering along his skin. “I am keen to see how you’d manage that, for I am quite certain our charges will be on their best behavior for a bit.”

In that moment, he wanted nothing more than to pick her up, sling her over his shoulder, and run off with her, but he quelled such caveman thoughts in order to nod. “Then let us slip out of the room for a quieter location. I owe you a story, in any event.”

“You do indeed, and what sort of an investigator’s assistant would I be if I didn’t pursue every avenue that might help me understand everyone involved in a case?”

Oh, she was a tart-mouthed handful. How long would it be before the two of them fell into bed again, and how much longer after that would it be before he asked her to enter into an affair with him?

It remained to be seen, but he feared the anticipation might just kill him.

Chapter Fourteen



Mary didn't exactly know what to do with the inspector, but she did look forward to finally hearing the story of why he didn't trust women and marriage in particular.

The dance they'd shared just now had been exquisite. So much so that she hadn't wanted it to end, for it was very much like intercourse but only in a standing position and in front of a group of people. Truth be known, she would rather have the man naked, but that would hopefully become an option soon.

And oh, he was so gorgeous tonight in his modified evening dress! How had he not been snapped up by a discerning lady of the *ton*? Easily she could imagine him as a husband and a father to little ones. Was that what he wanted for his life? Cold disappointment coiled in her gut, for that was something she wasn't able to give him or any man. For that matter, what *was* his living situation in London? Did he rent a townhouse or own one outright? Did he lease a set of rooms with his son?

There were so many questions that required answers, and they would come. This was the first time she'd been interested in a man for any purpose in what seemed a very long time indeed, and the whole world felt new again.

His muscles beneath her fingertips flexed as the inspector led her through the crowds of people standing and talking at the sidelines of the room. The solid strength of him was quite addictive and she couldn't wait to feel his form pressed against hers, but he was also cordial and polite to people they passed, either nodding or verbally greeting them as they went.

When she assumed they would exit the ballroom, Bright stopped, instead, in front of a gentleman she hadn't met before but seemed familiar as one of the house party guests. Tall and lean and as elegant as any of the men in the ballroom, his blond hair glimmered with red highlights in the

candlelight, but there was a certain furtiveness about him that Mary didn't trust.

"Good evening, friend," he said by way of greeting. "If you don't know, I'm Inspector Bright and I've been tasked with looking into the death of Mr. Alderson. Mind if I ask you some brief questions?"

The man startled but slowly turned about to fully face them. "Right. I've seen you about." He nodded in welcome as if it were *he* hosting the ball instead of the viscount. "I'm Mr. Hearthford, a contemporary of Lord Stanwick's. Live across the county." Then he moved his dark gaze over Mary's person, and that whole assessment left chills behind. "Who is this vision?"

She gave into the shivers that played her spine, for she immediately didn't like or trust this man. "Mrs. Tomlinson. I am the inspector's assistant," she answered in a cold voice.

"Ah, getting it coming and going, eh Inspector?" The man nudged Bright's ribs with an elbow and a wink. "That's the way to do it."

Frowning, the inspector moved a bit away, and made certain to put his body between the man and her. A subtle movement but telling. "I'll ask that you not malign the widow's reputation by salacious talk." Then he rested a narrowed gaze on the man. "Did you and Mr. Alderson have any altercations while you've been in residence here?"

The man snorted. "Alderson was always poking his nose into places he shouldn't have been." He shook his head. "Couldn't leave well enough alone. It's no wonder someone helped him to pop off this mortal coil."

Bright's frown intensified. "Why would you say that?"

"I'll admit I have a penchant for... let's say perusing things that don't belong to me."

Mary huffed. She peered around the inspector's person. "So you are a petty thief, then."

"I'd rather say I'm an opportunistic hunter." He shot her a grin that bordered on the slimy. "Is it my fault folks leave their valuables out where someone can easily get at them?" With a shrug he once more regarded Bright. "I might have been going through things in one of the guest's rooms when that dratted Alderson came upon me, completely incensed."

"As he should have been." The inspector crossed his arms at his chest. "What happened next? Did you two argue?"

"Of course we did. He was a judgmental prick, as if he didn't do

anything improper.” Mr. Hearthford shook his head. “After we exchanged words, he demanded that I return something I’d taken from the drawing room.”

“Which was what?”

“A lovely, bejeweled dagger with a matching sheath. Honestly, Lord Stanwick should learn how to better secure those display cabinets, for as it is, they cause too much temptation.”

To Mary, Bright said, “Well, that explains how the blade and sheath came to be in Alderson’s possession.”

“But why wasn’t the knife in his room with the sheath?”

The dratted thief butted in at that moment. “You should poke about the servant’s hall, Inspector. Last time I was down there—”

“—which was when, Hearthford?” Bright interrupted.

He shrugged again. “Just before the maid screamed when she found the body? I don’t remember because I left the scene quick enough. Nothing there to hold my interest.”

Bright made a motion with his hand. “Continue.”

“Well, when I was sneaking down to the servant’s hall, I used the servant’s staircase. Easier access, you know. There were droplets of blood on those treads.”

“Fresh blood?”

“Rightly so.” He nodded.

“Did the splatter marks indicate they led up or down?”

A hint of confusion clouded the other man’s face. “I couldn’t say. Not clever like you in that regard.”

“Did the drops continue into the servant’s hall itself?”

“Not that I could tell, but then, it was dark and there was panic in the area as the news of Alderson’s demise filtered down, but after I poked around a bit and went back up, most of the drops had been wiped away.”

Mary frowned. “Cleaned up or brushed away by the passage of skirting?”

“I couldn’t say.”

Then Bright cleared his throat. “See here, Hearthford, I must ask you to return everything that you have stolen during this house party else I’ll hand you over to the constable when he arrives.”

“I suppose being locked up would put a damper on other things I wish to do, so I agree.”

“Good.” The inspector nodded. “Deposit everything in the study by midnight tonight. I’ll have the housekeeper disburse the pieces.”

The man narrowed his eyes on them. “Is that all?”

“You may go.”

With a glance across the ballroom, Mary touched Bright’s arm. “Lord Stanwick is glaring at you. Might I suggest we visit the refreshments table before we step into the line of fire?” The last thing she wanted to do was tangle with the viscount’s ire again this day.

“Of course,” he said while Hearthford sauntered off through the crush. Then he offered her his arm, bent at the elbow. When she slipped her hand through the crook, he once more threaded their way amidst the crowds. “At some point tonight, we need to visit the servant’s hall.”

“Agreed. I somehow feel we’re about to solve this case.” Excitement tingled at the base of her spine. “However, I still cannot fathom who killed the butler.”

“I’ll admit, this has been a puzzle the whole time, but I’m beginning to have a clearer picture of what might have occurred.”

Surprise went through her chest. “Oh? Will you share your theory?”

“Not just yet. I’ll let it percolate a bit more before anything is revealed.” When he gave her a grin, flutters of need danced in her lower belly. “Punch or champagne, Mrs. Tomlinson?” he asked in a formal way as they approached the refreshment table set up outside the ballroom doors.

“Champagne would be quite lovely. Thank you, Inspector.” She nodded her thanks as he handed her a crystal flute of the bubbly wine. “How are you enjoying the ball?”

Bright guided her along the corridor and away from the refreshment table where there were fewer people. “I’m not much of a society event man, but I’ll admit, I only made an appearance because I knew you who attend, and I desperately wished for a dance with you.”

Languid heat curled into her blood. “I often wonder if it’s a character failing on my part to enjoy quiet evenings with a good book and a cheerful fire... especially if there is a handsome, attentive man close by.”

Desire glittered in his gorgeous hazel eyes that were more green than brown in the moment. “Instead of a character flaw, I’d rather think it’s a wish that will more than likely be fulfilled soon.” He watched her over the rim of his own champagne flute. “Meet me in the library in fifteen minutes. I shall return to the ballroom and do the pretty for a bit then come out to find you. Is

that acceptable?”

“It is. And let us hope you don’t incur your brother’s wrath in the interim.” She quickly finished the champagne and giggled when the bubbles tickled her nose. As he stared at her in an odd way, she shrugged. “Indulging in this is a luxury I’m not afforded often.”

“Then I will be certain to procure you another glass and bring it with me.” With a wink, he took her empty flute. “I should return to the ballroom,” he said in an overly exaggerated tone, no doubt for the benefit of the ladies behind the table and anyone else who lingered in the corridor.

“Enjoy your evening, Inspector.” She couldn’t help but play along, for being in his company was the most excitement she’d had in her life for a long time indeed.

Once she’d parted from him, Mary wandered the corridor, pretending she was examining the art that hung at intervals on the walls. The farther away she moved, the less drone of conversation reached her ears, and by the time she’d gained the library, there was no one lingering in that portion of the manor. It was easy to slip into the room, and after letting her eyes adjust to the darkness, she lit a few candles throughout the space. Not enough to illuminate the entire room but just enough to provide a welcoming, intimate glow. By the time she’d perused a few of the shelves, the door quietly opened and then Bright was there, his eyes lighting when he saw her.

“There was a part of me that didn’t think you would actually be here,” he admitted in a soft voice as he closed the door and turned the key in the lock. The click of the mechanism echoed in the silence that followed.

“Why?” That hint of vulnerability tugged at her heart. “Haven’t I been a willing participant in your plans this week?”

He snorted and rested a full champagne flute on a small, ivory-inlaid table near his location. “You have, unless you’re dressing me down for something stupid I’ve done.” While she locked the door that adjoined the room with the one next door, he prowled toward her. “I appreciate that you challenge me instead of spitting my opinions and thoughts back at me.”

“Well, we *are* two different people, and I’m not going to parrot your opinions merely to feed your ego.” There was a certain thrill involved in knowing a man simply wanted her, wished to spend time in her company. When he closed the distance between them, she rested her palms on his chest with a tiny sigh as his arms came loosely around her. “And there will be times when I am right, and you are not.”

“Of that I have no doubts.” He dipped his head and touched his lips to hers.

While it was a gentle, romantic kiss, Mary wanted more from him. She slipped a hand up his chest to curl about his nape, and as she lifted up on her toes to better fit her lips to his, the dear man took the hint. All too soon, he deepened the kiss, ran the tip of his tongue along that seam, encouraging her to open for him. Immediately, she did so, and that satiny glide of her tongue against his had her sailing on a sea of desire and satisfaction.

Several minutes passed while they simply drank from each other and essentially shared breath. There was something intimate and pleasing about doing nothing else with a man except kissing him, learning the secrets of his mouth, discovering how he enjoyed being kissed, and what helped to arouse him. In that, he was so much different than her husband had been. Where that man hadn't wished to waste time in kissing, Gabriel enjoyed that connection as much as she did, and that only endeared him to her even more.

No, she didn't want marriage again, but she didn't wish for him to walk out of her life once the case was solved and the house party ended. So where did that leave them? They would need to discuss it soon.

Eventually, he pulled back and set her at arm's length with a sigh. “We should probably leave things here else neither of us will exit this room until we've been rendered naked and sated.”

Her laugh was on the shaky side as her knees wobbled. “As if that is such a terrible thing?”

“While ordinarily it is not, I came here in order to talk with you, tell you of my failed marriage, and I don't wish to be distracted just now.” Taking her hand, the inspector led her to a low sofa of what looked like buttery leather. Once she seated herself, he settled next to her and slipped an arm about her shoulders, pulling her into his side. “Be warned, this story doesn't reflect well on me, I'm afraid.”

“As if my own story reflected well on me?” She tipped her head up to find his gaze. “We all have pasts, Inspector. Sometimes those pasts aren't the happy kind.”

“You are always so practical.” With a sigh, he buried his nose into her hair, maintained that close posture for long moments before pulling away and staring at the cold hearth. “So damned different from Sarah, my wife.”

The way he said it made it sound as if she were still in his life. “Did you, ah, divorce her or did she die?” Honestly, Mary didn't think he was the

type of man to go through the huge expense or the hassle of even trying to secure a divorce.

“Ha.” A sigh shuddered from him. “A divorce would have been much less scandalous, but at the time, I was shocked, didn’t know what to do, was heavily involved in gaining a foothold at Whitehall. Additionally, I had a ten-year-old boy who was left behind.”

“Oh, dear. What happened? Or rather, perhaps you should start at the beginning.” She wanted to know but alternately didn’t, yet if it made him emotional so he could finally cleanse himself of the memories, she would encourage him to move forward.

“Right.” His fingers brushed her shoulder, and that tiny touch had the power to drive her mad. “I married Sarah as soon as I left the military as a young man of twenty-two. We’d met at a society event and our parents were contemporaries. It seemed a good match, and I was ready to settle down, start my nursery even while I had just started with Bow Street.”

“I would imagine back then, being a Runner—”

“—Principal Officer,” he gently interrupted.

“All right, a Principal Officer was a rather respectful position.”

“It was. Not like people think of now with derision and very little respect.” A sigh escaped him. He moved into a more comfortable position on the sofa. “Regardless, Sarah and I were happy enough together. She wasn’t a deep person with no aspirations, and not long after we married, she became restless and unhappy.”

Mary remained silent. She didn’t want to interrupt the flow of his words.

“The saving grace was she became pregnant shortly after our nuptial ceremony, and for a while we were close. Anticipating a baby brought us together. We rented a modest townhouse on the edge of Mayfair near Marylebone. It was the best I could afford at the time, but it was large enough for our growing family.”

His voice broke on the last word, so she took his free hand in hers and held it in support.

“After Henry was born, I received my first promotion, so much of my time was given over to Bow Street. At the time, we were quite busy with cases, for crime grew as London grew. The baby thrived; he was quite happy in the daytime, but come night, he was colicky. After a while, that upset grated against nerves and patience.”

“Surely you had a wet nurse and nursery maid to help in the shifts of staying up with the baby that might have given Sarah a reprieve.”

“Of course we did. Eventually, he grew out of that and truly thrived as a curious, happy little boy.” Gabriel glanced down at her. Sadness and regret pooled in his eyes. “He has never stopped being curious, but some of his natural happiness had faded.” When he swallowed, it was audible. “As he aged, we hired a nanny, which freed up some of Sarah’s time, which gave her the opportunities to visit with her friends and family.”

“Except that wasn’t enough.” Already, her heart hurt for him. The story he’d already told hinted at the direction of where the tale would end.

“Sarah always reminded me of an empty vessel with a crack in the bottom. Anything that went inside that should have fulfilled her eventually ran out and she went looking for something new.” He clung to her hand, almost as if she was his lifeline. “When Henry went away to school at nine, I thought Sarah might move out of the ennui she’d fallen into as a new mother. Since I was busy with Bow Street, she was left largely to her own devices. Then she began going out in the evenings, attending social events and the opera. I was thrilled, thinking she was keeping herself busy and perhaps widening her friend network.”

“You needn’t continue if it brings you pain.” Turning more fully into him, she met his eyes. “I can guess at what happened next.”

A muscle ticced in his cheek. “I need to do this.” His jaw worked as he thought over his words. “Not long after Henry’s tenth birthday, Sarah came home one evening and announced to me that motherhood and being a wife to a Bow Street runner wasn’t what she’d wanted from her life. She informed me that she’d had her belongings packed while I’d been working a case that day. Without an apology or any sort of regret, my wife walked out on our marriage and her son, traded us both for one of the most notorious rogues of the *ton*. Told me that she needed much more excitement than I provided.”

“Oh, no!” Mary gasped. “I have no respect for women who do such things without at least trying to make their unions work. Especially when the man in the situation never beat her or treated her with anything other than respect.” And what she knew of Gabriel indicated he would have done whatever he could to turn things around.

“At no time did I lay a hand on her in anger or frustration. I was always offering possible solutions, even told her I would take her to Brighton

for holiday so she could come back to herself. In that time, I came to see there are plenty of ways a man can die, but only warped love can kill and keep a man alive so he can feel it. That is what she did to me.”

“I’m so sorry. You should never have had to go through that.”

“I agree, but I was desperate to repair my union.” Slowly, he shook his head. “Nothing worked. I didn’t offer an objection when she left me, for I could see that nothing would change her mind, and quite frankly, I was exhausted trying to juggle my career, being a father, and dealing with her.”

“No one is blaming you.” She cupped his cheek, brushed strands of his wayward hair from his brow. “That would try anyone’s patience.”

“Yes.” His eyes took on a faraway look. “I made a promise to myself that if I ever saw Lord Swynford, there would be hell to pay.” A snort escaped him. “Not that such a thing would have helped. Sarah wouldn’t have come back to me regardless. God, that was a horrible time in my life. Embarrassing as hell. Difficult to work through Henry’s rage; the boy blamed me, of course. Said if I wasn’t so busy his mother would have stayed. It took him years to stop crying himself to sleep.” He rubbed an eye with his fingers. “Only recently have Henry and I been able to converse on her defection in a mature manner.”

“I’m glad for you on that. He is fortunate to have you for a father.”

“Sometimes I wonder.”

“Stop. You are a wonderful role model, and your son adores you, but I hope you realize you weren’t at fault for Sarah’s betrayal. Henry probably didn’t understand why his mother wouldn’t have stayed, didn’t love him enough.”

“I know. We are better off these days than we were before.” With moisture pooling in his eyes, Gabriel took her hand and kissed her fingertips. “My dreams died that day and have never been resurrected. I closed off my heart, fearing that trying again would yield the same results, especially when I accidentally ran into Sarah in Hyde Park years later. She didn’t waste time telling me that Swynford was everything I was not, better at everything, including intercourse.”

The poor man! Tears filled her own eyes. “What a horrid woman, to not only say that but to kick a man when he was already low.” She swallowed down a lump of emotion in her throat. “Let me reassure you in the event you wondered that I found no fault in how you coupled with me. You were everything a man should be and fully satisfied me.”

A hint of ruddy color rose above his collar. "I appreciate that, and will undoubtedly put that to the test at the first opportunity." When moisture slipped to his cheeks, he dashed it away. "Years later, I was told she'd drowned while on holiday in Rome with her lover. I had to go through all the emotions of anger, sadness, betrayal, regret all over again, but at least there was closure there, and she wouldn't pop up about Town and wound me again."

"I'm sorry all the same. You didn't deserve such treatment; neither did Henry."

"At least she did it to me over someone else that might have taken her defection more harshly." Pulling her close, he rested his chin atop her head. "My heart was beyond bruised and broken from that relationship. I honestly don't know if I can move past that, but if you were wondering why I just can't make myself contemplate marriage again, that is why."

It had been a horrible story, and made her heart hurt for him. "I can't blame you, for it was much the way I felt when coming out of my own miserable union." She patted his chest and simply enjoyed being with him in whatever capacity he could manage. "There is nothing saying that you must marry again in order to find happiness in your life."

"Thank you for understanding. Most women would balk at the honesty."

Barely had she opened her mouth to reply, when he dipped his head and gently kissed her.

"That doesn't mean I want our association to end merely because my heart is too vulnerable to be extended to a woman again." Honesty reflected in his eyes where tears still lingered. "However, once this house party as well as the case has ended, I will have come up with a solution I hope will benefit us both."

Flutters moved through her lower belly, for that was how she felt about him. "We needn't marry in order to enjoy each other and have a decent life."

"Except we won't exactly be branded as decent outside of domestication." The rumble of his chuckle reverberated against her ear before it erupted into the air.

She pulled away enough to find his gaze with hers. "From what I've survived and how men have treated me over the years, I've had my fill of indecent men." There was something about the inspector that cancelled all of

that out. “You, however... Well, I don’t have adequate words for what you’ve brought into my life.” Heat seeped into her cheeks. “It’s almost as if I’d never learned how to live properly until you came strolling in and ordered me about.”

Had she revealed too much?

“Ah, Mary. You are so very different than any woman I’ve ever known.” Gabriel held her close again, and for long moments, silence reigned between them, broken only by the soft chime of the carriage-style clock on the mantel announcing the nine o’clock hour. With a sigh, he released her. “We have been here for an hour.”

“Is that a problem.” Quite frankly, she didn’t want the evening to end.

“Not really, but I do want a chance to look through the servant’s hall before the ball ends and the space is crowded with staff once more.” He peered into her eyes, seemed to see into her soul. “Come with me?”

“Always.” Not quite so naïve as to fancy herself in love with the man after a handful of days, there was a connection between them she couldn’t deny. For the moment, that thrilling, breathless feeling she had every time she was with him was enough, and like him, she wasn’t about to offer up her heart and have it trampled over.

Some lessons had been harder to learn than others, and would take twice as long to forget.

Chapter Fifteen



Now that Gabriel's soul and conscience felt as if they'd both been cleansed, he was ready to resume his investigation of the case.

And none of it would have been possible without Mary in his life. The knowledge of that boggled his mind. She was different than any woman he'd ever known, and absolutely nothing like his wife had been. Where Sarah hadn't cared about much past herself or how anything might have affected her, Mary worried about those around her. She sympathized with everyone's struggles and encouraged others where she could. Hell, already his son was half in love with her, and Adelaide was unconsciously imitating her fearless nature.

Additionally, the fact that she could dress his brother down without batting an eye or breaking into tears afterward betrayed her strength and determination. The only times he'd seen her emotional was when she shared her history with him... and when he told her of his.

God, she's just a brick of a woman!

As he led Mary from the library and into the empty corridor beyond, he breathed a sigh of relief. Though he didn't mind sneaking about in order to be with her, he would like to try and protect her reputation for as long as he could. Most of the people beneath this roof could go to hell and he wouldn't miss them at all, but protecting Mary was now part of who he was, and he would continue to do so for as long as she would let him.

"You are uncommonly silent, Bright," she whispered from behind him as he felt along the paneling for the hidden door that would open into the servant's staircase. It didn't matter that he'd spent years of his life in this manor house, he could never remember exactly where that mechanism was located.

"Perhaps now that I'm no longer a man defined by his secrets, I have

nothing more to say.” He glided his fingertips along wallpaper that was stripes of trailing ivy and tiny pink flowers stamped on ivory paper. “Which if that is true, it’s a sad commentary on my life in general. Unless, of course, you wish to hear me ponder the advisability of continuing with Bow Street and Whitehall at my advanced age.” Never more had he mulled over retirement than he had this week after meeting Mary. *Ah, there it is!* With his forefinger, he pressed on a slightly raised knot, and then the hidden panel swung inwardly open.

“If you think you were only interesting for the secrets you keep, you are doing yourself a huge disservice.” She smiled when he glanced at her from over his shoulder, and that gesture went straight to his stones. “I find you absolutely and explicitly fascinating just as you are, and there is still quite a lot I don’t know about you.” Then she winked. “And if you think two and forty is too old, you’re heading the right way for another dressing down from me, Inspector.”

Why the hell does she make me so damned hard?

Heat prickled over his skin, for he wanted nothing more than to carry her off and lose himself in her for the rest of the night. It was slightly disconcerting, for he’d felt that way about his wife before he’d married her, and everyone knew how that had turned out. Would it be different with a completely different woman? It was too great a risk, though. “I thought you said you weren’t going to feed my ego?” Then he slipped into the dark passage beyond, which was little more than a narrow landing.

“I decided to give you a little nudge. After all, it’s nearly Christmas.” The sultry sound of her whisper in the small space she’d followed him into shivered over his skin. As the panel slid back into place, she rested a hand on his back. “At least until we are completely alone.”

Dear lord, the woman was trying to kill him, yet there wasn’t a man alive who wouldn’t respond to that blatant teasing. Turning abruptly around, Gabriel caught her head between his hands and treated her to a searing kiss he hoped would make her forget her own name for a time. Her petal soft lips cradled his while her hands came up to clutch his elbows. By the end of it, his knees had the strength of cooked porridge. When he released her, he couldn’t help a grin as she sagged against the wall.

“Better hope we solve this case tonight, my enchanting widow, because we both deserve a few days left to our own devices, whatever that might entail. Don’t you think?” Then he plunged down the shadow-filled

narrow staircase, and his bootheels thudded on every wooden tread.

The soft inhalation of her breath echoed in the small space. “I rather like how you think.” Fabric rustled, and the faint *tap tap* of her heeled slippers indicated that she followed.

At the bottom of the stairs was a door with an actual handle. When he depressed the handle, the latch released, and he pulled the panel open. “I’ll need a candle.”

“I’m sure there is one around here soon.” Mary stepped past him and went into the servants’ hall proper, that housed a long table where the staff took meals together or enjoyed leisure activities such as card playing, embroidery, whittling, or other handiwork. As of yet, there wasn’t anyone in the room, for most of the servants were undoubtedly waiting on the ball guests or getting other rooms readied for Christmas on the morrow since some of them would enjoy the day with their own families. A candle burned in a brass holder on the table. She fetched it and brought it over to his position. “Are you looking for blood traces?”

“Yes, though it has probably been cleaned by now.”

Mary gathered her skirting in her free hand and then kneeled at the first step. A tiny glimpse of a stocking-clad ankle nearly proved too much for him. “I’m not seeing anything here.” She indicated a section on the wall where there might have been a red speck. “Is this a splatter?”

“Too difficult to tell. Let me examine further.” Gabriel took the candleholder from her. Tread by tread, he examined the wood up and down the staircase. “There are a few light smears, as if skirting did indeed trail through here.” He moved the flame nearer to the wall. “Some droplets here, near the tread.”

“But why? Was Mr. Alderson stabbed down here and went upstairs for some reason?”

“That’s a good theory, and could very well have happened, since I have a feeling this crime was between the domestic staff. Or perhaps someone ferried the murder weapon through here in an effort to remove it — and themselves—from the scene in a hurry.” As he came down the stairs and joined her at the bottom, Mary stood with concern in her eyes.

“Who do you think killed the butler?” She put a hand to her throat in an act of protection.

“I have an inkling, but let us discover if my hunch is true.” With cold foreboding twisting down his spine, he led the way through the common

room. They weren't going down the corridor toward the residence rooms. Instead, he turned down the corridor toward the left wing of the house that would lead to the kitchen and storerooms. The closer they came to the kitchens themselves, the more prominent savory and sweet scents wafted through the air. "I rather think the buffet dinner will be wonderful." It was scheduled to be put out at ten o'clock.

"These aromas make me realize I hadn't really eaten much at luncheon, and I skipped tea."

"Perhaps I can charm my way into some food from Mrs. Cochran." He glanced at his companion. "Do you think Henry and Adelaide are enjoying themselves?"

"That is the hope, but if my niece grows bored, she'll simply retire for the evening or head to the drawing room to decorate the Bavarian tree."

"And Henry will head to the library. The boy intends to study to be a barrister at the end of his education." It gave him some degree of pride to tell her that. "He'll do well at the position."

"If he's anything like his father, he can put forth a convincing argument." She smiled at him in the way she had that made him feel as if he could do anything.

It was quite an unusual sensation with the power to knock him on his arse for the first time in his life. While he marveled at that, Gabriel nodded. "I appreciate that." Then there was no more time to converse, for they'd entered the kitchen.

Festive holiday swags decorated the doorways here, and the red satin ribbons entwined with the pine boughs gave the rooms a jaunty look. The sharp scents of evergreens wafted to his nose as he came further into the kitchen.

Compared to the other areas of the servants' hall, these rooms were bustling with activity. Mrs. Cochran's matronly form pulled several trays of pastries from the ovens while kitchen maids arranged other finger foods artistically on silver serving trays. The assistant cook—a mousy woman with spectacles—quietly directed the maids and warned everyone to mind the hot trays and pots. A few footmen waited off to the side, and once the trays were finished, they whisked them from the kitchen and vanished through yet another servant's staircase. No doubt the trays were bound for the dining room where the buffet supper would be served. Scullery maids shuttled dirty pots and pans to the area that housed sinks where more maids worked at

scrubbing piles of soiled dishes.

Hardly anyone glanced up when he and Mary entered. Ordinarily, he wouldn't have minded, but tonight was different, for one of the people in this room had killed Mr. Alderson. With a nod to Mary, he strolled forward and flashed what he hoped was a charming smile at the women present. Some of the maids blushed and giggled, and when Mrs. Cochran turned about, her round face was wreathed in a pleased grin.

“Inspector Bright! It's good to see you this night. I thought you would be busy dancing the evening away.” The welcome was as warm and cordial as any he'd been given each time he'd visited, but this time, he swore he heard a tiny, false ring to the words. Then her gaze shifted to Mary. “And Mrs. Tomlinson! Welcome. Would the two of you like a bite?”

He looked at Mary, who shrugged, but her eyes said she would very much like to eat. “That would be lovely. Thank you.” And somewhat awkward, for when they finished, he would have no choice but to make them all halt their frenetic preparations and answer his questions.

Hand pies with a crispy exterior and soft, savory, warm interior were given over. Both the kitchen maid and the cook plied him with smiles and teasing as if this were an ordinary visit. Pastries were abundant to sample, as were small mince pies. Cups of tea were procured, and for the next quarter hour, it was a merry time in the kitchens amidst the hustle and bustle of a house preparing for a Christmas Eve buffet dinner. Eventually, though, he took the last sip of tea and swallowed the last bit of a honey cake.

Time to return to the investigation.

“As always, the fare from this kitchen is second to none.” He followed the praise with a grin he knew would set them all at ease. “However, if I could pull you aside from your work for a few moments, Mrs. Cochran, I would like to ask you some questions regarding Mr. Alderson.”

Immediately, the attitude in the room shifted. Gone was the joviality of before. In its place came an undeniable tension that seemed to infect all the members of the staff.

“It's hardly necessary, Inspector,” the cook said as she wiped her hands on her already stained voluminous pinafore-style apron. It matched the mobcap sitting on her graying black curls, the cap with the same two tiny bloodstains in the lace that had been there each time he'd visited her in the kitchens this whole week. “The man is gone. We should let his memory rest in peace.”

Gabriel chuckled, for it was a classic game of deflection. “I wish I could do that, Mrs. Cochran, but I need to do my position justice, and if the butler was indeed murdered by a violent hand, I must discover that too.”

As was her wont, Mary brushed the crumbs from the front of her gown. She gave the cook a sympathetic glance. “I know it’s concerning and quite terrifying to have a man from Bow Street invade your personal space. Especially a man you have watched grow from a boy.” When she turned her head and sent him a soft smile, his chest tightened, for she was the addition to his investigations he never knew he needed. “The sooner the inspector can conclude his work, the sooner we all can enjoy the holiday season.” She dropped her voice. “And perhaps you might feel better after you talk to him.”

Did she suspect the cook of having a hand in the murder?

For long moments, the cook stared at him while most of the frantic activity in the room slowed. Then she nodded. “We will utilize the housekeeper’s sitting room since she is busy abovestairs. No need to interrupt operations here else Lady Stanwick will have a fit her dinner wasn’t finished, and she has already been in a temper this week.” She glanced at the bespectacled assistant cook. “Will you take care of the rest, Eliza? I’ll take Molly and Matthew with me.”

“Of course, ma’am.” The thinner woman nodded, and with a curious glance at Gabriel, she issued a set of orders in a quiet voice, and the whole kitchen returned to the frenetic pace of before.

“Follow me, please.” Mrs. Cochran came through the kitchens with one of the maids and footmen trailing behind her.

Gabriel put a hand to the small of Mary’s back as he guided her back through the narrow corridors toward the other side of the servants’ hall. He put his lips near her ear. “Thank you for your assistance. I don’t know I could have done this as effectively without you.”

A faint blush stained her cheeks. “It has been quite exciting, and exactly the adventure I needed for this time in my life.”

Then they entered the housekeeper’s suite, and with so many people in the small sitting room, a crowded feel soon crept up on him.

Pulling a wooden chair with a spindled back to the center of the room, Gabriel waved a hand at the cook. “Please sit, Mrs. Cochran.” With a glance at the maid and the footman, he realized how similar in facial structure and eyes they looked to each other, as well as the cook. “Can I assume you are Mrs. Cochran’s children?”

“Yes,” Molly replied with the shake of her head. Over her pinned back dark hair, she wore a lace-trimmed cap similar to the one he’d found in the mill. “I’m nineteen, and the youngest of five. Two of us work here at Stanwick Hall.”

Matthew, the footman, cleared his throat. His face had gone white, and he had the air of someone who would bolt. “I’m the middle child at three and twenty. Been employed here for a few years.”

“It’s good to meet you both.” With knots of foreboding in his gut, Gabriel once more put his head close to Mary’s. “We’re entering into the end, and there might be complications. Please stand at the door to block a premature escape as well as to summon assistance I will no doubt need.”

She nodded but peered at him with speculation in her eyes. “I can’t imagine things will grow violent.”

“One never knows in these situations, especially if desperation was the motivation.” Once Mary skirted about the group and took up a position at the open door. He focused his attention on the cook. “Did you get along with Mr. Alderson?”

She snorted while clasping her hands tightly in her lap. “Mr. Alderson was a difficult pill to swallow most of the time.” A hard light entered her eyes. “For a man who was supposed to be the best and most proper of the males attending to this household, he was nothing but a lie. He was a schemer, nosy, a gossip, and a scoundrel.”

“In short, Inspector Bright, the man was a proper prick,” Matthew interrupted with a decided shake of his head. “He got what he deserved.”

Gabriel kept his own counsel. “Why would you say that?”

“He spent the bulk of his time chasing maids while preaching against that very sin to all who would listen.” The young man’s stiff posture suggested he held onto a fair amount of anger. “I’d wager everyone beneath this roof hated him.”

“While I understand that, the reason you are all here is to tell me if *you* hated him, and was that emotion strong enough to make you act upon it.” Gabriel slid his gaze to the maid. “What of you, Molly? How did you get on with Mr. Alderson?”

Where he assumed she would be as surly as her brother, dread and embarrassment went through the maid’s expression before tears filled her eyes. “I didn’t care for him, and never a day went by where I wasn’t harassed by him.” She sniffled. “I couldn’t get away from him; there was nowhere to

hide, and he was always threatening to do horrible things if I didn't fall in with his plans."

"Did you?"

"No! I'm not the kind of girl, Inspector." She shook her head. "Please don't blame my mother."

Mary widened her eyes at him from her position. The widow came away from the door and wrapped an arm about the maid's shoulders. "Calm yourself. Nothing good will come of growing hysterical." The soothing tone of her voice had Gabriel relaxing his own muscles. "Why shouldn't Inspector Bright blame your mother? What happened?"

"I can't tell you!" The girl sent a frantic glance at the cook. "I'm sorry, Mama, but this secret is killing me." She covered her face with her hands. "It's too horrible." Then she turned into Mary and sobbed while the widow held her close and gently patted her back.

This was rapidly getting out of hand, and he needed to regain control. "Perhaps you should explain, Mrs. Cochran." When the young man attempted to creep toward the door, Gabriel clamped a hand on his arm, led him to the only other wooden chair in the room, and gently pushed him into it.

"I suppose it was wrong for me to expect my children to bear all of this. I was only trying to protect them; they're still so young." Mrs. Cochran fussed with her apron. Finally, she sighed. "I tried to warn you away, Inspector, so you would stop asking questions and to just let the dead rest. Mr. Alderson wasn't a good man."

The seemingly random pieces of the puzzle were now sliding into place. "Did you sabotage the runner of the sleigh?"

"I did," Matthew admitted. He was rather green about the gills. "Mama was concerned that you were coming too close to the truth. I said I would saw the runners which would cause an accident and hopefully keep you away from the servants' hall." He shrugged. "No one ever truly sees those of us who toil for the Quality."

A snort came from Mrs. Cochran. "Unless they want to scratch a carnal itch, then suddenly they don't care about class divide." Bitterness wove through her words.

"So I've discovered over the course of this investigation." He met Mary's gaze. The concern reflected there enhanced his own. "Fortunately, Mrs. Tomlinson and I weren't harmed, and her ankle is healing nicely."

Matthew nodded. "I'm truly sorry, Inspector."

“I have a feeling that wasn’t the only assistance you rendered during this charade, was it?”

“No,” he said on a whisper while Molly continued to sniffle, and Mrs. Cochran stared with a stony expression. “I tossed the knife.”

It was the beginning of the end. “Where?” If the inquiry was much sharper than he’d intended, Gabriel couldn’t help the fact. It had already been a vexing week.

The boy’s Adam’s apple bobbed with a heavy swallow. “One of the rubbish bins in the root cellar.” He threw a frantic look at his mother. “I’m sorry.”

She gave him a small smile. “I should never have involved you or Molly in any of this.” Tears filled her eyes as she shook her head. “It was the only way I knew to make everything stop.”

Reminding himself to harden his heart against what would happen next, Gabriel approached the cook’s chair. “Did you kill Mr. Alderson, Mrs. Cochran?”

“Yes.” The admission was propelled on a broken whisper, followed by a gasp from Mary. “I had no choice, Inspector. There was no other way to protect my daughter.”

This was beyond difficult, for none of the people in this room were criminals and neither were they layabout lords and bored peeresses who had evil in their hearts. “Walk me through what happened shortly before the butler’s body was found in the dining room.”

The cook nodded. “Dinner was ready to be served. I was bringing up the soup tureen through the servant’s staircase because the footmen were occupied elsewhere. Molly was already in the dining room ahead of me. She’d counted the linens wrong, so we were short by ten serviettes, and she had to bring up the remainder.”

When the girl in Mary’s arms sobbed, the widow tried to calm her. “Hush, dear. We all make mistakes, and no one is blaming you.” She wiped at the tears on the girl’s face. “What happened after you brought the linens into the dining room?”

“*He* came in.” Horror dripped from that short statement, but Mary continued to encourage the girl. “Mr. Alderson entered from the door at the opposite side of the room.” She rubbed at the moisture on her cheeks. “I tried to go around him; he always tried to put his hands on me, touch my breasts.”

Gabriel’s chest remained tight, for he could well imagine what had

occurred. “Though this may trouble you, I truly do need to know what happened.”

The girl nodded. “I told Mr. Alderson I needed to return to the kitchens. He cornered me between himself and the end of the table. When I tried to get away, he grabbed me, said I’d been teasing him too often and that it was time to reap those consequences.”

Mrs. Cochran sent her daughter a look of concern. “Hush, dear. I’ll tell the rest.” She held his gaze. “I came into the room at the exact moment Mr. Alderson shoved my Molly over the table with her skirting up over her head and his shaft on prominent display.” Slowly, she rose to her feet as her face twisted with anger. “He would have raped my girl right then, while the Quality was entertaining in the next room!”

Chapter Sixteen



Mary gasped as the truth came out. The girl in her arms shivered either from reaction or emotion, she couldn't say, but there was nothing to do but let the scene play out.

"I was so frightened, Mrs. Tomlinson, and he was so strong that I couldn't get away," Molly said tearfully. "And never once did I flirt with him."

"Shh. I know. He was a man warped in the mind." She stroked a hand up and down the maid's back in the hopes of calming her.

Before she could form a question of her own, Bright was one step ahead of her. "How did you come to stab Mr. Alderson?"

The cook's body quivered with her anger. "I would not let that man defile my girl. She is destined for something better than working as domestic staff, and it is already difficult enough protecting her from the likes of Lord Stanwick." One of her hands disappeared into a pocket of her apron. "As soon as I put my tray on the table where the food was set out, I took up the knife from the platter of roast beef and I ran at the butler."

Mary softly cleared her throat. "Was it you who stabbed him?"

"Yes," the woman admitted softly with tears in her eyes. "I didn't think about it." She shook her head. "When he turned to face me, I just plunged the knife into his chest, used both hands."

"Ah, that gave you enough force to jam the blade between the ribs to get at the heart," Bright said as the light of interest went into his eyes. "I'd wondered."

Mrs. Cochran nodded. "Every day my daughter has been here, she has been plagued by the butler or even Lord Stanwick. Just because a servant has a pretty face and form doesn't give anyone in the house the right to take what they want from her."

“Agreed.” Mary set Molly away from her, for she suspected Bright would need her assistance. “Men need to understand that women’s bodies are not their possessions or playthings, that we have the right to say no.” Then she gasped. “Molly was the maid who screamed, which brought the rest of us running into the dining room.”

“Yes.” The girl nodded. “After the butler fell to the floor, my mother told me to set myself to rights, and as Henry took the knife away, she asked me to scream and tell whoever came that I was the one to find the body.”

“How much time passed between when your mother left the room and you screamed?” Mary was in danger of being caught up in the story.

“Mama attended to Mr. Alderson’s appearance for a bit, stuffing *that part* of him back into his breeches then doing up the buttons.” A deep blush appeared in her cheeks. “By the time she was done, Matthew had returned with a frivolous knife he said he’d found in the butler’s room. He dropped it into the puddle of blood near the body, told me that anyone would think Lord Stanwick killed Alderson. Everyone knew they butted heads.”

“Ah, but then there were complications.”

“Yes, because as soon as Mama and Matthew left by way of the door at the opposite side of the room, Mr. Bright—the younger one—came into the dining room. He asked me for a glass of water because he said the brandy was too strong...”

“And then you screamed.” The inspector cleared his throat to regain the attention of the room. “The fact of the matter remains that Mrs. Cochran killed Mr. Alderson in cold blood; you murdered someone.” He roved his gaze at all three staff members, landing on Matthew. “You threw away the knife?”

Henry dry-heaved. “I couldn’t let my mother be blamed. Alderson was a pig who cared about no one beyond himself.”

“That is not for me to say.” Bright glanced at Mary. “Fetch a footman. Have them comb through the rubbish bins. Since the snow kept the roads impassable, it’s unlikely they were emptied by the collection man yet.”

She had only been away from the housekeeper’s sitting room for five minutes, but when Mary returned, Mrs. Cochran had removed a pistol, presumably from her apron pocket, and now stood with the nose pointed at Bright’s heart. *Oh, dear lord!* Her breath stalled and her heartbeat raced as she took in the scene.

“Let my children go, Inspector,” the cook said even as the hand

holding the pistol shook. “They had nothing to do with any of this and aren’t guilty of a crime.”

“Neither are you, Mama!” Matthew pushed out of his chair with such force that piece of furniture toppled backward with a loud clatter. “You were only defending Molly.”

“I’d hoped you would have left off, Inspector, assumed the case would have taken your attention, and if it didn’t, then Mrs. Tomlinson would have distracted you from all you needed to do.” Never once did her gaze drop as Mary edged along the wall toward Molly.

“But a man was murdered. There must be justice,” Bright said as he raised a hand, palm outward, in the attempt to calm her.

“What of justice for my daughter? What of justice for the other maids he violated during his time here?” Anger rolled through the cook’s voice. “Where is the justice for the maids—and some of the footmen—who are accosted by the lord and lady of the manor whenever the whim strikes? Living every blessed day knowing that one or the other of them will try to get up their skirts and rut with them as if they were nothing?”

“I’m not saying it’s not a problem—”

“I told Lady Stanwick about Mr. Alderson, warned her he would prove a greater problem than even her own husband. She promised she would bring it to her husband’s attention, but nothing happened. If anything, he grew even worse.”

Mary quelled the urge to snort. Nothing happened because Mr. Alderson held the dirty little secrets of far too many people in the household, and it no doubt gave him the feeling of power. She couldn’t rush at Mrs. Cochran, for the impact might make her pull the trigger and thereby shoot the inspector.

“What would you do in my place, Inspector?” the cook asked with tears in her eyes. “If someone threatened your son, you have done anything to protect him, wouldn’t you?”

The truth was in his eyes, stamped all over his face, and that led to confliction, for as she’d told him early on in the investigation, there were times when a thing wasn’t a black and white issue. Poor man. He had a large decision to make.

“Perhaps you are correct, Mrs. Cochran.” Then he slowly lowered his hand and straightened his spine. “If you wish to shoot me, do it. But I know from experience that will not make you feel any better, and neither will it

absolve you from your crime. Instead, it will only add to it.” He never dropped his gaze from her face. “You might do a few years in Newgate for killing Alderson in defense of your daughter. It all depends on what a local judge will say, but if you kill me outright, you will definitely hang.”

Tension crackled in the air as silence reigned. By slow increments, the cook lowered her arm. Mary rushed over and gently pulled the pistol from her lax fingers. “What will happen now, Inspector?”

“I will do all that I can to help your case once the constable and the judge are involved. From all accounts, you were within your rights to defend your daughter.” He shrugged. “Since it is the holiday season, it is entirely possible neither will come out to Stanwick Hall until after Old Year’s celebrations.”

“And?” Molly joined her brother, and they clasped hands while everyone in the room looked at Bright.

“In the meantime, you may keep your position as the cook, and your children may retain their positions as well.” His lips formed a thin line, a sure sign he was conflicted. “Over the course of the next week, I will weigh the options of involving your children in this crime. However, I must remain true to my position, and I must insist that you remain in the manor house for the duration.”

“Thank you!” Mrs. Cochran dissolved into tears. She sat down heavily on the abandoned chair while her children gathered around her, all hugging and crying.

Mary gestured to the door with her head. She left the sitting room and once in the corridor beyond, she waited for Bright to join her. Once he did, she gave him the pistol. “I’m glad you weren’t shot, even though it was quite the risk.”

“There is always that on every case.” He grunted while removing a handkerchief from his jacket pocket, then he wrapped the pistol into it, and returned both to his pocket. “Thank you for your calming presence. Without you there, I have no doubt I would have ended up in the rubbish bin like the murder weapon.”

“I rather doubt that.” She shook her head. “You are trouble, but none of those people are bad and neither are they hardened killers. Just a family who looked out for each other, a mother who wanted a better life for her daughter, and all up against the obstacles of people of wealth and privilege who don’t value lives below theirs.”

“Agreed, but a crime *was* committed.”

“True, yet I somehow think justice was also served. You *will* do your best to have Mrs. Cochran’s sentence reduced, won’t you?” Surely he wouldn’t be so hard-hearted as to insist the cook go to prison.

“I give you my word, I will help all that I can. Knowing what sort of man the butler was, I’m rather willing to look the other way. Just this once.” His grin loosed butterflies in her belly. “What would I do without your commonsense approach to crime?”

Mary snickered. “Probably flounder around with your ego and arrogance, thinking from your own position of privilege.” She shrugged, for it was all too easy to tease him. “But I have faith that you will mature as a person. Congratulations for solving the case. You will need to tell me how you suspected the crime was committed by a member of the domestic staff.”

“It was all too obvious, my dear Mrs. Tomlinson.” He winked. “There are two droplets of blood in the lace of Mrs. Cochran’s cap. No doubt her clothing had been splattered when she stabbed the butler and she would have changed those, burned them no doubt. Except the cap, for it’s not a frippery and the lace isn’t solid enough to show a stain immediately. It was overlooked in the frantic clean up and then preparations for this week’s entertainments.”

“That is quite a reach, Inspector. Surely ferreting out the killer takes more skill than the off chance a stain on lace makes a person guilty.”

“Of course there is.” He closed the distance between them, cupped her cheek, and then claimed her lips in a fleeting kiss. “Someday I might even teach you the art of deduction and reasoning, but I’m glad you weren’t hurt either.”

“What now?” Surely this wasn’t the end of their association. It was all too deflating, and cold disappointment coiled through her belly.

“Perhaps we should rejoin the ball.” When he offered her his arm crooked at the elbow. “After all, I feel like celebrating.”

As she slipped her hand into that bend, she sighed. “As do I.” Though she’d had something completely different in mind.

“Also, I’m rather shocked to discover just how many unsavory secrets the people beneath this roof are keeping. Before I return to London, I’m going to give my brother a piece of my mind on many subjects, the least of which is hiring more proper people to fill the domestic positions. There is entirely too much foolishness going on.”

She couldn't help chuckling. "Leave them be for now, Bright. Don't you know that finding solace in the arms of a willing partner eases the pain found in life a tiny bit?" Her future might not be settled, but she didn't wish to usher in Christmas morning with worry. "And I wouldn't say no to a lovely glass of madeira or tea with a splash of whiskey. It has been a rather trying day."

"I will procure whatever you need, my dear, for this night could have ended much worse."

Indeed, it could have, and when she'd seen the pistol trained on him, her whole world had tilted sideways. No, she wasn't in love with the inspector, but there was *something* there between them that hadn't been evident before, and oddly enough, she wanted the opportunity to chase it, to find out what it could be if given half the chance.

Chapter Seventeen



December 26, 1818
Boxing Day

Mary sighed as she leaned her back against the side of the porcelain bathtub she'd ordered brought to her room. The soft chime of the carriage-style clock on the bureau top proclaimed it the two o'clock hour of the afternoon, and she was finally, blissfully alone.

Christmas Eve had seen the close of the case she and Gabriel had worked. After the ball ended and everyone had taken part in the buffet dinner, guests that weren't staying at the manor went home while the house party participants who wished it piled into the sleight or in carriages that would take them into the village for the midnight church service. Everyone else who remained at the manor went into the drawing room to decorate the Bavarian tree. She and Gabriel hadn't been afforded alone time, and by the end of the night, she'd been exhausted besides.

Christmas Day had been just as hectic and busy, but in a different way. Everyone had come together to partake of a huge luncheon spread in the dining room. The rest of the day was spent playing parlor games or taking exercise outside in various forms of sports. Dinner had been a lavish affair where everyone had worn their best clothing—Bright included. Carols in the drawing room had followed dinner, and the rugs had been rolled back so the younger members of the party could indulge in dancing. Though she'd chatted with the inspector a few times during the day, those conversations weren't deep and neither had they been about the case. He'd flirted and been charming to everyone—her as well—but he hadn't tried to pull her away into an empty room, so after the activities of the evening concluded, everyone retired, and Bright hadn't asked her to stay back.

Sleep had been fitful last night, and she'd feared he'd lost interest in her as a woman now that his case had been solved.

When the morning had arrived today, she'd not been ready, but the sunshine was most welcome. Adelaide had announced her intentions of

accompanying Lord and Lady Stanwick in delivering baskets and boxes to the poor in the district as well as delivering the same to all the staff who worked at Stanwick Hall. Since the servants had the day off, and those house party guests who weren't involved in charity had gone to the village in their own pursuits and wouldn't return until evening—since there would be no hot dinner waiting here—the quiet was both welcome and disturbing.

Not afraid of laboring for herself, Mary had warmed the water, and with Adelaide's help had brought at least ten buckets of steaming hot water upstairs to fill the porcelain tub. Afterward, Mary retreated behind the closed door of her bedchamber with the intentions of reading a book while she soaked in the violet-scented water. Feeling fancy, she'd even sprinkled a handful of dried violet petals into the water for a pop of color and to pamper herself.

Oh, the warmth of the water was heavenly as it lapped over her body and seeped up to her chest. Rarely did she do something like this for herself merely to enjoy it, so she took her book in hand, opened it to the last page she'd read, and sighed with the sheer luxury of it.

A half hour later, the *snick* of the door opening and softly closing brought her out of the warm cocoon she'd wrapped about herself.

“Adelaide, if that's you, find something else to do. I've no mind to socialize just now.”

“Not even with me?” The rumble of Gabriel's baritone sent gooseflesh sailing over her skin. “I thought after the past two days without time together, I should track you to earth in the hopes you'd wish to indulge in scandal.”

Perhaps she didn't mind being interrupted after all. “I assumed you were finished with whatever is between us.” She half-twisted about to look into his face.

“Perish the thought. My plans were merely delayed by the holiday.” With a wink, he began removing his clothing. Soon enough, his jacket of bottle green superfine was tossed to a nearby chair. A silver satin waistcoat followed and then slipped to the floor with a whisper of fabric. As she watched, he tugged off his cravat. It fell to the carpet like a dollop of cream. Cuffs and collar soon followed. “Imagine my good fortune when I slipped in here to discover you already naked and looking exquisite shrouded with a trace of bubbles and flower petals.”

Awareness prickled through her and tightened her nipples. “I thought

to spend some time relaxing... but you're welcome to join me."

"Mmm, perhaps I will." His eyes darkened as he neared the bathtub, removing his fine lawn shirt as he went. "Simply gorgeous."

"I quite agree." Dear heavens, that expanse of chest! Light brown hair lay sprinkled over his skin in a vague butterfly pattern that tapered into a thin line the farther it went south and disappeared beneath the waist of his breeches. "I suddenly have the urge to lick syllabub or champagne from your abdomen."

Oh, why did I tell him that? His ego will only grow larger.

"Wouldn't that be lovely for us both, and not a bad idea. I'll keep that in mind." Once he tossed the shirt away, Gabriel positioned a cushioned footstool behind the tub then sat upon it. The warmth of his breath danced over her nape and cheek. "Do you require assistance in washing your hair?"

"No. I'd not thought to do that chore tonight, merely enjoy soaking here." Tingles shot through her core from his proximity. "You are a clever man. I'm certain you can puzzle out what to do next, hmm?"

"Absolutely." He nuzzled the crook of her shoulder and at the same time, lightly danced his fingertips over her breasts, slowly, oh so slowly, bringing her nipples into tight buds.

"Oh." The sensuality of his touch sneaked up on her, and she wasn't ready for how wonderful it felt. A moan escaped and her back arched of its own accord, which put her bosom more firmly into his hands. "I have missed this."

"It has only been a few days since I last caressed these lovelies." He chuckled. "Not that I mind." Using his palms, he rubbed those sensitive buds, brought them into a frenzy that had pleasure careening into her core. Need pulsed between her thighs, and no matter how much she wanted him to take her in a firmer grip, he never did. Merely continued to tease with the lightest of touches. "I could spend hours playing your body." He continued to concentrate on bringing her to the brink of pleasure through her breasts alone.

"Mmm, if you have a good enough showing tonight, I might take you up on that promise."

"Or we could find something to keep that tart mouth occupied." With his lips at her nape, Gabriel kissed and nibbled the skin there while keeping her distracted by teasing her breasts, her nipples and the heat from his skin, his teeth, his tongue, the slight rasp of the day-old stubble on his cheeks and jaw added another layer of bliss to the play.

“Oh, drat you for knowing exactly what I like.” Mary’s eyes shuttered closed and once more her back arched. She couldn’t help it, for each pass of his fingers lit her on fire. Need throbbed through her core; her breath came in shallow pants. Blissful sensations darted over her skin. How was it he’d encouraged her so close to that edge, hovering, waiting, seconds away from flying without doing much more than caressing her breasts? “More,” she gasped out and lifted a hand to wrap around his nape. “I need more from you, Bright.” Deliberately, she used his surname in the event it might spur him into action.

“Missed me, have you?” He licked the side of her neck, just below her ear.

“How could I not? We’d barely gotten started before we were rescued from that mill.” Then her concentration on words shattered, for his hand went between her thighs, his fingers burrowing through her curls in the water, and it was a lovely sensation. As she shifted, parted her legs to give him room to maneuver, the inspector strummed those talented digits along her flesh, back and forth, and when she whimpered, put a hand over his to guide him to where she needed him the most, he found her swollen button, encouraged it out of hiding, and then applied friction to that nubbin as if that was his only mission in life.

“Mmm. I do like a man who knows what he’s doing.” Shivery sensations raced along her spine, pushed into every nerve ending. She held his hand tight to her pearl, clutched his nape with her other hand. He kissed her neck but didn’t leave off with his frenzied friction, glided his lips over her cheek, and when he bit her earlobe, streaks of need slammed through her core to heighten the feelings already crashing through her body.

“I appreciate the compliment.”

Water lapped in the tub as she restlessly undulated her hips. “I’m nearly there...” Oh, if he didn’t finish her, she’d melt right into the bath water.

“By all means, let me help you over so we can move elsewhere for the next act.” The dratted man pinched her nipple; he rolled that hardened tip and tugged a sharp gasp from her. The pleasure-pain sent her hurtling toward that glimmering edge. His chuckle was all too satisfied as he increased the pressure. “Don’t fight it, Mary. Let me see you come undone, for it was too dark the other night for such a treat.”

Those words made her shatter, and the more she relaxed into his care,

the greater the wave of bliss smacked into her, picked her up, and then carried her into that void where sound and light didn't exist. "Gabriel!" That cry broke his name into three distinct seconds as she squirmed with pleasure. Familiar contractions pulsed through her core, and still she clung to his hand. When she came back to herself, Mary had only enough strength to slump against the back of the bathtub. "That was an acceptable start."

"Ah, good. I'm glad I passed the first mark." Gabriel nuzzled the crook of her shoulder before he eased away from her and off the footstool. "But the remainder of the afternoon requires us to both be twisted in sheets upon a proper bed."

A shiver careened down her spine. "Now you have me curious, Inspector." Slowly, she stood in the tub and let the water run down her body while he watched with dark eyes.

"Curiosity is always a good indication that you'll never grow bored." Quickly, he tugged off his boots while hopping from foot to foot, and then wonder of wonders, he removed his breeches to stand fully nude and fully, gloriously hard and erect before her. "Shall we begin?" He held out a hand to her.

"Yes, please." Oh, how she wanted to explore his form with her hands and mouth. "I might not be done with you after this session," she said as she put her fingers into his.

"Then we shall have to make it a point to sneak away at some point during the remainder of this dreadful house party." Once he'd guided her from the bathtub, he then picked her up into his arms, carried her across the room, and after he tossed her onto her bed, he followed her down, immediately claiming her lips as he did so.

Mary was in danger of being lost in the man, but in the moment, she didn't care as she looped her arms about the breadth of his shoulders and returned his kisses. As she dragged her lips beneath the underside of his jaw, the contrast between smooth skin and stubble heightened her awareness and provided a layer of excitement she hadn't anticipated. Then their lips connected again, and he sought out her tongue with his, and every thought scattered.

There was no need to act coy with him; they were both too old for that. "I desperately want you, Gabriel." Every thrum of her pulse called his name; every breath she took tasted of him, even more so when she went exploring with her lips, her tongue, her teeth. Oh, there was so much to

discover about this man that she didn't know exactly where to begin.

"Then I have no choice but to oblige, for I never like to disappoint a lady, especially you." He held her face between his hands and gently kissed her lips. "You were lovely in those ballgowns the last two nights, but words cannot express how amazing I think you look without a stitch on," he whispered and then claimed her lips once more.

Need twisted down her spine. "You are quite romantic for a logically thinking Bow Street investigator. It's amusing and arousing."

"Ah, then I'll be certain to keep you guessing." His hands were at her breasts, kneading the flesh and worrying the tips into hardened peaks.

With a moan mixed with a gasp, Mary did some exploring of her own by sliding her hands up and down his back, tracing scars and wondering how he'd gotten them.

"The jagged one was given to me in the war when a ball went dancing over my skin as I was quickly bathing in a creek," he whispered against the crook of her neck.

"You poor thing."

He held up his left hand. "Around the wrist are scars from when I was briefly captured and secured to a tree with barbed wire."

"That's horrible." Mary pressed her lips to the inside of his wrist. Then she urged him upward enough that she could run her palms over his chest, bury her fingers into the crisp hair there. The sandalwood and orange scent of him mixed with raw man flooded her nose, made her lightheaded and drunk at the same time, and the latent strength of his body sent shivers of anticipation through her belly. "You make me feel giddy and naughty, more alive than I've ever been." When she pressed her lips to a pectoral muscle, he groaned.

"High praise indeed, but you encourage me, teach me that I don't know all I thought I knew so I'll strive to do better." For the next few seconds, he teased a nipple with his lips and tongue. "Too bad you favor such an old man."

"I hardly think that's true." Needing more stimulation than he apparently wished to give, she strummed her fingertips over her neglected nipple and laughed when he groaned. "I don't see a paunched belly or a stooped spine yet." In fact, his body was as finely honed and fit as a man twenty years younger. "I can't wait until I can explore every inch of your form." Need lanced down her spine to lodge between her thighs with tingles

that fed her hunger for him.

“So, so desperate. Are you one of those wicked widows?”

“Do you want me to be?”

“What do you think?” Then he set out to apparently worship her curves, signaling an end to their verbal conversation.

“Mmm.” With a shuddering sigh of contentment, Mary gave herself into his care. The touch of his lips to a puckered nipple delighted her. When he worried the other hardened bud with his fingers at the same time, she squirmed beneath him as fires caught in her blood. “More,” she whispered and held his hand and head to her breast.

“Let me work, woman.” The longer he suckled and rolled those sensitized tips, the more of a wanton she became. Heated urgency coiled and built within her body, searching for an outlet only he could give, which only built on what he’d made her feel that night at the mill.

“Far be it from me to rush the process, Inspector,” she murmured, then was lost to his ministrations. She’d chosen her lover well, for he spent copious minutes caressing her body, exploring her every curve until she panted and moved restlessly with anticipation. Oh, how she wanted to feel him inside her! “Gabriel, please.” Soon she’d fall over the edge into bliss, and that wasn’t fair, for she hadn’t yet had the opportunity to bring him to that shadowy brink.

“Please what, my dear widow?” He danced talented fingers down her torso, past her waist, over the soft swell of her stomach to furrow through the curls shrouding her sex. “Touch you here?” The dratted man guided his fingers downward, rubbed those digits along her folds slick with desire. “Or perhaps tease here?” He dipped one inside her channel, probing, stretching, teasing, and withdrew only to bedevil the hidden nubbin that set her whole world on fire.

“Argh!” A squeal mixed with a moan escaped her as he continued to bedevil that all-important button. Oh, he didn’t play fair... but then neither did she, at least not in this. Mary reached between them to cup his equipage. The engorged length was hot and hard against her palm, and she promised herself she would explore later. When she gave his stones a firm squeeze, he retaliated by adding friction and speed to *his* endeavors.

She couldn’t help the stifled scream that left her throat, doubly glad most of the company had left the manor for the afternoon. Over the edge she fell as pleasure broke in waves and her core contracted. “Cheeky.” The word

came out on the heels of a pant, and she beat on his shoulders with her fists. “On your back, Inspector. I demand recompense.”

“Why do I think I’ve caught a tigress by her tail?” However, he did as bid and reached for her, pulling her over his body until she straddled his waist.

“You mean, you didn’t realize what would happen? I thought you were a detective of some worth.” Mary leaned over him. She covered his face, his neck, his chest with kisses as some of her tresses escaped their pins and tumbled over her shoulders. “You drive me insane in many different ways, but in want is my favorite.”

“I can work with that.” Gabriel gripped her hips and guided her backward. His rampant length twitched against her bum. “I’m going to explode, soon, so you’ll need to take pity on me until I get a second wind.”

She smirked. “Hmm, perhaps you *are* too old after all.” When he protested, she lifted onto her knees, took his shaft in hand, aligned herself to his tip and then she slammed down upon him, not stopping until she was completely impaled. “Oh, yes.” Wicked sensation swirled around her. Being joined with him felt entirely too right. Her eyes briefly crossed.

“Quite telling, that reaction, so I don’t guess age matters in this, hmm?” He ran his hands up and down her ribcage and left tingles in his wake. When he met her gaze, his eyes gleamed with amusement and dark desire. Soon she would tumble into those brown-green depths and happily drown.

“Do shut up, Bright.” But she grinned. How could she not? Mary bounced up and down his length. She moaned as each pass brought her closer and closer to the edge once again. Then, suddenly needing to feel his dominance, she layered herself over his chest. “Let me feel you deep inside me,” she said and then kissed him with such passion she hoped he understood.

He didn’t answer with words, but his body tensed beneath hers. Seconds later, he flipped them both over and peered into her eyes. “I am so damned fortunate to have met you.”

“You have certainly changed... everything.” With a sigh, she wrapped her legs around his waist, locking her ankles at the small of his back. When she looped her arms about his strong shoulders and pulled him tightly to her, he began to move.

Over and over, his thrusts were exquisite. They glided together in a

dance as old as time, moving seamlessly as if they'd been together for years. Every stroke sent her higher, every push fanned the flames already burning in her blood. Then the cadence and rhythm changed. She held tight to his magnificent form, all the better to kiss whichever part of him came near. His pacing increased; he thrust deeper; his strokes became faster, shorter, more potent. When he took a nipple into the warm cavern of his mouth and nipped the sensitive flesh with his teeth, the added stimulation brought her hovering at the very brink of bliss.

“Oh!” His groans and labored breathing echoed in her ears as the sweetest affirmation. Then she gasped. The dam holding back the rush of pleasure broke. She screamed out his name as her body stiffened. “Keep going,” she whispered, and the harsh sound rasped into the room.

The inspector did as she asked, for with every frantic thrust he filled her being with his until they were well and truly joined, bound together in carnal sin. With a guttural sound, Gabriel kissed her hard and deep as he stroked into her one last time. His shaft pulsed and jerked amidst the feeling of warmth.

“Dear lord, I can't breathe.”

“If I did it correctly, I'll wager you can't walk either,” he quipped with a quick kiss to her lips and ground his hips into hers, then sneaked a hand between them to bedevil her swollen pearl one last time.

“So arrogant.” Mary held onto him as tight as she could as she fell over the edge, her world fracturing into shards of light as her ragged breathing mingled with his. He collapsed and his weight pressed her into the mattress. The tactile sensations of his large frame shielding her smaller one made her feel protected and peaceful—wanted—for the first time in far too many years. “Yet so good.” With a shuddering sigh, she relaxed her hold on him, and when he rolled off her, he took her with him, tucking her into his arms, her backside against his front.

It was such an intimate, trusting act that tears sprang to her eyes.

For long moments, they lay together in the silence as breathing regulated and her spirit came back down to earth. As a pleasant lethargy descended, she roused enough to stir. “Bright?”

“Hmm?”

“I meant what I said to you earlier in the week. I don't want another marriage right now.”

His arms tightened about her as he pressed his lips into the crook of

her shoulder. "I don't want to marry again either."

They were equally matched, it seemed. "Will you always think that?"

"At the moment, I'm not entirely certain. What of you?"

"Same answer. It's a murky subject, at best." She laid her arms over his while reveling in the solid feel of him around the whole of her body.

"Obviously, I am not a gentleman, as evidenced by what I just did to you."

Mary snorted with amusement. "I never said I wanted a gentleman."

"Ah, that clears away the confusion." His chuckle reverberated in her chest while the tone of his voice tickled her ear. "The thought of us separating once we return to London is not ideal, so I have been thinking upon a solution."

"Oh?" A queer little tingle went through her heart. Was their adventure together just getting started then?

"Though I take issue with extending trust into a marriage, I wouldn't say no to a torrid affair like what we teased about a handful of days ago."

"Ah, the night I interrupted your bath." She gasped. "That's why you came in on me this afternoon!"

"Well, it *did* seem fitting." His chuckle heated her blood but made her feel far too content. "In that way, you and I might still see each other if we can do so discreetly."

"Of course. I have Adelaide to think about and you have Henry." Threading the fingers of her hand with his, Mary sighed. "Your idea has potential, yet I had something like that with your brother years ago."

He huffed. "I would hardly call *that* bit of insanity an affair. It was terribly one-sided, and he cared nothing about you." A growl rumbled through his words.

"True." She couldn't help a grin. "Then I would be your mistress?"

"If we had to put a term to it, perhaps, but in all the ways that matter, I'd rather call you my partner. Yet under my protection for everything that entails."

It was a start, and more than she had at the start of the week. "I'm intrigued. Keep talking."

"We would only enter into this relationship if you wish it, but I hold you in high respect and care for you as a lover and friend. If you think this sort of thing is too demeaning..."

"Hush, Inspector." Turning in his arms, she met his gaze. "I know

what you mean.”

“Good.” He nodded, but a trace of vulnerability shadowed his eyes. “I am nothing like my brother. I want that absolutely clear.”

What a dear man he was turning out to be. “That is readily obvious.”

“Oh?”

“You are better in every conceivable way.”

A hint of ruddy color crept into his cheeks. “To tip my hand, I will also offer you the position of assistant on any upcoming cases I might have, but fair warning. I am heavily considering retirement from Bow Street.”

“But not from investigating privately?” One of her eyebrows rose.

“Exactly. A man needs a purpose, after all.”

Mary flashed a grin. “That sounds like the perfect solution for us both.” Not all relationships needed to have marriage to validate them, and she was content with what she currently shared with Gabriel. “However, I live with my brother and keep his house.”

“That will present complications, but my townhouse will be empty once Henry goes back to Oxford when the term begins again, so we will have a bit of freedom.”

“And after that?”

He shrugged. “We will take each obstacle as it comes, but I’m willing to rent a love nest for us to be together if that is what you desire.”

Never had she known a man to make such a sacrifice merely to be with her. It was both humbling and amazing. “Let us see where life takes us and go from there, but one thing I know with certainty.”

“And what is that?”

“I desire you, and haven’t nearly had my fill of you.”

“The good news is I can accommodate that need.” So saying, he rolled her onto her back, cupped her cheek, and then set about to apparently kiss her senseless.

Sighing, she gave herself over to his ministrations. Yes, she was entering into this relationship with her eyes wide open and a healthy wariness of men in general, but Gabriel had given her enough reasons to extend her trust. As long as this adventure kept her entertained and fulfilled, she would let it continue, and the anticipation therein would keep her happily guessing for what might happen next.

It was enough and she couldn’t wait to draw even closer to this man who’d turned her world on its head.

The End



If you enjoyed this book, please leave a review on the site of your choice.

This is not yet the end of Mary and Bright's romance or their partnership in solving cases. They will return in the spring of 2024 in *An Intriguing Springtime Engagement*.



Is it even an engagement unless a dead body is involved?

It's been four months since Mary Tomlinson solved her first murder as well as entered into a passionate affair with her handsome, mysterious Bow Street inspector. Though she's enjoyed herself hugely, she wonders where the relationship is heading. Surely, she can't remain his mistress forever even if the bed sport is quite satisfying. There has to be... more to life.

Inspector Gabriel Bright is a man on a mission. Old enough to know what he wants from his existence, he's invited the widow to accompany him to a tea café in a relatively quiet section of London for the specific purpose of asking for her hand. However, during the course of uttering that all-important question, their romance is interrupted with the news of a murder just down the street.

Once more Mary and Bright are on the case, for apparently someone has killed a popular butcher's wife, but shortly into the investigation, they discover it's no ordinary homicide. The murderer has left a gristly calling card of sorts and it's connected to Bright's past. If the case isn't solved in time, it could have dire consequences for their brand-new engagement as well as terminate the romance that's barely put down roots.

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Author Bio

Sandra Sookoo is a USA Today bestselling author who firmly believes every person deserves acceptance and a happy ending. That is why her characters are not in the usual style and oftentimes struggle with things out of the norm. She's written for publication since 2008. Most days you can find her creating scandal and mischief in the Regency-era, serendipity and happenstance in the Victorian era, or historical romantic suspense complete with mystery and intrigue. Reading is a lot like eating chocolates—you can't just have one book. Give her the chance with one book and you'll be hooked.

When she's not wearing out computer keyboards or mice, Sandra spends time with her real-life Prince Charming in Central Indiana where she also runs a gourmet cookie business and makes moments count with the man because the key to life is laughter. Inspired to storytelling by Walt Disney since the age of ten, when her soul gets bogged down and her imagination flags, a trip to Walt Disney World is in order. Nothing fills the well and fuels her dreams more than the land of eternal happy endings, hope and love stories.

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