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A Victorian Historical Romantic Suspense Novel
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To all the fantastic authors who write romantic suspense, encouraging me to dip my toe into the suspense waters.
Melbourne Station, England, April 1887

Miss Charlotte Reading furtively glanced at the clock on the wall in her tiny bedroom. Her heartbeat increased as she mumbled encouragement to herself and shoved her meager belongings into a small satchel. Lord Barton had sent a note around that he intended to return home at four o’clock, and to make herself available.

Fifteen minutes.

He didn’t need to say more—she knew exactly why he’d demanded her presence. She tried to hold down the panic as she looked around, grabbed her hairbrush and the small gilded mirror that had belonged to her mother, and shoved them into the satchel. Deciding there was nothing more important than her life, she fastened the bag, grabbed her pelisse and bonnet, and fled the room.

And the house.

An hour later, Charlotte took her first deep breath as the train rolled out of Melbourne Station, headed to London. As she’d waited for the train, her heart had seized every time a man had entered the station. She clutched her ticket tightly in her hands.

Giddy with relief as the train gained momentum, she studied the countryside passing by, carrying her farther from her employment. Tears gathered on her eyelashes, and her chin trembled. She’d made it. Closing her eyes, she leaned her head back against the seat and smiled.

Lord Barton’s face rose in her mind—with the ever-present sneer.

Dangling a very expensive ruby necklace that belonged to his mother—the woman Charlotte had served as a companion to for almost two years—he grinned. “It seems our chambermaid Molly, found this hidden under your mattress.” He waved the necklace back and forth in front of her face.

“I am sorry, my lord, but either she is lying, or you are mistaken.”

His arrogant eyebrows rose. “Indeed? Do you imagine the magistrate will assume I am mistaken, Miss Reading?” He shook his head, a look of feigned pity on his face. “An impoverished lady’s companion, a servant, tired of listening to an old woman’s complaints, decides to help herself to a piece of jewelry to better her position?”

In the past year, Charlotte had spent almost as much time avoiding Lord Barton, and dodging his groping hands, as she had serving his mother. His mother, who was a demanding, petulant woman, no doubt had taught all she knew to her egotistical, arrogant son.

Charlotte raised her chin. “I arrived with excellent references, my lord. I have never been accused of thievery in my prior two positions.”

He walked toward her, the leer on his face threatening to bring up her lunch. “I will be happy to have the magistrate decide for himself.” He moved even closer, causing her heart to beat so loud she was sure he could hear it. “However, if you agree to better your position by accepting my offer of carte blanche, this necklace will automatically re-appear in my mother’s jewel case.”

“I will not be your mistress.”

He continued to dangle the necklace, his eyes turning a darker brown. “Oh, yes, my dear. You will spread your lovely legs for me,” he leaned in closer and murmured in her ear, “except when I have you on your knees.”

To her relief and astonishment, he backed up and gave her a slight bow. “We are not finished
with this. Think about my offer. Then think about jail.” He clicked his tongue. “Such a horrible place for a beautiful young woman.” Shaking his head, he turned and left, dropping the necklace into his coat pocket.

The clicking of the train wheels soothed her, reminding her that every mile it traveled took her farther from the monster. She had saved enough of her wages to see her through a couple of weeks, but she needed to find a position as quickly as possible. Without references, it would be tricky, but she patted the two letters that she had from her previous employers, tucked into her reticule, hoping they would be sufficient.

She took stock of her situation. She was three and twenty and had been in service for six of those years. London would have many more opportunities. Perhaps a dress shop, or millinery. Maybe she could secure a position in a bank. The prospects were many.

Lulled by the rhythm of the train, she relaxed and enjoyed the ride, anticipating the new life to which she was headed.
Chapter One

London, England—Eighteen months later

Elliot Baker studied the small calling card in his hand. A charming card, it had a colorful array of flowers, with two doves, on one side. The second side read:

Mrs. Gabriel Pennyworth

“You say she is here in the waiting room?” He tapped the card with his finger and regarded his secretary, Mr. Gleason, the man who had been with him ever since he opened his office two years prior. Tall, thin, dressed—as always—in all black, he was the perfect complement to the type of business Elliot conducted.

“Yes, sir. She said she is aware she does not have an appointment, but it is of utmost importance that she see you.” His sniff told him how inappropriate he deemed the woman’s actions.

Elliot stood, rolled his sleeves down, and shrugged into his jacket. “Very well. Send in”—he glanced at the card—“Mrs. Pennyworth.”

He was just settling into his chair when a young, very attractive woman passed through the doorway. As he stood back up, he tried very hard not to notice her full lips, creamy skin, and golden-blond hair, fashioned into a chignon at the back of her head. Her high-necked, well-made black carriage dress did not sport the bustle that so many women had returned to, but gathered in the back, pulling the fabric close against her stomach. The style of the dress would draw any appreciative male’s eyes to her fine form.

Overall, she was of a most attractive countenance, which immediately annoyed him.

Mrs. Pennyworth cleared her throat, reminding him he had been staring. He flushed at being caught gawking, gave her a slight smile, and waved to the chair in front of his desk. “Won’t you please have a seat, Mrs. Pennyworth?”

She sat very primly at the edge of the seat, her delicate black lace-gloved hands resting on the handle of her parasol. “Thank you for seeing me without an appointment, Mr. Baker. I will not take up much of your time.”

He dipped his head in acknowledgment. “How may I be of service, ma’am?”

Her clear green eyes studied him in cool detachment, telling him nothing. “I wish you to investigate an issue on my behalf.”

He leaned back, regarding her once again. No wedding ring visible through the lace glove, a black dress, and asking for his services, which was generally done by a man. A widow. Perhaps a recent one. Tenting his fingers together, he tapped his lip. “Indeed? And what is it you wish me to investigate?”

She glanced off to the side, and a slight flush covered her lovely cheeks. “I am being bedeviled by someone who is making me quite uncomfortable.”

An alarm sounded in his brain, and his well-earned suspicious nature rose to the forefront. Slow down, Elliot. Not every pretty woman is a manipulator.

To give himself time to clear his mind, and accept whatever it was Mrs. Pennyworth was about to tell him without prejudice, he pulled a pad of paper toward him, and dipping his pen in the inkwell, looked up at her. “Please continue.”

She chewed her bottom lip, then taking a deep breath, drawing his eyes to her well-formed bosom, blurted out, “I have been receiving unwanted items on my front doorstep.” She stopped and once more
worried her plump bottom lip.

If the woman needed to be prodded every time she made a statement, the interview would take much longer than her initial promise. However, it was apparent she was upset, and having a difficult time of it. Since he rarely had women for clients, he softened a bit, without letting down his guard, and realized how out of her element she must be.

Perhaps the formal atmosphere was hindering her. He replaced the pen in its holder and pushed the pad away. “May I offer you tea, Mrs. Pennyworth?”

She visibly relaxed and nodded. “Yes, that would be quite nice.” She pulled out a fancy lace and linen handkerchief and patted her forehead and upper lip.

Elliot pushed back his chair and walked around the desk to the doorway. “Mr. Gleason, please bring tea for Mrs. Pennyworth and myself.”

He attempted small talk while they waited for the refreshments, but it soon became apparent that whatever had brought Mrs. Pennyworth to his office had a firm grip on her sensibilities, and she merely smiled and nodded distractedly at his comments.

Elliot was greatly relieved when Gleason appeared at the door with a tray of tea things. “Would you care to pour, Mrs. Pennyworth?”

Once they were settled with tea and plates of biscuits on the narrow table in front of the small wood-burning stove, Elliot said, “Please start at the beginning so I may understand what your problem is, and how I can be of service to you.”

Taking a sip of tea, she placed the cup in the saucer and folded her hands in her lap.

“About three weeks ago, I received a bouquet of flowers on my front doorstep. Since I had attended a small gathering the evening before, I assumed a gentleman had sent them over. The odd thing was, it arrived with no card. They were simply left there. Ordinarily, a delivery boy rings the bell and presents them.”

Time to get some facts. “And was Mr. Pennyworth upset by this arrival of flowers?”

She raised her chin. “Mr. Pennyworth passed a year ago.” She took another sip of tea. “I live alone in my own home, with a small staff, a bit north of Hyde Park.”

He made a mental note. Widow. Solid middle-class neighborhood. Her clothes reflected sufficient money and good taste.

“Go on.”

“A few days later there were more flowers, but again, no note.” She stared off into the distance, her voice lowering, her words disjointed. “Days followed with more flowers, a lovely plant, a box of chocolates, and an expensive handkerchief—"

“All with no identifying card?”

She nodded. “Last week, however, I received a single black rose, a blank card attached, with what appeared to be a drop of blood on it.” She patted her upper lip with her handkerchief once more and looked directly into his eyes. “This morning there was a dead bird on the steps.” She chewed her lips and shivered. “With a knife through its poor little body.”

What he had begun to think was merely a man too shy to approach an attractive woman, swiftly changed to something more sinister. “And still no note?”

She shook her head. “None.”

He leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms. “Have you notified the Metropolitan Police?”

“Yes. I just came from there. They dismissed my concerns. The man at the desk suggested I had an admirer, whose attentions I should be enjoying.”

He shook his head in disgust. “And the bird? What did he make of that?”
“That it was merely some rough youths playing a trick. He then informed me that unless I lived in Whitechapel and plied my trade on the street”—she winced—“they had no time for me since they are busy with that horrible man committing all those murders of prostitutes.”

Bloody hell of a way for an officer of the law to speak to a woman. “Yes, the one the newspapers have given the moniker ‘Jack the Ripper’.”

She swallowed visibly and took another sip of tea, her hand shaking slightly. “I don’t know what to do. I have not reached the point where I am afraid to leave my home, but I must admit to having twinges of fear each time I open the front door.”

“Do you mind if I take some notes?”

“Not at all.” Her eyes followed him as he rose and retrieved the pen and pad from his desk. “Do you think you can help me, Mr. Baker?”

Prior to the incident with the woman Annabelle, that had led to his resignation from Scotland Yard, he would not have hesitated to help a woman in need. However, time and experience had taught him to go carefully with pretty women. Even though he’d tried many times to tell himself all women were not like Annabelle, he was cautious in his answer. “I am not sure. What is it, exactly, you wish me to do?”

“Find out who is doing this, and stop these things from coming to my front door.” Her voice rose, and her face flushed. “I apologize for shouting, but I am quite stressed.”

He looked down at the pad to give the poor woman a moment to compose herself. “Tell me, is there a pattern with the arrival of these items? For example, you mentioned the first flowers arrived the morning after you had attended an event. Is that true for the other packages? Or maybe after a specific type of event you attend on a regular basis? On certain days of the week, perhaps?”

“Yes. I have noticed they mostly arrive the morning after I have been to a social event. However, there have been times when nothing came the morning after.”

“Which means your tormentor might not have been at that event.”

“I thought of that and tried to remember who was not there, but so many of the events have people coming and going all night, it is hard to keep track.”

He nodded and made some notes. “Any particular type of event that did not have a package left the next morning? For example, the theater, a dinner party, garden party, etc.?”

She shook her head. “No, I don’t believe so.”

“Have you ever had a package arrive the morning after you’ve had an evening alone, at home?”

She considered for a minute. “No. I don’t believe so.”

Elliot continued to look down at the pad. “Is there a gentleman who has offered his attentions that you have spurned?”

Her body stiffened. “I am just coming out of mourning, Mr. Baker. Any gentleman who offered his attentions has been spurned.”

He nodded. Either she was a good actress, or she lived by a decent moral code. Until he knew her better, he opted for actress. “And yet you attend social events.”

If she saw any condemnation in his words, she didn’t show it. “Since I recently passed the anniversary of Mr. Pennyworth’s death, I have been accepting invitations, but only those of a more sedate nature. Smaller assemblies, no large balls or gatherings.”

“And those in your circle of friends and acquaintances would be aware of your situation? Of the fact that you are coming out of mourning?”

“Of course.”

Still reluctant to take on Mrs. Pennyworth’s case, he asked, “Have you no men in your family to
He did not imagine her miniscule change in demeanor. The slight tension in her body, the hesitation, as if considering her words carefully. *What is she hiding?*

“I am an only child, with no male relatives.”

Leaning back, he regarded her. If he were to help this poor frazzled woman, he would need to spend time with her, which he did not relish. Once burned, and all that.

“May I ask what brought you to my door?”

“The constable at the Metropolitan Police. He said you were a former Inspector.”

“Ah, yes.”

Charlotte attempted to calm herself, so Mr. Baker wouldn’t think she was a swooning, hysterical female. When she had first decided to take the constable’s suggestion and visit with Mr. Baker, she had been expecting to meet a middle-aged paunchy man, with thinning hair, beady eyes, and thick spectacles.

Instead, she found the private investigator to be young, handsome, and someone who did not seem to confine himself to sitting behind a desk. He filled out his coat quite well, and the peek she’d gotten of his well-formed legs bore witness to time spent in active pursuits. His deep-blue eyes seemed to look right into her soul. A lock of light-brown hair fell over his broad forehead, which he kept pushing back with his fingers. To no avail.

However, the last thing she needed was to develop a fancy for a man. She was still angry at Gabriel for risking his life in that stupid carriage race. She’d begged him not to go. Cocksure, as usual, he’d kissed her goodbye and tweaked her nose, telling her she worried too much.

That was the last time she’d seen him alive. He’d been thrown from the carriage, landing in such a way that he’d broken his neck. Rage, tears, and depression had taken over her life for months.

After her narrow escape from Lord Barton, she’d only been in London and at her new situation at the bank for a few weeks when Gabriel Pennyworth had appeared one morning and begun to take notice of her. A well-placed solicitor and the third son of a viscount, he had not been exactly handsome but had possessed a personality that charmed women wherever he went. Including her.

Only a month after their marriage, all her hopes for a happy life with a husband, a comfortable home, and children, had vanished on a rainy Saturday morning at Hyde Park. The arrival of her menses a week later had added to her sorrow for the child who was not to be.

The owner of a sizeable trust fund from his grandparents, Gabriel had left her with a lovely townhouse, along with a nice income that would last the rest of her life.

One would think, after her experience with Lord Barton, she would realize no man could be trusted. Gabriel had promised to love, honor, and cherish her. What sort of honor was risking your neck in a carriage race with a group of ninnyhammers? She intended to take care of herself from now on, which was why it rankled to have to ask Mr. Baker for help.

“Are you planning any social events in the near future?” Mr. Baker’s deep voice cut into her musing.

“I have accepted an invitation to a poetry reading at Mrs. Bertha Ainsley’s home tomorrow evening.”

Mr. Baker pulled a face, which piqued her curiosity. “Why do you ask?”

“Right now, it appears your persecutor is a member of your social circle. The best way for me to
uncover this culprit is to attend the events where you will be. Since I do not travel in your circles, I will need to accompany you as your escort. Although I abhor poetry, would it be difficult to obtain an additional invitation to this affair? Also to any others you will be attending?"

She pursed her lips, mentally reviewing the various occasions on her social calendar. “No, I do not believe it will be a problem.”

He placed his pen back into its holder on the desk and stood. “Excellent. I will call for you at…”

Startled at his abrupt change of demeanor, she hesitated. “Oh, the reading begins at eight o’clock, so I would think seven-thirty or so shall do it.”

“Please give your direction to Mr. Gleason as you leave.”

She scrambled to gather her things at being so summarily dismissed. “But…we haven’t discussed your fee. Or whether you think you can assist.”

“Madam, if I could not assist in the search for this man, I would not be foisting my company upon you. As far as my fee, I will charge you less than you expected, yet more than you had hoped.” He offered a smile, enough for her to realize the man had a smile that should be declared illegal. White even teeth, full lips, and small lines alongside his mouth that gave him a rakish look. *None of which I need note.*

He clutched her elbow and walked her to the door of his office. “Don’t forget to leave your information with Mr. Gleason.”

Her head spinning with the energy emanating from Mr. Baker, she nodded and made her way to the front office where she gave the needed information to the secretary. Feeling hopeful, she left the building, took a deep breath, and was immediately overtaken with a spasm of coughing from the ever-present coal dust in the air.

She headed to the hansom cab she’d arrived in, since her coachman, Bones, had developed an ague, and she had insisted he stay abed.

Thinking ahead to tomorrow’s poetry reading and being accompanied, of all people, by a private investigator, she let herself into her house and headed straight for the kitchen. Another cup of tea would be just the thing to settle her nerves and help her decide what to wear. Not that it made a whit of difference. This was just another social event.

... Ensnconced in a safe place, it was easy for *M* to watch the woman climb out of the rented equipage and hurry into her snug little house. Why was she not using her own carriage? Had she found it necessary to let the coachman go? To sell the carriage and pair? That would never do for sweet Anne.

Anne. Now going by the name of Charlotte. *M* sighed at her trickery.

Perhaps the next gift should be one of value, so she could sell it if she needed the funds. How comforting it would be to take care of her again. To watch her lovely face light up with pleasure at the little gifts. To remind her to wear a pelisse when it was chilly outside, and to be sure to eat breakfast since she tended to start her day with only a cup of chocolate.

Anne was such a delicate little thing and had brought great happiness to their life together. Except when she hadn’t. Memories returned of when it had been necessary to punish her. That was why other, more unpleasant, gifts had been left on her doorstep. The bloodied rose and dead bird would not have made her face light up with joy. Things that would make her sweet breath catch, and her delicate hand tremble. Reminders that she was being watched.

Turning away, the fog swirled around, enshrouding *M* on the short walk home. The wind picked up, and the fall weather with the abundance of colorful leaves, that Anne loved so much, took away some
of the heaviness at her absence.

Tomorrow night would be another chance to gaze upon her, would even, perhaps, present the opportunity to speak with her. A smile burst forth at how Anne had failed to recognize her lover. M knew her and would always know her, no matter where she ran and hid.

Upon M’s arrival home, Mrs. Gearing, the neighbor next door, attempted to begin a conversation. There was no time for Mrs. Gearing. Preparations had to be made for tomorrow night’s poetry reading and seeing beloved Anne once more.
Elliot chastised himself as he dressed for the blasted poetry reading. Several times since Mrs. Pennyworth had left his office, he’d considered sending a note explaining that time did not permit him to accept her case, after all.

Not a complete lie, since he did have other assignments, as well as some legal work that needed his attention. Of course, no other job required him to be available in the evenings, which was when he would be doing most of the work for his newest client.

Every time he thought of Mrs. Pennyworth, Annabelle’s face rose to mind. Her sweet countenance, her fake blushes, her batting eyelashes as she had lied through her teeth. There was no other way to put it. She’d made a fool of him, cost him his career as an Inspector, and put him on guard with every woman he’d met since.

Especially Mrs. Pennyworth, with her delightful round face, pleading eyes, and shaky hands. An act? Perhaps. Whatever she was about, he would bet his yearly income she was holding something back from him. He would have to remain cautious with her.

Returning his attention to the task at hand, he gave his best suit a good brushing, and dressed. Not having attended one of these functions before, he hoped his closely tailored slack suit with a wingtip collar and four-in-hand tie would be acceptable attire.

He was not attempting to impress Mrs. Pennyworth, merely endeavoring not to embarrass the woman. As a former Inspector with Scotland Yard, and now a private investigator and solicitor, his usual social engagements consisted of a round of boxing at Gentleman Jim’s, followed by a few mugs of ale in the local pub, or a snifter of brandy at his club.

While he pulled on various pieces of clothing, his mind once more wandered back to the disaster that Miss Annabelle Walters had caused. Lovely Annabelle, with her deep-brown eyes and wavy black hair. Beautiful, charming, sensuous. And deadly.

No matter how many times he castigated himself, he still felt anger at her duplicity. And his stupidity.

He had believed those sultry looks and promises of carnal pleasure. He’d fallen hard for her, spending much more time dancing attendance on her than concentrating on his work. He’d been assigned to meet a ship sailing from India with a jewel onboard to be transported to the Tower of London where the Crown Jewels were stored. Annabelle had pouted and complained that she would miss a theater performance to which she had demanded his escort.

It was after she had threatened to attend with another man who had been seeking her favors, that he’d passed the assignment off to an underling. The poor man had been crippled in the attempted robbery of the priceless piece. Weeks later, Annabelle, along with three men who had been her accomplices, had been arrested.

He’d been the one to handcuff her and place her into custody. The venomous words she’d hurled at him in front of the other Inspectors had brought him shame and disgust. After a very brief meeting with the Chief Inspector, Elliot had resigned. He’d spent the past two years attempting to recover his good name.

Now, he was once again working at the behest of a beautiful woman. One to whom he was unquestionably attracted. Unfortunately, due to the nature of her situation, the best method to uncover her tormentor was to delve into her world and spend time with her. He broke into a sweat at the
thought of again falling under the spell of an unknown female, and placing his reputation on the line.

Besides attending social events, he would assign someone to watch her doorstep to see if the man could be caught that way, but it was highly unlikely the suspect left the repulsive objects himself.

Placing his derby on his head, he left the house to travel the two miles to pick up Mrs. Pennyworth. Night had fallen, and with the ever-present fog not too heavy, he eschewed hiring a hansom cab for such a short jaunt and instead chose to take the omnibus and then walk the short distance to her house.

The neighborhood changed as he made his way from his lower-middle-class flat to her upper-middle-class home. There was more space between the residences, and the front gardens were better kept. Most likely, these dwellers had permanent staff, as opposed to Elliot, who relied upon his landlady, Mrs. Murray, to clean his rooms, and provide him with breakfast each morning. He sent his laundry out and hired a horse or hansom cab when the need arose.

One day he might take a wife, but until he felt he had recovered his reputation, he would not saddle a woman with his name. If his standing as a crack private investigator, and a top-notch solicitor, continued to grow, he might consider marriage.

_Mrs. Pennyworth would make some man a fine wife._

He snorted and shoved that idea from his mind. He barely knew her, had reason to believe she was hiding something, and she was above his station. He’d just spent a half hour reminding himself of the repercussions the last time a woman had distracted him. It was best to squash whatever fancy he might have for her and concentrate on getting the job done.

He was humming a tune by the time he reached her front step. He took a quick look around to see how visible the area was to someone he would send to watch. He could see down the street from both ways clearly enough.

A young fresh-faced parlor maid opened the door to his knock and escorted him to the drawing room—a well-appointed, lovely room.

Deep rose-colored patterned wallpaper covered the walls, with white wainscoting along the bottom. A plush decorative carpet protected most of the highly polished wooden floor. He groaned at the uncomfortable-looking, yet stylish furniture taking up a great deal of the floor space. ‘Twas obvious no man had selected these pieces.

Dozens of knick-knacks, clocks, bowls, lamps, picture frames, figurines, and other whatnot decorated the area, giving him an immediate sense of claustrophobia. Yet, from the little he knew of Mrs. Pennyworth, the room looked very much like what he would have supposed. Attuned as he was for sounds, he knew immediately when she entered the room. The slight swish of a gown, mixed with the light scent of roses he’d noticed when she’d come to his office.

He turned, and wished he had not decided to conduct the investigation in this manner. His client was a stunning vision who robbed him of breath. Her deep-lavender dress displayed her form to perfection. Her warm smile and intelligent eyes suggested she was not just another pretty face. Mrs. Pennyworth possessed an inner core of steel that attracted him as much as her visage.

Despite the trouble her maid no doubt went to in arranging her hair, all he wanted to do was pull the pins holding up her golden tresses and run his fingers through its length.

_I am in deep trouble._

He gave her a bow and smiled. “You look lovely this evening.”

She gave a quick curtsy in return which, given their stations, was not required, but she looked almost as confused as he felt. Before he could make a cake of himself, he extended his arm. “Shall we?”

“Yes.” She took a deep breath and licked her lips, causing his lungs to seize. Every single drop of
blood in his body traveled south, shouting *hooray!* After Elliot assisted with her cloak, they headed to the front door.

The muscles in her arm tensed as the parlor maid opened the door. He bent toward her, a whiff of her delectable scent filling his nostrils. A big mistake. “Do not concern yourself. There was nothing there when I arrived.”

She offered him a slight smile and relaxed as they stepped onto the empty front steps.

“Shall I fetch a hansom cab?”

“No. I have my own carriage. Yesterday, I arrived at your office in a hansom because my coachman was down with a chill, but he has recovered.”

No sooner had she finished her explanation when a smart carriage and matched pair rounded the corner from the mews and rolled to a stop in front of her house. Whoever Mr. Pennyworth had been, he'd certainly left his widow in a comfortable place.

Elliot waved at the coachman to stay where he was, opened the carriage door, and helped Mrs. Pennyworth in. He followed her, and when they were both settled, he tapped on the ceiling of the carriage, which rolled away to the familiar sound of horses’ hooves clomping on the cobblestones.

“Tell me a little bit about the poetry reading.”

Mrs. Pennyworth laughed, a light tinkling sound. Somehow, he had expected her laugh to be deeper, throatier. However, this appealed to him more, and suited her well. “Do you realize, Mr. Baker, that you wince every time you mention poetry?”

“I am afraid poetry is one art form that escapes me. If it rhymes, and the writer uses words that make sense, I can understand it. But I find most of it boring drivel.”

“Well, do not hold back, Mr. Baker. Please do tell me how you feel.” She tempered her words with another smile.

He offered her a lopsided grin in return. “I am afraid that is one of my character traits.”

“Therefore, I assume you do not suffer fools?”

“No, not at all.” He hesitated as he studied her. “’Tis something to remember.”

Her raised eyebrows were her only response.

Arriving at the townhome, they entered the room where the poetry reading was to take place. Mrs. Pennyworth nodded at a few people, most of whom were already seated. They took their seats, and Elliot looked around at the crowd of about forty people. His attention, of course, was on the men.

From what he could see, none of them were paying any special attention to Mrs. Pennyworth. All those who greeted her were friendly and seemed harmless enough. However, he knew from experience that meant nothing when it came to crime. Some of the most congenial people committed the most horrendous misdeeds.

After about ten minutes, an older lady moved to the front of the room. The feathers in her hair wobbled as she nodded and welcomed everyone, and announced the first reader. Elliot groaned inwardly and prayed he could stay awake.

One final sweep of the room revealed no one looking in their direction. Satisfied that, for the moment, he could relax his guard, he gave his attention to the young man at the podium with a sheaf of papers, adjusting his horn-rimmed spectacles.

Let the torture begin.

…

Although she would never admit it, Charlotte was no great fan of poetry herself. In fact, she had rather enjoyed Mr. Baker’s description of it. She also felt if it didn’t rhyme, it wasn’t poetry. The only
reason she had accepted the invitation was because her dear friend’s son was offering a reading of his poems.

Mr. Alvin Macon was third in the program, and his mother, Lady Oldridge, was unable to appear due to attending her daughter in Bath. The woman had just delivered her third child and desperately needed her mother’s assistance.

Lady Oldridge had never accepted that her daughter had married a member of the merchant class. As such, she did not live in a grand house, have a horde of servants to see to her every need, and had to actually—gasp—deal with her own children as they did not employ a full-time nurse and governess.

Even so, she had agreed to help her daughter, with the strict understanding that she would only entertain the two older children, and not deal with the new baby. Charlotte adored the woman, even though she sometimes found her insufferable. She’d never told Lady Oldridge of her own meager beginnings, of being forced into service in a noble’s home when she was seventeen years.

Papa’s older brother, who had acted, rather reluctantly, as her guardian after her parents had perished in a carriage accident, had given her from the age of fifteen to seventeen to find a husband. When no one appealed, she was shipped off to her first servant job. In fact, Charlotte had never told anyone about her background. She still worried about the theft charges brought by Lord Barton. She was certain he had carried through on his threat, and right now there was a warrant for her arrest hovering over her head.

Oftentimes, in the dead of night, she would awaken and think of how her comfortable life could disappear in a blink. She shivered at the thought.

“Are you chilled, Mrs. Pennyworth?” Mr. Baker’s smooth voice brought her back to where she was. Safe in Mrs. Ainsley’s drawing room, among friends and acquaintances, who liked and respected her.

As safe as anyone could be with an unknown man leaving upsetting items on her doorstep. “Yes, perhaps a bit.” ’Twas better to say that than explain to Mr. Baker about her past. A past he would surely question, considering what she had hired him for. Former Inspectors were not of the ilk to dismiss a pending arrest warrant, nor view the recipient thereof in a favorable light.

“Would you care to change seats so we are closer to the fire?”

“Heavens no, I’m too warm already.” Oh dear God, she was so immersed in her concerns over her possible arrest, she’d forgotten her comment about being a bit chilled. He viewed her with curiosity.

“I’m sorry. I sometimes become too cold or too warm rather quickly.” She hesitated. “I am afraid that is one of my character traits.” She grinned at tossing his words back at him.

He tilted his head to one side. “Well done, Mrs. Pennyworth,” he murmured.

Lord and Lady Monroe, sitting in front of them, turned and gave them displeased looks. Mr. Baker raised his eyebrows, glanced at Charlotte, and covered his amused lips with his finger. She had to stifle a giggle. So, the staid former Inspector had a sense of humor.

An hour later, Charlotte took a glance once again at the long clock in the corner. She stifled a yawn just as she heard a light snore. She turned to find Mr. Baker fast asleep. Lest they garner the attention of the couple in front of them once again, she nudged his arm with her elbow.

“What?” His loud response stopped the poet in his tracks. All heads turned in their direction. Embarrassed, Charlotte winced at the irony in her waking him, so his snoring would not disturb the couple in front, only to have him respond with such gusto that they now had everyone’s attention.

The young man at the front of the room cleared his throat and continued. Thankfully, he was the last reader on the program. With a sigh of relief, she stood and shook out her skirts. “Would you care to
accompany me to the refreshment table? I feel quite parched.”

“Yes, refreshments sound wonderful.” He took her elbow and escorted her to the table and bent to speak into her ear. “This is a good opportunity to introduce me.”

Charlotte was amazed when Mr. Baker took two plates and placed various items on them. He escorted her to a small table where he left her with the food, then he returned with two cups of tea. Certainly, a private investigator should not know the proper protocol for taking refreshments at a Society event.

That thought reminded her how little she knew of the man. But then, there was no reason to know him any better. He was her employee. That was all. And it would do her well to remember that, so they did not cross any boundaries.

She needn’t notice how well he fit in with the other members of the poetry reading audience, or how gentlemanly he was to hold her elbow to escort her. She could walk by herself, thank you very much. Her legs had been holding her up for years.

Mr. Conrad approached their table. He was a pleasant man, nearing his fiftieth year. She’d always enjoyed speaking with him, but now Mr. Baker had put her on guard, made her re-examine every man with whom she spoke.

The idea that someone from her social circle was responsible for the packages on her doorstep had crossed her mind briefly, since they had arrived the mornings after she’d attended various affairs. She hadn’t realized how much she’d dismissed that idea until Mr. Baker had presented it as the obvious one. It was difficult to believe someone she spent time with, and had possibly even shared a dance or conversation with, could do such a thing.

“Good evening, Mrs. Pennyworth. Did you enjoy the readings?” Mr. Conrad bowed over her briefly and cast an inquiring glance at Mr. Baker.

“Yes. The readings were delightful. May I present Mr. Elliot Baker to you, Mr. Conrad? He is my guest this evening.”

Mr. Baker stood, and they shook hands. “Will you join us?”

Charlotte was sure Mr. Baker wanted to speak with various men, and Mr. Conrad was a good one to start with—even though she had found him to be a mild, innocuous gentleman, who would never dream of doing dreadful things to upset a woman.

They were soon joined by Mr. and Mrs. Graymoor and General Norwich. Although he held his own with the conversation, Mr. Baker covertly eyed each man and most likely took note of how they presented themselves.

“Mrs. Pennyworth, will we have the pleasure of your attendance at the assembly this Thursday?” Mrs. Graymoor, an older woman, regarded her as she took a sip of the ratafia. “Mr. Graymoor and I so enjoy your company.”

“Yes, I do plan to attend.”

“Excellent,” General Norwich said.

The conversation continued, with the Graymoors eventually quitting the small group and a few others taking their places. Eventually, Mr. Baker addressed Charlotte. “Mrs. Pennyworth, may I interest you in a stroll around the room? I find that standing in one place makes me a bit restless.”

“Of course.” She joined her arm with his, and they strolled away.

He bent close to her ear, “Introduce me to a few more men.”

She steered him in the direction of a group of men having a lively discussion about the latest reports from Scotland Yard on the lack of progress in catching the man brutally killing prostitutes in Whitechapel. She preferred not to listen to the details that men so enjoyed sharing, but once she
joined the group, the talk changed to the weather and other subjects fit for a lady’s ears.

Once several of the guests began to ask for their carriages, Charlotte turned to Mr. Baker. “I find I am quite fatigued. Perhaps we can call for my carriage?”

“Of course.” He led her to the front door where he spoke with the butler. His eyes never stopped moving, taking in the surroundings, and focusing on the men conversing.

Charlotte hadn’t realized how strained the evening had been for her until she settled into her carriage. Every man who spoke to her had become a suspect. At least she hadn’t needed to worry that Mr. Baker would stand out as someone who did not belong. He had conducted himself exceptionally well.

“I must thank you for your attention this evening, Mr. Baker.” She offered him a warm smile. He turned to her, and once again she was taken with his appearance. He was certainly an attractive man. His strong features looked as if they’d been chiseled from marble. Except he was a flesh-and-blood man. Even though he’d arrived at her door freshly shaven, already a light shadow appeared on his jaw and chin.

The way he studied her in the golden glow of the lantern on the carriage wall brought flutters to her insides. Although she had no intention of ever entrusting her heart or well-being to a man again, as a widow, she could perhaps one day engage in a liaison with a gentleman without too much scandal, providing they were discreet.

But certainly not this gentleman, who represented the law, and who, for all intents and purposes was her employee.

“Aside from the poetry, it was my pleasure,” he answered. “Since I do not travel in the circles to which you are accustomed, I had hoped not to call attention to myself.” He grinned. “Except for the snoring, I believe I succeeded.”

She laughed, more of the tension leaving her body. “Yes, you did succeed. However, I am sure Lord and Lady Monroe will never sit in front of us again.”

“Ah, yes. It is difficult to relate to someone who is actually there to listen.”

The carriage continued on until it rolled to a stop in front of her house. Mr. Baker helped her from the vehicle and escorted her to the door. Suddenly, she felt awkward. After all, this was not a true social engagement for them, but merely business. “My carriage will take you the rest of the way home.”

“Thank you very much, but after all that sitting, I believe I would enjoy the walk.” He bowed slightly, and once the front door was opened, he turned and hurried down the stone steps.
Chapter Three

Elliot could not get away from Mrs. Pennyworth fast enough. Spending the entire evening with her, the warmth from her body right next to his, and the light floral scent emanating from her skin, was beginning to drive him crazy.

Crazy would be continuing with this assignment. Rather than a nice leisurely stroll, he hurried along the cobbled streets, moving through the London mist from gaslight to gaslight until he arrived at his home. Despite the cool evening, he was sweating when he entered his rooms. He flung off his jacket and tie and tugged his shirt from his pants.

The best thing for him to do would be to work diligently to solve Mrs. Pennyworth’s problem, and then forget her. And her sweet face. And golden hair. And soft skin he wanted to run the back of his fingers down.

Groaning at his stupidity, he removed the rest of his clothes and flopped onto his bed, staring at the ceiling. Yes, he needed to move forward with this, and put Mrs. Pennyworth far from his mind.

... 

The next morning, he climbed aboard an omnibus and took a ride to her house. He found her already out and about, a surprise, since he thought ladies of her class spent the morning in bed. The young parlor maid invited him in to wait. Although he had no intention of waiting, since she said Mrs. Pennyworth would be out for a couple of hours, he accepted her offer and spent the time speaking with the staff, starting with the young girl.

“How long have you worked for Mrs. Pennyworth?”

Apparently, not expecting to ever need to converse with guests, she blushed and seemed to have a difficult time forming words. “I have been in service here since before Mr. Pennyworth married Mrs. Pennyworth.”

“And when was that?” He smiled, trying to put her at ease. “The marriage, I mean.”

“Last year, my lord. I believe October.”

He grinned. “I am not a lord, merely Mr. Baker.”

She blushed once again, her small hands fluttering at her side.

“What is your name, miss?”

She gave him a curtsy. “Bridget, my l—”

Yes, she looked like a Bridget. Flaming red hair, trying very hard to escape her white frilly maid’s cap. Deep blue eyes and freckles marked her as Irish.

“Tell me, Bridget, was there a package delivered here today for Mrs. Pennyworth?”

For the first time, the girl’s open demeanor closed down. She began to view him with suspicion. Her eyes narrowed. “I am not sure, and now I must return to my duties.”

Elliot held out his hand. “No, wait. I should have introduced myself. I am Mr. Elliot Baker, and Mrs. Pennyworth has hired me to help her with a problem.”

Her eyes grew large. “Are you speaking of the strange things that show up on the doorstep?”

“Yes. That is why I asked about packages this morning. Was there anything for her today?”

The girl shook her head. “I really do need to return to my duties. Mrs. Blanchard will have my head if my morning chores are not completed.”

“Ah, yes. Is Mrs. Blanchard the housekeeper?”
“Yes, and a fierce one she is.” She began to back away.

Elliot reached into his pocket and withdrew his card. “Will you be so kind as to present this to Mrs. Blanchard and ask her to allow a few minutes to speak with me?”

Bridget reached out and took the card, then giving another brisk curtsy, left the room. She was back in a matter of seconds. “Oh, my—Mr. Baker, I forgot to ask if you would like tea.” She fidgeted with her fingers. “Please don’t tell Mrs. Blanchard I neglected to ask before now.”

He smiled, hoping to put the girl at ease. “No, thank you, and do not worry. It will be our secret.”

In less than ten minutes, an older woman entered the room. She was a bosomy middle-aged woman, tall, with steel-gray hair pulled back into a painful-looking bun. She wore a long dark wool skirt, covered with an apron, and a white blouse, more fitting for a governess. “You wished to see me,” she looked down at the card, “Mr. Baker.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He waved to the settee in front of the cold fireplace. “Please have a seat, Mrs. Blanchard.”

She settled at the very edge of the settee, watching him expectantly.

“I have been hired by your employer to investigate an issue she is currently dealing with. How long have you worked for Mrs. Pennyworth?”

Mrs. Blanchard drew her brows together in thought. “Mrs. Pennyworth’s been here since last October when she married the master. For Mr. Pennyworth, I have been in service for nigh on ten years.”

Ten years the man had had his own household. He must delve more fully into Mr. Pennyworth’s affairs. There was always the possibility some connection to him was precipitating the packages. Although, why they would start now was the question. A question he needed to ask. “I understand Mr. Pennyworth passed about a year ago?”

Mrs. Blanchard nodded and tsked. “The poor man died only a month after his wedding to Mrs. Pennyworth. So sad for the young girl. She was quite happy when he first brought her here. I had expected years of continued happiness, with little ones arriving on a regular basis.” She touched the edge of her apron to her eye.

Apparently, Mr. Pennyworth had been well-liked by his staff. “Has Mrs. Pennyworth hired any new servants, say, in the last couple of months?”

Mrs. Blanchard glanced up at the ceiling, which he found many people did when they were thinking. “A new kitchen girl.”

“What is the hiring process?” Since he’d never had a full-time servant, he had no idea. The oldest son of a policeman, his path in life had been laid out almost from birth. His family of three brothers and two sisters had never starved, but they had watched their coins carefully. Clothes had been mended and handed down, meat had appeared at the dinner table only once a week, on Sunday, and they had all tended the garden at the back of their small London house.

But every one of them had had a decent education, thanks to the local vicar who ran a school for the nearby children, and his parents who had sacrificed their help while they were in school.

“If we require a new servant, Mrs. Pennyworth contacts the hiring agency, and they send over a few. I generally interview them first, and if they pass my examination, Mrs. Pennyworth speaks with them. She, of course, makes the final decision.”

“No new men?”

She shook her head. Of course, it would not be that easy, but he would be remiss in his duty to not check the most obvious first.

“Has Mrs. Pennyworth made you aware of the odd leavings on the doorstep the last few weeks?”
“Not at first. Mrs. Pennyworth keeps to herself. I knew something was amiss, however, but as it was not my place to question her, I waited until she confided in me.”

“When was that?”

“Only last week. I found her holding what appeared to be a dead bird. She was pale as new snow, and my stomach churned at the fear in her eyes. I helped her to a chair, disposed of the bird, and brought her a tisane. She then poured out the story of the strange happenings, and I suggested she visit Scotland Yard.”

Itching to learn more about his client, he realized questioning her housekeeper would not be quite the thing. When he was with the Yard, he could ask away, but Mrs. Pennyworth had hired him to find her tormentor, not examine her personal life history.

Sometimes, it was hard to differentiate between honest suspicion and the general skepticism he’d developed after his experience with criminals in general, and Annabelle, in particular. He tried to tell himself with each new woman he met that not all females were devious schemers.

“Yes, well the police are busy right now attempting to catch the man attacking prostitutes in Whitechapel.”

Mrs. Blanchard sniffed. “One would think that tax-paid policemen would be better served in looking for those who torture the ones who pay those taxes, instead of worrying about the women off the street.”

Elliot was familiar with many individuals, even some on the police force, who held the same opinion. To him, a life was a life, despite how one wished to conduct it. While prostitutes plying their trade in Whitechapel might turn many God-fearing souls to condemnation, most, if not all those women, were in that situation through no fault of their own.

He slapped his thighs, and stood. “Thank you very much for your time, Mrs. Blanchard. Please inform Mrs. Pennyworth of my visit, and ask her to send around a note if she needs to speak with me before I escort her to an assembly dance Thursday, next.”

Mrs. Blanchard nodded. “Yes, Mr. Baker, I will pass that message on to her.” She walked him to the front door. “Have a pleasant day.”

Charlotte placed her hand on the fevered brow of the young girl tossing in the small cot. “You have quite a fever, Mary.”

“I feel so hot, miss. Do you suppose I’m getting close to the gates of hell?”

Charlotte sucked in a breath. “No, for heaven’s sake—wherever did you get such an idea?”

“Mrs. Trevor said so, miss. She said those of us left here with no papa to claim us are headed to hell.” She nodded her little head, her small forehead wrinkled with concern.

Charlotte gritted her teeth so hard her jaw hurt. It was bad enough these poor children had no family, and for the most part, spent their childhood in this orphans’ home without proper nutrition and clothing, but it rankled that those in charge of the little mites condemned them for things over which they had no control. “No, Mary. I do not think you are near the gates of hell, and no, you are not headed there. If you are a good girl, and do what the Lord expects of you, there will be no gates of hell for you. Now, I am going to get a cloth and a pan of cool water to wipe you down. You will feel much better soon.”

She would also have a word with Mrs. Trevor on how to speak to the children.

Charlotte volunteered two mornings a week at the St. Jerome Children’s Orphan Home in St. Giles. It had helped her with her grief after Gabriel had died. If she were not to have a child of her own,
then her motherly instincts could be put to good use by caring for those who had no parents.

Most of the children at St. Jerome’s were illegitimate, their mothers prostitutes and drunkards. Some had been dropped off on the front steps, wrapped in bloody ragged blankets with umbilical cords still attached. Others were rescued from dire circumstances by kind-hearted souls who brought them to St. Jerome’s.

Whichever way they arrived, their lives were better, but certainly not wonderful. Porridge, bread, and the occasional piece of meat or fish made up their daily diet. Rarely did they see fresh fruit and vegetables. Charlotte had worked out a deal with the local dairy to supply the home with milk at a reduced price.

Most of the children suffered from illnesses directly related to malnutrition. The city of London provided some coinage, and other money came from wealthy benefactors, but most funds had to be cajoled from those more fortunate.

Charlotte spent a good deal of her time attending various fundraisers, begging on behalf of the children. She would give much more of her own money, but the tidy sum Gabriel had left her was controlled by his solicitor, and although he was happy to pay her dressmaker bills, he chafed at giving money to St Jerome’s.

A strange way of looking at things, from her viewpoint, and another reason to not trust a man. Gabriel had claimed to love her, but it wasn’t until his death that she’d discovered how little he had trusted her. She could barely make a move without consulting Mr. Daniels, the trustee. Although, as the pompous man had sniffed as he’d pointed out to her, she was fortunate to have the funds, since she and Gabriel had only just married.

He acted as though she had married Gabriel to do away with him and get his money. There had never been an occasion to explain to Mr. Daniels that she would have much preferred her husband to his money.

She detested the little man and hated when she found it necessary to deal with him.

Charlotte spent the next couple of hours attempting to reduce Mary’s fever, and assisting the woman employed to deal with the infants. She loved holding their little bodies, and the ache for one of her own followed her home after each visit.

“A Mr. Baker called for you, ma’am.” Bridget, the parlor maid greeted her as she entered the house.

“Oh, I am sorry I missed him. Did he say if he planned to return?”

“Not sure, ma’am. He spoke with Mrs. Blanchard.”

Charlotte removed her hat and cloak and handed them to the girl. “Please have Mrs. Blanchard attend me, and ask Cook to send a simple lunch to the drawing room.”

No fire had been laid in the cool fireplace, but Charlotte made a mental note to tell Mrs. Blanchard to see to having them prepared for winter. It would be nice to be able to start a fire now to warm up the space.

Perhaps the chill had not come from the air in the room, but from her time at St. Jerome’s. She enjoyed her visits there, but she always left with a heavy heart, knowing what she did was so little compared to their needs. Money. That was what would help the little mites have a better diet, warm clothes, and sturdy shoes.

“You sent for me, ma’am?” Mrs. Blanchard arrived with all the dignity that was her due. Unused to employing servants before her marriage to Gabriel, it had taken her some time to learn how to deal with them, to not make friends with them, and to observe the stringent servant hierarchy by which they lived.
“I understand Mr. Baker called today.”
“Yes, ma’am. When Bridget told him you were away from home, he sent for me.”

Their conversation was interrupted by Thomas, her combination footman and butler, arriving with her luncheon. She instructed him where to place it and returned her attention to her housekeeper.

“What was his intention in sending for you?”

“He wanted information on the servants. He asked if we had any new staff, in particular, male staff. That was mostly what he wanted.”

She startled. “Mostly? What else did you discuss?”

Mrs. Blanchard flushed. “He asked some questions about you, ma’am. How long you were married, when Mr. Pennyworth died, that sort of thing.”

“Despite employing him to help with the unwanted packages situation, Mr. Baker has no need to pry into my life.” She cringed at the brusqueness of her words.

The poor woman’s face flushed even deeper. “Yes, ma’am. However, I told him no more than what is publicly known.”

Charlotte felt sorry for snapping at the woman, and the tension left her body. It might have been unwise to hire a private investigator—always in the back of her mind were the pending charges against her, but would he be so diligent in his duties as to uncover that?

Not for the first time, she considered whether there was a connection between her dilemma and Lord Barton. Then, she dismissed the idea. It had been so long, and her name had changed. He would have to be quite clever—which he was not—to find her after all this time. Of course, he could have hired someone, but she doubted if his desire for her was that strong. Most likely, he’d already turned his unwanted attention to another unfortunate employee.

“It is all right, Mrs. Blanchard. I will speak with Mr. Baker and impress upon him that he is not to question anyone in my household without me present.” She turned toward the lovely array of food Cook had sent. “You may return to your duties.”

The housekeeper turned on her heel and left the room, quietly closing the door.

Charlotte poured her tea, and while she ate the lovely finger sandwiches and fresh fruit, her mind wandered to Thursday’s assembly. With Mr. Baker again attending as her escort, it would soon become a matter of speculation as to exactly what their relationship was.

She quelled the twinge of excitement in her lower parts at the thought of being in his strong arms as they danced. Quickly, she chastised herself. She needed to put those ideas aside. She was finished with the male gender. They could not be trusted, and since she had the means to support herself, there was no need to seek another husband.

\[
M \text{ dangling the beautiful diamond and ruby bracelet, the light catching the jewels, causing an array of}
\]

\[
\text{rainbow colored specks to dance on the wall. Beloved Anne would be surprised and thrilled to receive it. She loved jewelry, the more expensive and flashy, the better.}
\]

The humming stopped at the thought that Anne still needed punishment. How dare she bring that man with her to the poetry reading? The plan had been to sit alongside her, and enjoy her lovely company, discussing the poems, and absorbing her familiar scent. Instead, he had taken up the space next to her, with Mrs. Davis on the other side, so there’d been no room. Anne should have known better, since she knew flirting was against the rules. Rules made for her own benefit, to keep her from making mistakes that required punishment.

And this man seemed so crass! Large and bulky, and far too much at ease with Anne. He had not
appeared to be a gentleman, and when they’d been introduced, it had taken all the control mustered not to spit in his arrogant face.

Leaving the lovely bracelet on her doorstep, along with a small, but potent reminder that she needed to behave herself, had become necessary. Beloved Anne should already know to whom she belonged. How many times had there been occasions to impress that very idea upon her? Although hating to resort to such harsh tactics, truth be known, the image of Anne naked, on her knees, begging for forgiveness, was incredibly exciting, the memory causing a stirring down below.

If that horrible man accompanied her once again, even stronger punishments might be called for. A smile burst forth. Yes, more punishments. Then, a faint sigh quickly replaced the smile. It was so hard fighting the sadness. So very hard when the one you loved so desperately didn’t remember all you had shared.
According to the reports from the man Elliot had paid to watch Mrs. Pennyworth’s front steps, no packages had been left after the two of them had attended the poetry reading. Tonight, he would accompany her to the assembly where, hopefully, he would meet many more people. The atmosphere would be much more conducive to watching men, and how they interacted with his client.

So far, nothing led him to the conclusion that Mrs. Pennyworth was in any sort of physical danger. Aside from the dead bird, there had been nothing else sinister. The man harassing her could merely be someone too shy to approach her on a normal, social basis. Although, leaving a dead bird hardly seemed conducive to romance.

He straightened his tie as he sounded the knocker on her front door. Bubbly and friendly Bridget greeted him. “Good evening, Mr. Baker. The mistress has requested we put you in the library, where you may avail yourself of some brandy while you wait.”

“Good evening to you, as well.” He removed his hat and followed the young girl down the corridor. The library led him to believe someone thoroughly enjoyed reading. The floor-to-ceiling shelves were almost 90 percent full. A quick perusal of the books showed them to be placed according to category, and then alphabetically by author.

He strolled to the sideboard and poured about two fingers of brandy, then, taking light sips, he wandered the room, pulling out a book, flipping through the pages. He turned at the sound of the door opening and inhaled sharply through his teeth.

Yes, this assignment would be the death of him. His client looked like a goddess in a deep-blue silk gown that clung to her upper form, creamy white skin visible above the lace neckline. Her hair was piled up in such a way that teasing curls escaped, resting against her smooth cheeks.

“Good evening, Mrs. Pennyworth.” He managed to get the words out, despite the sudden dryness in his mouth. “You look enchanting.” Enchanting was not the proper word, but he would find himself justifiably slapped in the face if he used the word that was actually on his mind.

“Thank you.” She seemed pleased, her smile gentle, her eyes sparkling, then she stiffened as if remembering something unpleasant. Raising her chin she said, “I am ready to depart.”

“Of course.” He crossed the room and followed her to the doorway where she accepted her cloak from a man Elliot had not seen before. She was out the door before he could offer his arm and attempted to maneuver the steps herself, until it became apparent her gown was not going to permit it.

Trying not to smirk, unaware of what game she was playing, he extended his arm. “May I be of assistance?”

“Yes, thank you.”

Once they settled in the carriage and he knocked on the ceiling to alert the coachman to proceed, he rested his foot on his bent knee and regarded her. “How many generally attend this event?”

Mrs. Pennyworth grabbed the strap hanging from the wall next to her as the carriage hit a nasty bump in the road. “Having been in mourning for a year, it has been some time since I attended, but if memory serves, I would say about a hundred people.”

“This should give me a good opportunity to observe the gentlemen attending. Please try to introduce me to as many as possible. I still believe the timing of the package arrivals is connected to your social life.”

“Yet nothing was left the morning after the poetry reading.” Her voice was muted in the dark light.
With the fog swirling around the outside of the carriage, they seemed to be cocooned in their own world. Safe and protected.

"Perhaps your tormentor had not attended."

"True." She glanced away from him, then back again. "There is a matter I wish to discuss with you."

He nodded for her to continue.

"Mrs. Blanchard informed me that you stopped by the other day while I was away from home."

Since that was a statement and not a question, he merely continued to study her, no words requiring a rejoinder.

"In the future, I would prefer to be present when you question my servants." Two red dots appeared on her lovely cheeks, and her small chin rose as she waited for his reply.

"Of course. I had not visited your home with the intention of questioning anybody, but I do need to know about your household, new servants, etc."

"I agree. However, in the future, please direct your questions to me, and if you need to speak with one of my staff, I wish to be there."

"Surely, it is not your intention to hire me for a job and then proceed to tell me how to conduct it?"

"No, I just feel that it is my prerogative to be at hand when you speak with my staff." Her face flushed a delightful pink, and she refused to look him in the eye.

Bells went off in his head. *What the devil is she hiding?* Of course, she had the right to insist on being present when he questioned her staff, but something about her attitude put him on alert. He tried to tell himself it was because he was generally careful about new clients, but his more cynical side told him she was hiding something.

Like most women.

He did not want to get caught up in another debacle, and open himself up to becoming a fool. His lighthearted mood upon leaving the house vanished with their conversation. Then, he realized there was no reason to be disturbed.

What if she *was* hiding something? She had hired him to learn who was leaving packages at her door, and make them stop. That was all he intended to do. He had no reason to further entangle himself with Mrs. Pennyworth, and he was well advised to remember that.

The light from the assembly hall rose before them in the fog, like a welcome beacon guiding a ship to shore. The carriage rolled to a stop, and the door opened. Elliot stepped out first, then turned to assist Mrs. Pennyworth. She gave him a slight smile, as if to set a more pleasant mood.

The room was already full when they entered. Women in colorful gowns gave the space the look of wildflowers in a summertime field. A lively melody played from a small orchestra tucked into the northwest corner, with couples taking advantage of the music as they dipped and twirled around the floor.

After leaving their outerwear with a footman at the door, Mrs. Pennyworth smoothed her dress and took his arm as they entered the dance.

They both received small cards on which to enter names of dance partners. It didn’t surprise him that they barely took a few steps when Mrs. Pennyworth was swamped with hopeful partners. While she smiled and nodded, and wrote down names, he watched each gentleman—how close he stood to her, how he regarded her, and if he moved away to allow another gentleman to step forward.

Once her admirers had moved on to other women, he turned to her. “I hope you saved a dance for me.”

If she’d been as surprised by his request as he was, she didn’t show it. *Why the devil do I want to*
dance with her? He was here to do the work for which he’d been hired: observe and take mental notes.

She held out her wrist where the dance card dangled from a small ribbon. “There are only two dances left.” He glanced at it. A waltz and a cotillion. He wrote in his name.

Her eyebrows rose. “You filled in the waltz.”

“Did I? I hadn’t noticed.” Of course he’d noticed and told himself it was a better idea to seize a waltz so they could speak without being overheard. Compare notes, and all that. He pushed aside the annoying voice reminding him they would have the carriage ride home to do just that. *It is better to coordinate while they are still at the assembly, so I can instruct her,* he told the annoying voice.

Just then a gentleman approached, his attention riveted on Mrs. Pennyworth. With the music starting up again, Elliot assumed he was her partner for the upcoming dance. He bent his head and murmured into her ear, dismissing the fragrance wafting from her. “Don’t forget to introduce me to every gentleman you encounter. Otherwise, I might be forced to attend one of my clubs to meet them outside of these events.”

“You belong to clubs?”

“Yes, although I seldom grace them with my presence. Not such lofty clubs as White’s and Boodles, but the ones I’m sure some of these gentlemen might frequent.”

“Mrs. Pennyworth, I believe this is my dance.” Her partner was tall and lanky, with a mustache and a slight scar running from the edge of his mouth to his jawline. Despite the scar, the man emanated cheerfulness and sincerity, but one could seldom assess what was in another’s heart by mere presentation.

Mrs. Pennyworth took Elliot’s hand and drew him forward. “Mr. Talbot, I am sure you remember Mr. Elliot Baker?” She glanced at Elliot. “Mr. Talbot was a dear friend of Mr. Pennyworth.”

The man nodded in Elliot’s direction. “My pleasure.” He glanced toward Mrs. Pennyworth. “And a dear friend of yours, as well, I hope.”

Mrs. Pennyworth blushed, and Elliot regarded Mr. Talbot a bit closer as the man extended his arm to Charlotte. Elliot watched them walk away, and join the queue to begin the country dance. Deciding it would look suspicious if he spent the entire evening watching Mrs. Pennyworth, and her various dance partners, he approached the few women he had met at the poetry reading, to request dances.

He had filled a couple of spots when he approached Miss Garvey, who had attended the reading with Mr. Talbot. “May I request the honor of a dance, Miss Garvey?”

She studied him for a moment, her features tight. “I am sorry, Mr. Baker, but my dance card is full. If you will excuse me.” She turned abruptly and walked off.

Elliot shook his head at her rudeness, then shrugged and continued on his way. There were plenty of other women he could request dances from in order to observe Mrs. Pennyworth.

Once he had a respectable number of names written on the card, and tucked away into his jacket pocket, he spotted two more men from the poetry reading, sipping from glasses, and having what appeared to be a lively conversation. Grabbing a drink of a suspicious nature from the refreshment table, he joined them.


An hour later, Charlotte released Mr. Glenmoor’s arm and joined the other ladies in the line of dancers. She’d forgotten how much she enjoyed the interaction with other people, while she’d been in mourning.

Hers was not a world occupied with many lords and ladies, but honest, hard-working people:
merchants, solicitors, doctors. Some had inherited their wealth, but due to how it had been handed down, would not be received in the homes of the upper crust.

When she considered her beginnings—in service for years—she counted herself fortunate to be received by these people. Of course, marrying Gabriel had done a lot for her social position.

As the music began and she moved with the familiar steps, she noted several new faces in the crowd. She especially took notice of new men, since she doubted those she’d known for a while would suddenly begin behaving in such a bizarre manner as to leave unwanted, and disgusting, things on her front steps.

“Mrs. Pennyworth?” The woman alongside her touched her on the arm as they separated from their partners and joined the line once again.

Charlotte smiled at her. Another fairly new face, Miss Garvey had been at the poetry reading earlier in the week. “Yes, good evening, Miss Garvey.”

A slight woman, Miss Garvey appeared to be in her mid to late thirties. Brown hair with some gray had been pulled back in a bun at the nape.

“It is a pleasure to see you once again. I hope you are enjoying yourself.”

The woman smiled. “Indeed, I am. I don’t wish to appear presumptuous, but I wonder if I might ask a favor of you.” They moved away from each other to circle with their partners, then were back in the line again. “I had hoped to increase my social circle in London and heard you are just the person to help me in that quest.”

“I shall be delighted to help you adjust, Miss Garvey. I am having an afternoon tea next Tuesday if you are free.”

The woman’s face lit up. “I would love to come. What time?”

“I will send along a note with the information. If you have a card with you, just leave it with the man at the door, and I’ll collect it when I leave.”

Miss Garvey nodded. “Thank you so much. I will definitely do that.”

Charlotte had been approached before by women new to London who had found it difficult to find the correct social circle. She had become a one-person welcoming committee of a sort. Knowing how unhappy one could be with no social life or friends, she was always willing to help a newcomer adjust.

Just then, Mr. Glenmoor whisked Charlotte away to be joined with another couple as they moved in time, forming a small circle.

Once the lively dance ended, he escorted her back to where she’d left Mr. Baker, who was just then returning from a conversation with Mr. Melrose and Sir David. Mr. Talbot joined them and lingered, appearing to prevent Mr. Baker from getting too close. Surely the man didn’t think, as Gabriel’s close friend, he had some sort of obligation to “protect” her? The idea both humored and annoyed her.

“What line of work are you in, Mr. Talbot?” The snap in his eyes and the deep concentration he was affording the man, alerted Charlotte to his true intentions. It appeared poor harmless Mr. Talbot was coming under Mr. Baker’s scrutiny. As much as she wanted to dismiss the matter as utter nonsense, it did afford her the opportunity to study him further.

She’d always been comfortable in his presence, but Gabriel had invariably been there during Mr. Talbot’s visits to the house. Except for the time shortly after she’d been notified by the police that Gabriel had not survived the carriage crash. Her husband, along with several of his muddle-headed friends, had set up a race, driving large horse coaches, normally driven by experienced coachmen.

Mr. Talbot had stepped in to help with the funeral arrangements, stayed by her side during the horrific time, and had called on her at least once a month thereafter to ascertain her well-being. Could
he now feel she owed him in some way, or that he was her champion with Gabriel gone?
But how would that fit into leaving her obnoxious things? To gain her attention? Make her feel
unsafe so he could step in and aid her? Nonsense. She was now taking second looks at every
gentleman she’d known for the past year and half. She hoped Mr. Baker was good enough at his job
that he would find the culprit soon enough, and put a stop to such suspicious thoughts.

“I manage my investments,” Mr. Talbot said in answer to Mr. Baker’s inquiry. “I was fortunate
enough to inherit property and such, which keeps me quite busy. And what is it you do, Mr. Baker?”

That question got Charlotte’s attention. Certainly, Mr. Baker had an innocuous answer at the ready,
knowing Mr. Talbot would ask the same question in return.

“Solicitor.”

Well, that was indeed a good cover for his true profession, but something that anyone could easily
investigate if one was apt to do such things. Once Mr. Talbot took his leave to fetch his next dance
partner, Charlotte turned to him. “Was it wise to pretend to a solicitor’s profession? Perhaps
someone might have cause to call you out on that.”

Mr. Baker smiled. “I am a solicitor.”

She startled. “I thought you were an Inspector with Scotland Yard before you began as a private
investigator?”

“Indeed. However, I also studied law and passed the exams set by the Law Society.”

“Before you left Scotland Yard?”

He nodded, and the tightening of his lips and the stiffening of his body suggested there was a story
he preferred not to divulge. She gave it a try, however. “Why did you leave Scotland Yard? The
Inspector with whom I spoke didn’t say.”

“It was a complicated matter, but one that taught me to remember good is good and evil is evil, no
matter how it is packaged.” He glanced, with seeming relief, over her shoulder. “Now, however, it
appears your next dance partner is headed this way.” Mr. Baker nodded in the direction of the
gentleman making his way across the room. Mr. Carter had been introduced to her this evening for the
first time. He was a banker, and held himself in high regard. Almost to the extent that the short time
she’d been in his presence, she felt as though he looked down upon her. Why he had requested a
dance eluded her.

Her feet ached, and her head had begun to pound when the orchestra started to play the waltz that Mr.
Baker had requested. Tempted to ask him to forfeit the dance and escort her home, she, nevertheless,
took his extended arm as they made their way to the dance area.

He turned her in his arms, and tilting his head, studied her. “You appear a bit fatigued. Would you
prefer to leave?”

Her shoulders slumped in relief. “As a matter of fact, yes. Would you mind, terribly?”

“Not at all. These are not my favorite type of events, and I believe I’ve gathered enough
information to begin my investigation.”

She glanced at her dance card. “I still have three more dances promised.”

“I am sure whichever gentleman requested those dances will manage to survive without you.” His
grin took the sting out of his words. They left the dance floor, and Mr. Baker asked the man at the
doors to have her carriage brought around.

Sinking into the comfortable velvet seat of the vehicle, she groaned with happiness to be off her
feet. She reached down and used her finger to rub the side of her foot. Mr. Baker settled across from
her, tapped the ceiling, then glanced at her hand. “I don’t mean to be forward, Mrs. Pennyworth, but
you look as though you could use a good foot rub.”

She sucked in a deep breath. Yes, that was a forward suggestion, and she should have brought him up short, but the idea of someone rubbing her poor feet sounded too good to be lost to propriety. “I didn’t realize when I secured your services that foot rubbing was included.” She smirked when her words caused him to grin.

“Ah, but then I didn’t take the time to outline all the wonderful things I can do, besides find your tormentor.”

His eyes grew heated in the dim light from the carriage lantern, and Charlotte shifted at the sudden ache between her legs. “’Tis good to know.” She barely got the words out from between her dry lips, before pulling herself back from where she was afraid they were headed and added, “I don’t believe this is a good idea. However, my feet do pain me.”

He moved to the edge of the seat and patted his leg. “Here, put your foot up.”

Slowly, and holding her gown so the hem stayed secure right at her ankle, she gingerly placed her left foot on his leg. His warm, muscled leg. He leisurely slipped her shoe off as she watched mesmerized. When she looked up, he wasn’t looking at her foot, but directly at her face. If possible, the heat in his eyes had increased.

The slight chill in the carriage had disappeared, and a warm flush rose from where he touched her ankle, all the way up to her stomach. Slight butterflies danced to a merry tune in her middle as his thumb moved over the ball of her foot, rubbing in delectable circles. She closed her eyes and let out a soft moan, forgetting this man was her employee, and she should not be allowing this intimacy.

At that thought, her eyes snapped opened, and she attempted to tug her foot away, but he held fast. “No,” he spoke barely above a whisper, “just close your eyes and relax.”
Elliot silently agreed with his client. Rubbing her foot was probably not a good idea, especially given the seclusion of their surroundings. The faint light from the lantern alongside Mrs. Pennyworth cast her features into a golden glow, emphasizing her plump lips, rounded chin, and high cheekbones. She truly was a lovely woman, and given his history with the fairer sex, someone to stay as far away from as possible.

Instead he sat, rubbing her delicate foot, inhaling her sweet feminine scent, and admiring her face and form. The slight mewing sounds coming from between those luscious lips, suggesting a woman being pleasured, had his cock hardening. Was that how she sounded with a man’s hands on her breasts, tweaking her nipples, kissing the tender skin beneath her ear?

He would never know, nor would he want to. Mrs. Pennyworth was his client. He was her employee, and any contact they had was only for professional reasons.

And now I am a professional foot rubber?

Elliot shoved that thought away and continued his ministrations. Instead of concentrating on what his hands were doing, he went over the evening, thinking of the various men he’d met, and those who had interacted with Mrs. Pennyworth. They all seemed to be regular, pleasant fellows, but he’d memorized the names of each man so he could explore their backgrounds.

He slipped her shoe back on. “Give me your other foot.”

“You really don’t have to do this.” Her face was flushed, leaving him wondering if embarrassment, or something else, made her blush.

“I don’t mind.” But his feeble attempts to concentrate on the list of men he needed to investigate no longer kept his thoughts from what his hands were doing. Or from what his ears were hearing. The devil take it, but she made the most interesting sounds!

Thankfully, the carriage rolled to a stop in front of Mrs. Pennyworth’s house. She pulled her foot from his grasp and bent to put her shoe on. The light hit the neckline of her gown in a perfectly wonderful way, and he got a delightful view of the tops of two creamy breasts, looking as though they were eager to escape their bindings.

He broke into a sweat and hurriedly exited the carriage, then turned to assist her. The sooner he got Mrs. Pennyworth into her house, with the door closed between the two of them, the better for his sanity. Else, he would grab her and devour that enticing mouth, and then discover if light kisses on her jaw, down her neck, and under her ear would produce the same lovely little sounds she made when he rubbed her foot.

God, he was in a bad way. Perhaps he needed pay a call on Mrs. Byrd, a widow who supplemented her meager income by entertaining men. It had been a while since he’d been there, and his reaction to Mrs. Pennyworth tonight suggested it was time for a visit.

He checked their surroundings as they mounted the steps. “When is the next event that you plan to attend?” Taking deep breaths and concentrating on the business part of their relationship should help calm his body. Although, there was no other relationship with his client that existed.

And it was best to remember that.

“Sir Danforth and Lady Danforth are hosting a card party on Monday afternoon. Do you play?”

“Yes, I do. I have a few items to move around on my calendar, but I will be prepared to escort you. What time shall I call?”
The invitation is for two o’clock, with tea at five. Perhaps about fifteen before the hour? It is not a long ride to their house.”

He studied her wan expression, and pale face. “Are you unwell, Mrs. Pennyworth?”
“I do have the beginnings of a headache.”
“Please get sufficient rest tonight. I am afraid this is going to be a lengthy process to ferret out the man annoying you.”

She nodded, and the door opened by the man he’d seen earlier. He did not want to trouble her now, but he needed to speak with all the men she employed. “Well, good night then. I will see you Monday afternoon.”

…

Charlotte trudged up the steps to her bedchamber, feeling weary to the bone. Perhaps she’d returned to a social life too soon. Not that she felt as though she still needed to mourn Gabriel, but the stress of wondering if every man who approached her was the one leaving those disgusting objects was taking its toll.

Truth be told, Mr. Baker was also weighing on her mind. After the glowing recommendation she’d received about his services from the Inspector at Scotland Yard, she had no doubt if anyone could uncover the man responsible, it would be him. On the other hand, her attraction to him disturbed her. The man was too handsome for her own good. And he had a way of looking at her that made parts of her body tingle and hum a snappy tune. Aside from the fact that he was her employee, she had no desire to foster a relationship with a man. Any man.

A husband was certainly not on her list of desired acquisitions, and becoming a mistress was not to her liking at present, either. Many widows in her social circle, as well as among the nobility, found widowhood an escape from the confines of marriage. With a thoughtful lover, who took the necessary precautions, widowhood could be a very enjoyable time of life.

She had no faith in men, and no reason to trust them. Depending on herself sat very well. Thank heaven—and Gabriel—for leaving her in a position where she did not need to marry again to keep a roof over her head, and food on her table.

All these thoughts raced through her mind as she stripped off her clothes, adding tension to her already pounding head. She placed her clothes neatly on the chair next to the wardrobe and took out her nightgown.

Once the velvety cotton hit her bare skin, she immediately relaxed. Cook’s special tea would go well, but she had no desire to venture to the kitchen to prepare it. Taking a huge yawn, she climbed between the covers, and before long was fast asleep.

…

The next morning, she felt immensely better and lay there deciding what she would wear for her Friday visit to St Jerome’s. No outfit that could be spoiled by sticky little hands. It occurred to her when Mr. Baker had asked her about her next social event, she’d forgotten her promise to elderly Mrs. Fenster to stop in after St. Jerome’s to share tea.

That would hardly count as a social event he needed to be aware of, however, since the poor older woman was certainly not harboring a man who was leaving things on her front steps.

Refreshed, and anxious to start her day, she climbed from the bed and rang for Beatrice. A long,
leisurely soak was just what she needed.

“Good morning, mum.” Beatrice burst into the room, all smiles and sunshine. She and her sister Bridget were both sweet girls, hard workers, and as far as she knew, both sent the bulk of their wages to their parents in Ireland, where the family still lived with eleven children at home.

Charlotte shook her head at the thought of so many children in one family. Their poor mother must be worn out. That, of course, led her to thoughts of the children at St. Jerome’s. Life for them was so much worse with no family members who cared enough to work hard so they could eat and have warm clothes.

Once dressed for her visit, she ate a light breakfast of toast, jam, and tea. She allowed herself time to peruse the newspaper while she ate, a luxury she enjoyed almost more than any other in her life. As a child growing up, there had never been money for newspapers, and the brief time she’d been married to Gabriel, the newspaper had belonged to him.

She had been welcomed to it when he was done, but by then she’d already finished her breakfast. True independence was reading the newspaper at her own table while she ate breakfast.

A quick look at the clock told her it was time to go. She sent word for Thomas to ask the coachman to bring her carriage around. Her small basket of treats for the children hooked over her arm, she tied the bonnet ribbons under her chin.

Satisfied at her appearance, she smiled at Bridget as she opened the door. The toe of her half boot struck something, and she looked down.

And sucked in a deep breath.

A large, brown dead rat lay on the step, its throat cut ear-to-ear, its poor head hanging off by a thread, its glassy eyes staring straight at her. A pool of drying blood had begun to gel under its body. A metallic stench rose from the puddle, turning her stomach. The rodent’s thick tail was wrapped around a velvet cloth with a huge pink bow from a jewelry seller. Her stomach roiled at the incongruity of the pairing. Liquid flooded her mouth, and she swallowed several times to keep her breakfast down. She gripped the doorframe to hold herself up, but with a slight moan, darkness claimed her, and her knees gave way.

Elliot stepped from the omnibus and walked toward his house. He’d spent the entire morning checking into several men’s backgrounds. He’d visited bankers, tradesmen, and clubs, asking questions. So far, none of the men on his list had anything suspicious to note, which was no surprise since all of them had been friends or acquaintances of Mrs. Pennyworth from the time she’d married her deceased husband.

He still expected the man leaving his unique calling cards to be someone new to her, but every man had to be investigated so he could narrow the possibilities.

Lost in thought as he turned the corner and entered his street, a fancy carriage parked in front of his boarding house slowed his steps. As he drew near, it appeared to be Mrs. Pennyworth’s vehicle. He needn’t ask the coachman why he was there, since he was almost sure she had received another package.

“Good day, Mr. Baker. Mrs. Pennyworth asked that you call upon her.” The man shouted from the top of the carriage.

“Yes. I will be happy to. Please give me a moment to fetch a few things from my rooms.”

The coachman nodded, and Elliot hurried up the steps. He left the notes he’d made that morning on the desk and picked up a new pad of paper. This would be a good time to interview her servants and
possibly even some of the neighbors.

The sun was peeking out from the clouds by the time they arrived at Mrs. Pennyworth’s house. He bounded up the stairs, and the door was opened immediately by one of the maids. She nodded at him. “Mrs. Pennyworth is in the drawing room, sir.”

“Thank you.”

Just as he started down the corridor, an unfamiliar man stepped out of the drawing room. “Are you Mr. Baker?”

“Yes, sir.” The man did not have the demeanor of a servant and carried a small bag. “And you are?”

“Dr. Blakely. I was summoned by Mrs. Pennyworth’s lady’s maid a bit ago. It seems she had a fright and needed something to calm her nerves. She mentioned you were employed by her to clear up a rather nasty business she has been dealing with.”

“That is correct. How is she now?”

“I gave her a sedative, but she refused to take it until she’d spoken with you.”

Elliot nodded and walked around the man into the drawing room. Mrs. Pennyworth reclined on a settee with a cold cloth on her head. He cursed himself at the sight of her paleness. The young man he’d employed to watch the house had left word that nothing had arrived. Either he had been lying abed while writing that note, instead of on the job, or the package had arrived after Stephen had checked and left.

“I assume another package has arrived?” He pulled up a dainty stuffed chair that he worried would not hold his large frame and sat, taking in her tightened lips and fearful eyes.

“Yes, it was horrible.”

“What was it this time?”

Mrs. Pennyworth struggled to sit up, and he immediately rose and helped her. “It was a dead rat, its head practically cut off.” She closed her eyes and shuddered. “Next to it was a parcel, a gift-wrapped package.”

“Where are the items now?” She looked dreadful, and he hoped to gain as much information from her before she was forced to take the sedative the doctor had left.

“Bridget was at the door when I found it. I apparently fainted, and my footman, Thomas, was summoned to carry me here. I believe someone took the dreadful items to the back courtyard.”

Elliot ran his fingers through his hair. “There are several things that must be done. I need to see the objects, and then I need to speak with your staff. One by one. I know you did not want me to interview them without you present. Do you feel up to it?”

She nodded, twisting a lace handkerchief in her hands. “Yes. Honestly, I feel better with you here.”

Charlotte took a deep breath. Mr. Baker’s mere presence calmed her frazzled nerves. She hated more than anything to depend on a man to make her feel secure, but there it was. This was by far the worst parcel she’d received yet, and she had an awful feeling they would only get worse.

“Can you please pull the cord to summon a maid?” She nodded in the direction of the brocaded rope hanging near the door. “I need to send notes to St. Jerome’s and Mrs. Fenster, who is expecting me for tea after my normal visit to the orphanage.”

Mr. Baker did as she bid and waited. Beatrice appeared, and after instructing her on sending the notes, Charlotte asked her to show Mr. Baker the items.

She rested her head against the cushion and closed her eyes. Her lovely, peaceful life was spinning
out of control. Must she now hide in her house? Afraid to leave lest she meet this man who tortured her so?

Within minutes, Mr. Baker returned, carrying the beribboned velvet bundle. She had no desire to ask what had happened to the dead rat. He laid the package on the table in front of the settee. “We need to see what is inside. Do you wish for me to open it somewhere else?”

She viewed it as if it would jump up and bite her. “No, you can open it here.” She had to stop being so lily-livered. Mr. Baker was sitting right across from her. He began to untie the bow, and she had the urge to cover her eyes but kept her hands in her lap.

Mr. Baker put the ribbon aside and opened the flaps of the cloth. Charlotte gasped. Sun streaming through the drawing room window reflected off a beautiful gold bracelet, with diamond and ruby stones. The workmanship on the piece was exquisite, each stone set perfectly. Nothing she owned came close to the beauty of the bracelet.

“Dear God, who would leave something like that on the front steps?” She looked up at Mr. Baker. “With a decapitated rat alongside it?”

She ran her hands up and down her arms. Hysterical laughter and the urge to scream overwhelmed her. “This man must be deranged.” Her shaky hand tucked the loose curl that had escaped her topknot. She turned her eyes from the table. “Throw it away.”

“If you wish to eventually throw it away, that is up to you. However, we might have our first solid clue here.” He reached out, tucked his knuckle under her chin, and turned her face toward him. “If we can track down the store that sold this, we have our man.”

Her chin shook as the tears gathered in her eyes. “Do you think so? Do you think this could possibly be over?”

Mr. Baker moved from his chair and joined her on the settee. She shifted forward and considered bolting for her bedchamber, but before her thoughts turned into action, he put his arms around her and pulled her to his chest.

The tears fell lightly, at first, then the fear and shock of finding the grisly rodent let loose, and she sobbed on the man’s jacket. It felt so good to be held, to be comforted. There had been no one when she’d escaped from Lord Barton, and no strong arms to hold her when Gabriel had died.

He rubbed circles on her back and murmured soothing words that made no sense, but comforted her, nevertheless. The rumble of his chest against her ear as he spoke, the warmth of his body, the scent of something spicy, mixed with starched linen, wafted over her, carrying her to places far away from where she sat.

“You have been under a great deal of stress. We will catch this person, and return your life to you.” Mr. Baker fumbled in his pocket, and then handed her a handkerchief. “Yours is a bit soggy.”

A light laugh escaped her, and just like that, her tears dried up. She dabbed her face with the handkerchief and pulled away, casting her eyes from him, embarrassed. “I must apologize for my lapse in manners, Mr. Baker. I will pay to have your jacket cleaned.”

He waved dismissively. “No need to concern yourself.” After a moment, as she tried to regain her dignity, he said, “Mrs. Pennyworth?”

“What?”

“Look at me.”

Taking a deep breath, she turned her head in his direction. This handsome, virile man sat here in her drawing room, ready to uncover who was distressing her. Yes, she was paying him, but she doubted foot rubs and holding a sobbing client were part of his services.

“I will find the person doing this to you, be sure of that. But there is one thing I must ask you, and I
insist you answer me honestly.”

She wiped her nose. “What is that?”

“Are you keeping something from me? Is there anything at all in your background you need to tell me before I continue my investigation?”

M sat in the large chair by the window, sipping sherry, thinking about the latest gift to Anne. Hopefully, the reminder left with the bracelet would impress upon her that she was being watched. She knew when her lover was not happy, and she would certainly know it now. Allowing that despicable man to escort her to the assembly! What was she thinking? Did she imagine M didn’t know? Didn’t see?

The piece of paper resting on the table next to the chair held the schedule of Anne’s events. Next would be a card party. M would be ready.
Charlotte stared at Mr. Baker, his question echoing in her ears. *Are you keeping something from me? Is there anything at all in your background you need to tell me before I continue with my investigation?*

The fear was always present in the back of her mind that perhaps Lord Barton *had* found her and was the one behind the leavings, but that was not his style. Had he unearthed her location, he would march right up to her front door with a constable in tow and have her dragged off to jail. “Certainly not.”

He studied her for a minute, then leaned back in his chair. “Since I am here, I would like to interview your staff. I have a man watching your front door, and he reported this morning that nothing had been left. Obviously, that was not true, and I will address that issue with him when I leave here.”

“Do you wish to speak with just the men?”

“No. Any one of the female staff may have seen something that might help us.”

Charlotte sighed. “Very well.” As much as she would like to drink the sedative the doctor left and retire, it was necessary for her to help in any way she could.

She rose from the settee and pulled the brocade cord. Within minutes, Bridget hurried into the room. “Yes, ma’am.”

“Please ask Mrs. Blanchard to gather all the staff and direct them to the drawing room. It will be necessary for them to speak with Mr. Baker.” She did not employ an immense amount of people. Just Cook, Mrs. Blanchard, Bridget, Beatrice, Thomas, her coachman Bones, and Malcolm, the groom. Certain times of the year she hired a gardener, but there had not been one on staff for a few months.

Bridget gave a quick dip. “Yes, ma’am.” As she turned to go, Charlotte said, “One minute.” She turned to Mr. Baker. “Have you had luncheon, Mr. Baker?”

“No, I was on my way home from my morning activities when your coachman delivered your message.”

“Bridget, please have Cook send in a light luncheon for Mr. Baker.”

“And Mrs. Pennyworth.” His deep voice right behind her made her jump. When had he crossed the room? He was so quiet. His stealthy movements battered her already stretched nerves.

She tried hard to quell her pounding heart, and turn her unease into anger at him practically ordering her to eat. “I am not hungry.”

“Well, then.

He was now directing her life? Even though she agreed with him, it was hard to allow him to command her. “I believe I am adult enough to know when I need to eat.”

His raised brows were his only answer. With their eyes locked almost in combat, she relented, thinking she could probably eat a little bit, if that would move this along so she could put the dreadful morning behind her. “Yes, Bridget, I will have something, as well. Mrs. Blanchard can begin sending in the staff one at a time when we are through with luncheon.”

“I know you have a sedative from your doctor, but given your paleness, I believe a small sip of either sherry or brandy might help steady your nerves.”

Why in heaven’s name did this man sound as though he was ordering her around, and at the same
time offering practical suggestions? It would not do for her to allow him to assume he could take such
liberties.

He grinned. “I can see you trying very hard to disagree, but you know it is for the best.”
Pulling her skirts close, she moved around him, her chin in the air, and headed for the library.
“Stay here, and I will get it for you.”

He returned with a half-full glass, and in a fit of defiance, she gulped the entire thing and was
overtaken by a fit of coughing that negated her cheekiness. A soft chuckle from Mr. Baker annoyed her
even further.

After they consumed a luncheon of bread, cheese, cold beef, fruit, and tea, the stream of servants to
be questioned began. The first one, Bones, stood in the center of the room, twisting his cap in his
hands, looking decidedly uncomfortable.

Never having had reason to examine him so closely before, she hadn’t realized how very slender
the man was. Apparently, his slight frame had something to do with his name. He shifted from foot to
foot, nervously licking his lips.

“It is all right, Bones. Mr. Baker will merely ask you a few questions, and then you may return to
your duties.” Charlotte didn’t bother offering him a seat since she knew he was quite anxious to get
the interview over with. Bones was not comfortable in the house.

“How long have you worked for Mrs. Pennyworth?” Mr. Baker drew his pad forward on the small
desk he had moved from the corner of the room to the middle. Charlotte sat on the edge of the settee,
eying her empty glass, wishing she had the nerve to excuse herself to fetch another one.

“Since Mr. Pennyworth bought the house, back in ’78,” the coachman answered.
Mr. Baker nodded and made a notation on the pad. “What are your duties?”
Bones scratched his head, no doubt wondering about this strange man who asked what a
coachman’s duties were. “I drive the missus carriage.”
“Yes, and what else?”
“Keep the vehicle clean, and in good repair.”
“Do you tend to the horses?”
“No, sir. The groom does that.”

Charlotte saw no rhyme or reason for the questions Mr. Baker asked, but since she was not an
investigator herself, perhaps there was something necessary in his line of questioning.

Mr. Baker leaned back in his chair and tapped his lips with his pen. “Have you noticed anything
unusual in the neighborhood in the last few weeks? The presence of a previously unknown
individual? Someone who seemed to stop and watch the house?”
“No, sir. Nothing any different than the way things have been forever.”
“Thank you, then. If you think of anything that might be of help in finding the man who is leaving
these distasteful items for Mrs. Pennyworth, please contact me.” He reached in his pocket and
withdrew a small white card that he handed to Bones.

Once the door closed, Elliot turned to Charlotte. “What do you know of your coachman’s
background?”
“Not much. He had already been in place when I married Mr. Pennyworth. Why?”
“He bears a strange tattoo on the back of his left wrist, right above his glove that could denote
nefarious activities somewhere in his past.”
“Indeed?” She had never noticed the tattoo, but then again, she was not a private investigator.
“Does that mean something?”
“Only that I don’t trust him.” Mr. Baker gazed at the door the man had just left.
“Why?”
He shrugged. “It could represent some sort of gang. Once a criminal, always a criminal.”
Charlotte sucked in a deep breath at his callous statement. “Can you not believe that things are not always as they seem?”
“No. I would be a fool to believe that.” He looked down at his pad. “Who is next?”
Still reeling from his words, she consulted the list Mrs. Blanchard had sent in. “The groom, Malcolm.”
“How many staff members do you employ?”
Charlotte ticked off on her fingers. “Mrs. Blanchard, Bridget, Beatrice, Cook, our footman, Thomas, Bones, and Malcolm.”
Just then the door opened, and Malcolm, with dirt, and possibly some other interesting matter on his shoes, and looking as uncomfortable as Bones, stepped into the room. He stood before Mr. Baker as if facing the executioner. Despite the man’s demeanor, she had doubts the poor man, who had also been with the house since Gabriel bought it years ago, had anything to do with dead animals and expensive jewelry appearing on her doorstep.
She leaned back and regretted saying it was necessary for her to be present when Mr. Baker questioned the staff. Fighting a yawn, and wishing the afternoon over so she could rest, she listened as Mr. Baker cleared his throat and addressed Malcolm.

The following Monday, Charlotte tugged her kid gloves on and checked her appearance in the mirror. She moved her hat a bit to the right, and re-anchored the hatpin holding the lovely deep green confection that matched her pelisse firmly on her head. Mr. Baker would be arriving shortly to escort her to the card party at Lord and Lady Danford’s townhouse.

Her memories returned to the last time she’d seen Mr. Baker. After a few hours of awkwardness on the part of the servants, he’d dismissed the last one and looked up at her from his pad. “I wish I could tell you all of this had some effect on our search for your nemesis, but unfortunately, nothing presented itself as important.”
“Except for Bones’s tattoo.” She’d felt the need to add that, since in her mind, Mr. Baker’s reaction to that had been excessive.
“Yes.”
He’d then went on to assure her it had been a necessary process, and there was a chance one of her servants would remember something that his questions prompted, and contact him. She had walked him to the front door where he’d hesitated for a moment, and then suggested she get some rest. Once again annoyed at his tendency to overstep his bounds, she merely nodded before he strode down the stairs and away from the house.

The sound of the front door opening and Thomas greeting Mr. Baker brought her back to the present and urged her to pick up her reticule and join him downstairs.

Once again, she was taken by the man’s looks. He certainly filled out his jacket quite well. His eyes studied her as she descended the stairs, something in their depths causing a light flutter in her middle. His slightly crooked grin only increased the sensation until she had to look away before her knees failed her.
“Good afternoon, Mrs. Pennyworth.” His deep voice undid her determination to calm her body. For goodness sake, the man was her employee. She was paying him to deal with her problem. Them being together was no more than a necessary part of his plan to discover who was tormenting her. There
was absolutely no reason for her heart to be pounding, or for her breathing to hitch.

“Good afternoon to you, Mr. Baker.” She quickly looked away and smoothed out the front of her pelisse, then regarded him with a bright smile, telling herself she was now in control. As if he understood her inner turmoil, he grinned at her and extended his arm. “Shall we?”

*Yes, we shall. And no, we shall not.*

Elliot linked Charlotte’s arm in his, and they made their way down the stairs. The deep green of her pelisse and matching hat intensified the hazel in her eyes until they almost seemed the color of spring grass. He breathed deeply of the charming scent that always surrounded her. Why was it every time he laid eyes on her after an absence, she affected him in a manner he preferred not to admit?

*She is your client, and a woman, that is all. Women are not to be trusted and can be devious when appearing innocuous. Continue to remember it, and all will be well.*

They settled onto the softly padded benches across from each other. “I suggest, since this will be the third time we appear at one of these events together, we stop with the Mr. Baker and Mrs. Pennyworth.”

Charlotte eyed him carefully, biting her lower lip, where he wanted to place his own lips. “I’m not sure if that is appropriate.”

She looked adorable, and he had to glance away before he scooted over to her side of the carriage and took that delectable mouth in a kiss she was not likely to forget. “If we are to be a believable couple, which means no one will question why I am at these affairs since they are not my friends, we need to act more…”

*More what?*

He leaned forward and lowered his voice, as if to keep the outside world unaware of his words. “Like lovers.”

Her head snapped back, and she stiffened, while he waited for a well-deserved slap across his face at his suggestive words. “I have no intention of allowing people to believe that I am behaving in such an improper manner.”

Unable to keep from teasing her at her self-righteous fury, he said, “You don’t wish to be seen as my lover, or as any man’s lover?”

She fussed with her reticule, her face flushed, obviously having a difficult time composing herself. He should drop the matter, but something inside him rebelled. He wanted to know. “Come now. Surely you are aware that most widows take lovers, if they don’t remarry.”

“I am not most widows! And this is an extremely inappropriate conversation.” The anger in her voice and the red dots on her cheeks made him wonder what it would be like to have all that passion directed toward him. In bed.

“I apologize. You are right. I have no reason to speak to you in that manner, or believe you would be the type of woman who would take a lover.” He leaned back once more, pondering what had possessed him to even bring up such a subject. The conversation had gotten far from where it had started, and not in a good direction.

Although she had not answered his question, it was time to let it go. “However, I stand by my suggestion that we adopt Elliot and Charlotte when we are around your friends. Besides which, if we intend to draw out the man harassing you, we need to give him reason to show his cards.”

“I don’t understand what you mean.”

“Has it not occurred to you that the man leaving the packages, and gaining your notice, might be
acting out of jealousy?”

She sniffed. “Jealousy? That is absurd. I have given no one a reason to be jealous.”

“Charlotte.” He paused, seeing how her given name felt on his tongue. “You are a very attractive woman who is at the end of her mourning period. I am sure there are a number of men in your circle of friends and acquaintances who would be quite pleased to enter into a relationship with you.”

The startled look in her eyes made him wonder about her sincerity. Could it be she was so naive as to be unaware of her appeal to men? Did she not know she was not only beautiful, and possessed a figure every man under four score would love to run his hands over, but her sweet, genuine personality, wit, and intelligence was a draw of its own?

Or did he have it all wrong, and this was another game she was playing, pretending ignorance while she plotted and planned something? Was it possible she was using him and his investigation into these packages as a cover-up for some nefarious deeds?

He shook his head at the fanciful thoughts running away with him like a prized thoroughbred nearing the end of the race. He wanted to believe she was sincere, and if he had not previously been made an arse of by a beautiful woman, he would not be questioning her at all.

“I suppose there might be someone interested in me in that manner, but he would hardly earn my favor by leaving dead animals on my front steps.” Her lips turned up in a slight smile.

Happy that her anger at him had subsided, he said, “’Tis true. I must admit whenever I courted a woman, I never thought to offer her dead animals.”

“So narrow-minded, Mr. Baker? No dead birds or rodents for your sweethearts?” Her smile had turned into something else. Her face lit up, and the banter they enjoyed had obviously relaxed her.

“Perhaps you are right. But then a fine steak dinner could fall into that category as well.”

She shuddered. “Oh, dear. I shall never look at a steak the same way again.”

Sorry to see her good humor vanish with his careless words, Elliot glanced out the window of the carriage as the vehicle came to a stop. “It appears we have arrived.” He moved forward on the seat and reached for the door handle. “Although I am hardly a great romantic, even I know that whoever is doing this is misguided in how to gain a lady’s favor.” He hoped his smile restored the geniality they’d shared during the few minutes of silly repartee. As he helped her out of the carriage, he added, “I still credit jealousy as your tormentor’s motivation, so let us give him reason to reveal himself.”

The room to which they were directed was large enough to hold a dozen card tables. A few of the tables were already in play, the competitors serious in their game, while several groups of guests clustered together, chatting and sipping from glasses. Elliot and Charlotte entered the room and were immediately approached by Mr. Talbot, who seemed a bit possessive of Charlotte, and Miss Garvey with the full dance card. The other man was unknown to him.

Talbot greeted them and turned to the other man. “May I introduce you to Mr. Elliot Baker and Mrs. Pennyworth?” He waved in their direction, then placed his hand on the man’s shoulder. “This is Baron Von Braun, from Austria. He has recently relocated to London.”

“A pleasure, Baron,” Elliot said, studying him carefully. The baron was somewhere in his mid to late forties. Most of his face was covered by a well-trimmed beard and mustache, with a monocle wedged in his left eye. Tall and bulky, he stood straight as a soldier, his smile never reaching his eyes.

The man made a curt turn away from him, bowed from the waist, and took Charlotte’s hand in his, brushing his lips over her gloved fingers. “Mrs. Pennyworth, may I offer my condolences on the passing of Mr. Pennyworth.” He patted the hand he held.

Charlotte’s eyebrows rose. “You knew my husband?”
“Indeed. We conducted business several years ago. I did not know of his death until I arrived from Austria.”

“Oh.” She seemed to be trying to tug her hand loose, but the baron did not let go.

“If there is anything I can do for you, please send word. I am at your service.”

“Yes, I will.” Finally able to retrieve her hand, she moved it behind her back and gave him a strained smile.

Watching the exchange between the baron and Charlotte, Mr. Talbot’s smile faded, and he frowned, which added two men to Elliot’s list of potential suspects—Von Braun and Talbot.

“Is anyone ready to play cards?” Miss Garvey’s rough voice broke the spell that seemed to hold the group transfixed.

“Yes, of course.” The baron waved to a table near the door that held four seats. He turned and looked directly at Elliot. “It appears we are one too many. Who would like to sit out?”

Happy to have a good excuse to wander the room, Elliot immediately volunteered. He wanted to keep an eye on the baron as well as Mr. Talbot, and at the same time be free to speak to some of the others at the party.

However, it might have been his imagination, but Charlotte looked a bit anxious at his imminent departure. He reached out and squeezed her hand, a reminder that he was watching, and she had nothing to fear. “May I fetch you a drink, Miss Garvey, Charlotte?”

“No,” Miss Garvey said. “I have no need to have anyone fetch me what I am able to obtain myself. I have just finished a lemonade.”

Silence followed her comment as they all stared at her. Oblivious to their regard, she took her seat.

“Yes, please, Elliot.” Charlotte seemed to stumble over his name, but he doubted anyone noticed. “I would like a lemonade.”

After bringing her the drink, Elliot wandered the room, speaking to various people, joining in on games with other groups.

But the entire time, his eyes kept returning to Charlotte’s table, keeping Baron Von Braun and Mr. Talbot under close scrutiny.
Chapter Seven

“Do you feel as though you learned anything tonight?” Charlotte settled herself in the carriage across from Elliot. The card party had been pleasant enough, but since she was now looking at every man who spoke to her with suspicion, the strain truly took a toll on her nerves.

“I know Talbot was a friend of Mr. Pennyworth, but how well do you know him? He seemed a bit unsettled when the baron fawned over you.”

“He hardly fawned over me. He was polite. And to answer your question, Mr. Talbot was my husband’s friend. He visited our home on a regular basis, but aside from that we had no contact, except when he assisted me during the funeral, and the few times he stopped by over the course of my mourning to ask after my well-being. I’m sure if he had dark intentions toward me, it would have come out before now.”

“You were in mourning for almost a year, so he had no reason to see other men paying you their attentions.”

“Why would that matter?”

“Because he might very well have intentions toward you, and seeing other men as competition could set him off.”

“But how would that figure into sending me dead animals?”

They were back to that again, but not in the mood to continue the vein of the earlier discussion, Elliot squeezed the bridge of his nose. “I don’t have all the answers. I’m merely trying to put together pieces of the puzzle. For now, he will stay on my ‘possibility’ list. Let’s discuss the baron.”

Charlotte sighed and looked out the carriage window. The dark circles under her eyes, illuminated by the pale sun coming through the window, reminded him how this matter was affecting her. So far, she’d come across as a strong woman, but even strong people were known to crack under pressure.

After a few minutes of silence, when Elliot thought he would need to repeat his question, she turned to him. “Truth be known, he made me uneasy.”

Elliot sat up straight and leaned forward. “How so?”

“Perhaps he did fawn over me. He held my hand longer than is proper, and when I tried to tug it free, he kept holding it for a few more seconds, as if to let me know he had some power or control over me.”

He had noticed that little byplay between Charlotte and the baron, which was why Elliot had kept his eyes on the man while he roamed the room, and even when he sat with other players at various tables. “He remained at your table the entire party, even though Mr. Talbot and Miss Garvey eventually switched to other tables. Did anything of note happen while you played cards?”

She shook her head. “No, that is the strange thing. After I was initially introduced to him, he never said another word. Not to me, nor to anyone else at the table, that didn’t relate to the game. But—every time I looked up from my cards, he was staring at me.”

Baron Van Braun shot to the top of Elliot’s list. He would ask his foreign office contacts about the baron first thing in the morning. Thinking it best to take her mind off the events, since it was his job to ferret out the scoundrel so Charlotte’s life could return to normal, he changed the subject. “I noticed on the list of events you provided me that a St. Jerome’s was mentioned for tomorrow. Is that a church you attend?”

“No. St. Jerome’s is an orphanage in St. Giles.” Her bright smile erased some of the strain on her
“I go there two or three times a week to play with the children and read to them. I bring treats, clothing donated by friends, fresh fruit which they rarely get, and baked goods from my cook.”

His eyebrows rose. “St. Giles? I don’t think it is a good idea to venture into that part of town. Does anyone else go with you?”

“No.” She raised her chin. “I answer to no one. I can certainly move about freely without restraint. I have been going to St. Jerome’s since before Mr. Pennyworth and I married.”

“I don’t approve, and I will accompany you tomorrow.”

Her eyes snapped as she regarded him. “Don’t approve? Excuse me, Mr. Baker, but I hired you to find out who is leaving packages on my front doorstep, not to tell me how to conduct my life.”

“Things have changed, madam. Someone is haunting you, leaving horrid things on your doorstep. How do you know this person is not keeping track of your comings and goings? At the best of times, St. Giles is not a place for a gently reared woman to be, let alone one who is already in someone’s sinister sights.” When she didn’t answer, but still gave him a mulish look, he added. “I will accompany you tomorrow. Just tell me what time.”

The flush on her face told him she did not take his commands well, but nevertheless, he would not permit her to expose herself to danger. “I generally plan to leave at ten in the morning. If you wish to escort me, please be on time.” She narrowed her eyes at him. “I will not wait for you.”

Stubborn woman. Why had he allowed himself to get mixed up in this entire matter? It irritated him. Everything about Charlotte Pennyworth spelled trouble. She was beautiful. She stirred his loins every time he was near her. She was headstrong, and above all, she was hiding something. Something he intended to get to the bottom of.

“Tell me a little bit about your life before you married Mr. Pennyworth.”

Charlotte’s face flushed, and she immediately began to pick off invisible lint from her pelisse. “I worked at Drummonds on the West End.”

The distrustful monster in him reared its ugly head. “The bank that deals with the aristocracy, gentry, and wealthy lawyers?”

“Yes.”

“What did you do there?” While it was not unheard of for a woman to work at a bank, it was indeed rare.

“I was a file clerk, and on occasion I delivered papers to some of the bank’s customers. It was how I met Mr. Pennyworth.” Although she did not seem as fidgety, her terse words told him this was a conversation she wanted to end.

“Ah, yes. I believe you told me he was a lawyer.”

“Yes. A solicitor.”

“Have you always lived in London?”

Once more a flushed face. “I do not see the point of all these questions about me, Mr. Baker. I am certainly not the one placing these things on my front doorstep.”

He moved forward, his knees touching hers. “If you want me to investigate fully, I need to ask questions. For all we know, the person tormenting you could very well be from your past.”

“I have no past.” Her words were clipped as she turned her head to look out the window.

He leaned back again, every nerve in his body on alert. Everyone had a past. He would bet Mrs. Pennyworth not only had a past, but something onerous that she was reluctant to share.

She returned her attention to him. “Very well, if you must know, the answer is no, I have not lived in London my entire life. I was raised in a small village that I left when I was old enough to find my own way in the world.”
Acceding to her discomfort, he merely nodded his acknowledgment. There were easier ways to pry information from someone, and it appeared he needed to use those skills on his client, who was obviously not forthcoming. That alone should give him reason to bow out of the investigation.

However, he was not one to give up on an assignment, although he reminded himself to be careful of the strong attraction between them. Right now, he had the urge to reach across the space dividing them, haul her into his arms, and plop her rounded bottom on his lap.

The vehicle came to a stop. “We are approaching your house. I will arrive promptly at ten in the morning to accompany you to St. Jerome’s.” If it was not bad manners to roll one’s eyes, he was sure Mrs. Pennyworth would have done so. A slight grin tugged at his lips as he opened the door and stepped out of the carriage. Turning, he took her hand and helped her out of the vehicle.

Once they arrived at her doorstep, he gave her a slight bow. “Until tomorrow.”

“No. The omnibus will suit me just fine.” Feeling as though he needed to settle her ruffled feathers, he said, “Please understand that anything I do, or ask, is to further my investigation. It is quite possible someone from your past, especially since you have not been in London your entire life, has now arrived and decided to gain your attention. Just think on what I said, and if there is anyone who you think might be behind this, let me know.”

She still looked uncomfortable, and eager to enter her house. With a tug on the brim of his hat, he turned and made his way down the steps. The short walk to the omnibus gave him time to consider what had happened at the card party, in the carriage on the ride home, and his upcoming trip with Charlotte to St. Jerome’s.

Mrs. Pennyworth was turning out to be as much of a mystery as her problem.

Once a criminal, always a criminal.

Charlotte closed the door and leaned against it, her hands still shaking, and her knees barely holding her up. Elliot’s words from the other day echoed through her mind. Why in heaven’s name hadn’t she considered if she hired an investigator he would want to know her background? Of course, he would assume someone from her past could be the person they sought.

With a heavy sigh, she removed the pin from her hat and pulled it off her head. Beatrice hurried down the corridor, a bright smile on her young face. “Here, let me take those from you, ma’am.”

Charlotte shrugged out of her pelisse and allowed Bridget to take that and her hat from her. “Please inform Cook that I would like a light supper in about an hour or so. But now I would like some tea. I will be in the drawing room.”

The drawing room was her sanctuary. This room was where she wrote her correspondence, read her books, and embroidered. She felt secure inside these walls. All her pictures, knick-knacks, and decorations anchored her, reminding her she had a home of her own, where she could escape from the rest of the world.

Except she no longer felt as secure as she once had. She wandered the room, waiting for her tea. She dragged her fingertips over the furniture as her thoughts consumed her.

She’d been quite flattered when Gabriel had taken notice of her at the bank. He’d been tall with dark curly hair, and his commanding mien had drawn her from the first time he approached her. His flirting and flattery had certainly turned her head, and after a courtship of only a few months, he’d proposed, and they’d married.

And then a month later he died, and she was once again alone in the world.
The ride to St. Jerome’s with Elliot was much more pleasant than the ride the day before. He didn’t query her, and shared information gathered during conversations he’d had at various clubs. Based on some of those discourses, several men had been crossed off the list.

“Unfortunately, the baron is not known in my circles, which troubles me,” Elliot mused. “This afternoon I have an appointment with a friend who works at the Foreign Office, who I hope will have information on the man.”

“I must admit, I am a bit uneasy at investigating all these men. I feel as though we are invading their privacy.”

“Perhaps, but if someone is law-abiding, they have nothing to fear from me asking questions. Only those who have broken the law need worry.”

Charlotte nodded her agreement since her mouth dried up at his comment, and she doubted she could form any words. She had always been an upstanding, honest individual. Yet, if he uncovered the warrant for her arrest, she would look quite guilty.

Then she grew angry. Who was he to judge everyone by such a narrow definition of honesty? She’d never done anything dishonest in her life, but still she had that blot on her character. Unfairly.

If anything convinced her that she was much better off not telling Elliot about Lord Barton, his black and white view of the world, and his opinions on lawbreakers solidified her decision. She would keep it all to herself, and pray he did not discover it.

The carriage plodded along, leaving behind the affluent neighborhoods, through the less prosperous, and finally, to the decrepit slums of St. Giles. Waste and garbage lined the streets, and small children in ragged clothes darted between buildings. Most of the urchins had been taught almost from the cradle to steal.

So many of them would die before they reached adulthood. The few who did survive would spend their lives on the noisy, dirty streets of London’s disgrace until they were knifed in the back or run over by a carriage as they stumbled home drunk.

The women walked the streets, offering their worn bodies for a glass of gin, or a piece of bread. Any children they had were left to take care of themselves. Only the truly lucky children made it to St. Jerome’s.

The familiar, dilapidated building of the orphanage came into view as the carriage rounded the corner of St. Giles Street. Although the rest of the street bore all the marks of poverty and hopelessness, the front of St. Jerome’s was swept clean, the steps washed.

Elliot looked around as they alighted the vehicle and, gripping her elbow, moved her toward the steps. Although she’d never felt unsafe before, truthfully, she was glad to have him with her today. Her current situation had her on edge, so that even something she’d done for months, and had always enjoyed, seemed sinister.

A small girl, no more than six or seven, with a torn, filthy dress, and bare feet, stuck a cluster of weeds at them. “Flowers for yer lady, sir?”

Elliot stopped and bent to the child. “Yes, I would like your flowers.” He reached into his pocket and withdrew a coin that he placed in her small dirty hand. Taking the weeds, he bowed. “Thank you, miss.”

The little girl giggled, revealing small white teeth, with the front two missing, and ran. “That was very nice of you, Mr. Baker.”
His lips tightened. “So many in need, with so few resources.”
Perhaps he wasn’t so rigid, after all, she mused. “I hope she buys something to eat with that money,” Charlotte said as they watched the child dodge pedestrians and carriages.

The pained expression on Elliot’s face, this big strong man so staid in his opinions, did something to her insides. “Chances are she’ll bring the money to a mother who will drink it up, and maybe, just maybe, buy a bun or biscuit for the girl.” Elliot shook his head, and they climbed the stairs.

The usual chaotic order greeted them as they passed through the door to the main room. Mrs. Robbins, the manager and main attendant to the children, waved a half of a biscuit in front of little Sarah, who had her arms wrapped around her middle. Charlotte hurried over to the poor girl, who was looking worse by the second. “What happened, Mrs. Robbins?”

Mrs. Robbins continued to stare at the little girl as she spoke. “This little one here ate something she wasn’t supposed to, and now she’s claiming a bellyache. Serves her right for stealing.” She gave the girl a swat on her bottom.

“Oh, no, don’t spank her, please. You can see she is in distress.” Charlotte kneeled and looked at Sarah. “Does your stomach hurt, poppet?”

Sarah nodded and winced. As Charlotte placed her hand on her forehead, Sarah moved her head to the side and brought up the contents of her stomach onto the floor. “I’m so sorry, Mrs. Pennyworth, but I feel sick.” With those words, the little mite collapsed, with Elliot rushing forward to grab the girl before she hit the floor. Her face was covered in sweat, and her small body shook.

Charlotte stood and waved at Elliot, with Sarah in his arms, to follow her to the kitchen where they laid her on one of the small cots tucked around the perimeter of the room. “Get me a bucket, please.”
She grabbed a thin blanket from another bed and covered Sarah’s trembling body with it. “What did she eat, Mrs. Robbins? It appears whatever it was has upset her stomach something dreadful.” The poor child continued to moan and grasp her tummy. Elliot placed the bucket next to Sarah, who made use of it while Charlotte and Mrs. Robbins talked.

“This biscuit,” Mrs. Robbins said, holding out the half biscuit she’d been waving in Sarah’s face when they entered the house.

“Where did it come from? Is this one of the biscuits from the kitchen?”
The manager shook her head. “No, ma’am. That was why she was in trouble. It was one of your biscuits.”

“Mine?”

“Yes. Early this morning, a package arrived on the front steps with your card attached to it. I brought it in, and left it on the kitchen table.” She glared at little Sarah as the girl continued to hold her stomach and moan. “This one got into the box and ate half of one before I could stop her.”

Elliot moved so fast, he was almost a blur as he crossed the kitchen and picked up the box sitting on the table. He took out a biscuit, crushed it, and examined the crumbs on his palm. He smelled, and then tasted it. “Thank God she only ate a half. I can’t say for sure, but my guess is this box of biscuits has been poisoned.”
Chapter Eight

_M_ sat on a comfortable chair, sipping a sherry, staring out the window at the annoying neighbor, Mrs. Gearing, tending her garden, wearing that ridiculous hat with the brim slowly unweaving. She was extremely nosy, and something would have to be done about her soon.

Another sip, another thought. The box of biscuits brought a smile, although at first, the thought of dead children had threatened a change of plans. Children were truly the only innocent creatures on earth. Then, the reminder of the ultimate prize, Anne’s return, fortified the decision, and the biscuits were on their way.

Hopefully, several of the brats at St Jerome’s would eat them and die a terrible death. Guilt for beloved Anne to bear, since with her giving nature, she would share the treats with the urchins. And it was a reminder to Anne that she needed to behave herself and get rid of that man who followed her about.

... 

“Of course we have to call in the police, a crime has been committed!”

Charlotte backed up, her stomach twisting as Elliot shouted the words, his hands fisted at his hips. “No. No police. We discovered the poison before anyone was seriously harmed.” She cast a guilty glance at little Sarah who was resting peacefully after emptying her stomach several times. Mrs. Robbins had given the child something to help her rest after her ordeal.

Why, oh why had she ever involved Elliot in this mess? She should have known she was treading on unsafe ground as far as her past was concerned. If they brought in the police, questions would be asked, answers demanded, backgrounds investigated, and shortly thereafter, she’d be on her way back to Melbourne Station.

Why she hadn’t thought about that when she’d first approached the police amazed her. Not for the first time, she considered selling her comfortable home and moving away. Far away. Disappearing somewhere no one knew her. Yet, except for her hurried exit from Lady Barton’s house, ’twas not like her to run away.

Then her resolve kicked in. No, she would not give in to this menace and run and hide. She had a lovely home, good friends, and an active social calendar. She loved her life and did not want to give it up because some deranged man was wreaking havoc.

“Charlotte, be reasonable. You cannot keep this from the police. That child”—he gestured toward Sarah—“could have died if she’d eaten the entire biscuit before Mrs. Robbins found her. A crime has been committed, and it needs to be reported.”

She could think of no good reason to deny what he said. A crime _had_ been committed, and while little Sarah had not been killed, she’d been hurt. If she continued to object to his reasonable demand, it would only encourage him to ask more questions, demand answers. Perhaps the police would not focus on her background, and only on what was happening now. She sighed and glanced at the box of biscuits on the table. “Yes, I must agree. The police should be notified.”

He nodded and picked up the box. “I think we should visit Scotland Yard now. There is no reason to delay.”

A fine sweat broke out on her forehead. This time a constable would not dismiss her with comments about secret admirers, but ask questions she would prefer not to answer. But there was
nothing to be done for it. Elliot was not going to allow this to pass, and the more she held back, the more suspicious he would become. Best to get it over with.

“Yes. We should go now.” She reached for her reticule and pelisse. Elliot took the pelisse from her and helped her into it. With a fond glance at Sarah, and a nod toward Mrs. Robbins, they left the foundling home and climbed into her carriage.

Too soon, the large gray building, its rear entrance located on a street named Great Scotland Yard, stood before them, housing the constables and inspectors who made up the Metropolitan Police.

With a knotted stomach and shaky legs, Charlotte held onto Elliot’s arm as they climbed the stone steps worn to a slight dip in the center from decades of both the good, and the evil, shuffling up and down. The inside was cramped, with men busily going through papers at their desks. A couple of Inspectors interviewed individuals, scratching notes on pads of paper.

Precariously leaning boxes of files took up a great deal of the cramped space. Men, minus jackets, with sleeves rolled up to their elbows, moved from one box to the next, extricating papers, challenging the tilting columns to remain steady. The entire scene was one of noise and confusion, leaving Charlotte to wonder how they ever solved crimes. From a woman’s point of view, the entire place needed cleaning and organization.

Once they were spotted, it became apparent Elliot was well-liked by his former colleagues. There was a great deal of teasing and backslapping as they wended their way through the maze of desks. They were stopped every few steps for greetings. More than a few glanced in her direction, curiosity plainly written on their faces.

An Inspector was summoned, and introduced to her as Inspector Morgan. After additional teasing and more backslapping, he directed them to a private room where they settled into chairs, with the ominous box of biscuits placed on a table between them.

“I must say I never expected to see you sitting on the other side of the table from me,” Inspector Morgan said with a wide grin. The man was huge, built like a tree trunk. The seams of his jacket stretched in protest as he leaned forward, placing his hands on the table. His mustache covered a great deal of his face, with the ends curling up, stiffened with some type of pomade. His piercing blue eyes twinkled with humor, redeeming his broad features.

Elliot offered Inspector Morgan a tight smile. “I never expected to be here, either.” For all his insistence that they involve the police, Elliot had been tense from the time they’d exited the carriage. The teasing seemed to make him more uncomfortable.

The Inspector pulled out a pad, dipped his pen into the inkwell, and nodded. “Tell me why you brought a box of biscuits, and why I don’t think it’s a present for me.”

As Elliot gave the Inspector a run-down of what had happened at St. Jerome’s earlier, Charlotte took the time to consider this latest development. So far, all the packages left for her had been frightening, but nothing that would endanger her life. The box of biscuits fell into a different category.

Another matter that neither she nor Elliot had discussed was the fact that the biscuits had been delivered to St. Jerome’s with her calling card attached. Whoever was harassing her knew of her connection to the home, as well as what day she would be there. An alarming thought, because now she needed to worry about being followed when she was out and about.

Her musing ended when the room grew silent, and both men turned to look at her. Apparently, one of them had asked her a question. “I’m sorry. I’m afraid I was woolgathering.”

The Inspector cleared his throat. “I asked if you knew of anyone who might wish you harm? Or since the biscuits were delivered to the orphanage, would wish the children harm?”

“No one, except for whoever it is leaving packages on my front doorstep.”
Morgan leaned back in his chair and twirled the end of his mustache. “How is the investigation going on that, Baker?”

“Slow. Mrs. Pennyworth has a large circle of friends who need to be considered. I have managed to eliminate several over the past few days, and I attend events with her to see if we can draw the man out.”

“Indeed? Well since I’ve now met Mrs. Pennyworth, I am certainly not bemoaning your job. Spending time with an attractive woman is no hardship.” Morgan smiled at her, and she blushed.

He continued, “So, you think this stems from a rejected admirer’s jealousy?”

Elliot hooked his thumbs into his waistcoat pockets, and tilted his chair back. “It fits the pattern. The man obviously wants to gain her attention, and the flowers and jewelry tell me somewhere in his twisted mind, he imagines he is courting her.”

“Mrs. Pennyworth, have you rejected any suitors of late?”

“I have recently come out of mourning, Inspector. My husband passed away a year ago, and I have avoided most social events. So, to answer your question, no, I have not spurned any potential suitors.”

Morgan nodded. “One more thing. Your calling card is attached to this box. Who would have access to your card?”

Charlotte smiled. “Everyone. I leave them with shopkeepers, and when I call on friends. Most women do. It is not hard for someone to get their hands on one of my cards.”

The Inspector thought for a moment, then directed his comments to Elliot. “I assume you’re doing a good job of covering this, Baker. With the men chasing this Ripper fellow, and everything else going on, your investigation will produce more than we can right now. Just keep me informed.”

It appeared they were being dismissed, which allowed Charlotte to take a deep breath. The police would not be investigating her.

They all rose, with the two men shaking hands, and indulging in more backslapping. Elliot took her elbow and escorted her out of the building, and into her carriage.

Charlotte rested her head against the velvet squab and closed her eyes. Now that the tension from the morning had left her, she was tired to the bone, and in possession of a raging headache.

“Are you not well, Charlotte?” Elliot’s deep, soothing voice rolled over her. She opened her eyes, once again reminded what a handsome man he was.

“I have a headache. It has been a trying morning.”

“Yes, I know.” He reached his hand out. “Come here.”

Again she surprised him by doing just that. She turned her back to him, and once he shifted so his knee was bent on the seat, he gathered her firmly against his chest, and said, “Close your eyes.” His fingers began to massage her temples.

His desire for Charlotte grew each time he saw her. He’d been fighting it, but with her lush body resting against him, and the flowery sent of her hair drifting to his nostrils, his awareness of her was wreaking havoc with his blood supply. He was finding it more and more difficult to keep his hands above her neckline when she sighed as he rubbed her head.
“Elliot?” The sound of her silky voice murmuring his name stirred him further.
“Yes?”
“Why did you leave Scotland Yard? It seemed as if everyone there liked and respected you.”
When he didn’t answer right away, she turned and studied him with raised brows. He moved her head back into position and continued his ministrations. “I made a serious error in judgment, and it caused a constable to be crippled. His wife was forced to secure employment to provide for their children.” It felt strange to speak those words, because he’d never told anyone about it before. He’d always kept his disgrace to himself.
“What happened?”
He lowered his voice, as if to prevent her from hearing him. However, this was something he had to do. “I was courting a woman who, unfortunately, blinded me to her real character.” He continued rubbing Charlotte’s temples but felt her stiffen at his words.
Interesting, that.
“I assume she was beautiful, charming, and in possession of a lovely form?” Despite the humor in her tone, the lightness she most likely attempted to convey fell flat.
“Yes, all those things.” He paused for a moment, once again picturing Annabelle, the beauty and charm surrounding such evil inside. “I had been assigned to meet a ship at the London docks and travel with the courier to the room in the Tower of London where the Crown Jewels were housed. An extremely valuable piece was being sent there.”
Charlotte waited patiently as he again paused. “Annabelle wanted to attend the theater that night. When I explained to her I was unavailable to escort her, she became upset. I realize now what a fine actress she was.”
“Women sometimes are,” Charlotte said.
He grunted. “When I continued to refuse, she threatened to attend with another gentleman who I knew was trying to secure her favor. I foolishly pushed the assignment off onto a constable, who was unable to handle the attempted robbery of the jewel. He was shot in the back during the scuffle, paralyzing him from the waist down.”
Charlotte turned to him, his hands dropping to her shoulders. “Oh, Elliot, how horrible. I can’t imagine how you felt.”
“Had I been thinking rationally, I would not have chosen the man, but he was the first constable available. Unfortunately, the best choice would have been for me to ignore Annabelle’s threats and do my duty.” Without conscious thought, he pulled Charlotte to his chest, and she wrapped her arms around him.
“What happened with Annabelle? Was she remorseful after what happened?”
He winced at having to tell her the end of the story. “No. No remorse. It turned out she was part of the group of men who had tried to rob the jewel.”
Charlotte sucked in a deep breath, and he tightened his hold on her. Keeping her from looking into his eyes at his disgrace? “She had been allowing my attentions while one of her partners in crime had a contact at Scotland Yard who made sure I was given the assignment.”
“Because they knew she would talk you out of it.”
“Unfortunately, yes.”
They remained silent for a minute, Charlotte’s head resting on his chest. “Were Annabelle and her partners arrested?”
“Yes. I was the one to put the handcuffs on her and escort her to jail.”
Charlotte drew back and studied him. “You are not the first man to be fooled by a woman. And,
most likely, not the last.”

He looked directly into her eyes. “Which is why I will never allow that to happen to me again.”

Something flickered in her eyes, but before he could consider it, she asked, “Were you fired?”

“No. The Chief Inspector tried to convince me it was a mistake in judgment, but I insisted on resigning. I no longer felt as though I had the right to call myself Inspector after that.”

“Oh, Elliot, you are so hard on yourself. The Chief Inspector was correct. It was a mistake in judgment, and horrible that the man was injured, but there’s no guarantee it would have turned out any differently if you were there instead of the constable.”

“Except I would have been the one with the injury, and not the constable.”

“I hate to sound callous, but isn’t that part of the job? I’m sure the constable knew being injured was not unheard of among policemen.”

He shook his head. “It was still my fault he was injured.”

“No, I disagree. It was the robber’s fault the constable was injured.”

“Things are either right or wrong. I was wrong.”

It was hard to believe Charlotte wasn’t appalled at what he’d just told her. He had confessed to a dereliction of duty, and she only felt sympathy for him, not the injured constable. *Is it possible I’ve been too hard on myself?*

He brushed back the hair that had fallen on her forehead. Something seemed to shift between them with his confession. She seemed comfortable in his arms, warm, and gently scented. This close, he could see the flecks of gold in her hazel eyes. Before he could change his mind, he dipped his head and brushed his lips over hers.

She sucked in a sharp breath but didn’t recoil. He pulled her closer and covered her mouth with his. Her light gasp allowed him to sweep his tongue past her teeth to taste the fragrance of her mouth. After a slight hesitation, she joined him, their tongues tangling, probing, savoring.

He took the kiss deeper, gripping her head and angling it for better access. She moved her hands up to link behind his neck, her fingers playing with the hair hanging over his collar. He’d just confessed to allowing a woman to cloud his judgment to another’s peril, and what was he doing, but the same thing. He had to stop this madness.

Pulling back with the intent of gathering his senses, his eyes lighted on the silky, white skin where her neck and shoulder joined. He leaned in and feathered kisses along the tempting spot, then nibbled and soothed her silky flesh.

The carriage came to a slow roll, and then a stop. He pulled back, his breathing heavy. Charlotte’s face was flushed, and she covered her mouth with her fingers. “That should not have happened.”

Despite his dry mouth and pounding heart, he said, “Yes. I agree, and I apologize.” Taking a deep breath, he stepped out of the carriage, grateful for his great coat which covered the part of his body he did not want her to see. He turned and reached out. Uneasiness in her eyes, she accepted his hand and allowed him to help her down, and up the steps to her front door.

Attempting to return things to normal, he stopped her as the front door opened. “When is your next social event?”

She hesitated, and he could only think she was as rattled by their kiss as he was. “I’m not sure if you would consider it a social event, but many of my friends are at church Sunday mornings. This week there is a luncheon following the service. We all contribute a dish.”

“What time shall I stop by to escort you?”

“The service begins at ten, so nine-thirty would give us enough time to arrive and place my food offering in the hall.”
“Nine-thirty on Sunday, it is.” He bowed and hurried down the steps, hoping he could outrun the hounds of hell nipping at his heels.
“I cannot remember the last time I attended church.”

Charlotte smiled at Elliot’s confession as he glanced up at the bell tower and winced. The big, brave private investigator looked almost frightened.

“Hopefully, the roof will not cave in when you step through the door.” She handed him the bowl of pea salad before she exited the carriage and linked her arm with his. “Although from what I understand, there was an occasion when that did happen. The story goes that the man had spent his life in debauchery and sin, and was attending church for the first time in years.” She sighed and shook her head. “The floor collapsed. They say the devil came up from Hades and welcomed him with open arms.”

Elliot smirked, then leaned in close to her ear. “I’ll tell you what. I’ll watch the ceiling, if you watch the floor.”

They followed the steady stream of congregants into the hall adjoining the church to drop off her food contribution.

“Good morning, Mrs. Pennyworth, Mr. Baker.” Miss Garvey stood at the entrance to the hall with Mr. Conrad and Mr. Talbot.

“Good morning to you, as well, Miss Garvey, Mr. Conrad, Mr. Talbot.”

Mr. Talbot immediately stepped forward. “Mr. Baker, if you would be so kind as to take Mrs. Pennyworth’s offering to the table, I will be happy to escort her to church.”

A stunned silence fell at the man’s machinations, but with a smirk, Elliot stepped into the building. Mr. Talbot moved forward and offered his arm.

“Thank you very much, Mr. Talbot, but I will wait for Mr. Baker. But, please, do go on ahead to church. I don’t wish to delay you.” She offered a polite smile, but Mr. Talbot’s possessive attitude was beginning to concern her.

He bowed. “As you wish.” He turned to Miss Garvey and offered his arm. The three of them followed the pebbled path from the hall to the church.

Within minutes, Elliot joined her. “Talbot seems to think he has some sort of a claim on you.”

“Yes, I know, and it’s quite trying. I know what you’re thinking, but I cannot honestly see Mr. Talbot leaving decapitated animals on my front steps.”

Their conversation ended as they entered the church. This was to be the first service conducted by the new vicar, Mr. John Spencer. The parishioners had been waiting for weeks since the last one had passed away. They’d had several visiting curates conduct services, but a community as large as St. Michael’s needed a full-time vicar.

Mr. Spencer had been living in the cottage connected to the church for two weeks but had insisted he was not yet ready to guide the flock. Rumors had spread of him lecturing the women who came to welcome him on what he’d considered improper behavior. The church members so far had not been impressed, and the service this morning could change minds, or solidify prior opinions.

As he took the pulpit, all eyes were on the new man. He was short, with a full beard and mustache. While not exactly obese, the threads of his jacket strained to keep the vicar clothed. He had a sharp, pointed chin—perhaps he hoped the beard would hide it—and dark eyes very close together, with round spectacles perched on his nose.

“The devil waits in glee to welcome all those who live in debauchery and sin.” The vicar slammed
his fist on the pulpit, and a bit of spittle escaped from between his lips.

The congregation stiffened as a group and shifted uncomfortably. Much to Charlotte’s dismay, the rest of Mr. Spencer’s sermon was all fire and brimstone. He even had the audacity to criticize, from the pulpit, a young woman’s attire. It was a shame because St. Michael’s had always been a lively, happy place to worship, very welcoming. If this was the sort of service to expect, Charlotte would be forced to find another church.

Finally, the painful service ended, and they all trooped to the church hall. Mr. Spencer made a point of visiting each table, sitting for a while. When he settled next to Elliot, Charlotte braced for criticism. She was not disappointed.

“Mrs. Pennyworth, how lovely to finally meet you. I have heard so much about you from the ladies who have visited.”

“It is nice to meet you as well, Vicar. Welcome to St. Michael’s.”

“Thank you.” He leaned in, his breath strong, and patted her hand, his palm damp with sweat. Charlotte swallowed the bile that rose from the back of her throat. When he continued to hold onto her hand, she eased it out from under his as he spoke. “I wanted to visit with you at length, my dear, but I believe another time would be more suitable. Perhaps you may call at the vicarage one afternoon?”

“Perhaps.” Not a chance.

“I see you decided to come out of mourning, although your husband has recently passed to his final reward.”

The man seemed to know a bit too much about her. She offered a tight smile. “A year.”

He shook his head and tsked, his eyes boring into hers. “You young woman are so very anxious to cast off your widow weeds and move onto the next man.” He turned to Elliot. “And are you Mrs. Pennyworth’s young man?”

Oh, good grief. She nudged Elliot with her foot, hoping he would take the hint and merely ignore the man. The look on his face was not encouraging. “I am sure you did not mean to ask such a personal question, Mr. Spencer, so I will forgive your lack of manners.” He turned to Charlotte. “Are you ready to leave?”

She scrambled for her belongings and followed him out of the building, noticing that most of her friends had already left. If it had been Mr. Spencer’s intention to close down the church she had been married in and had enjoyed for the past year, he was certainly on the right path.

She felt as though her head would burst as they settled into the carriage. “The nerve of that man! I can’t believe he has been approved by the bishop for this post. I shall write to him this very afternoon and demand he remove him. He is vile, self-righteous, and opinionated. I have never encountered such a rude man of the cloth in my life!”

“I agree, but more than that, I am interested in the fact that he arrived only a couple of weeks ago. He seemed to have a great deal of information about you, yet this is the first time you met him, correct?”

“Yes, and believe me, once is enough.” She took a deep breath in an effort to control herself. Suddenly, she realized Elliot was staring out the window, deep in thought. “What are you thinking?”

“I’m thinking I could easily see Mr. Spencer placing a decapitated rodent on your doorstep.”

Air whooshed from her lungs as she sat back. “I am afraid I agree, but what would be the purpose since he doesn’t know me? And where would a vicar get the kind of money to buy an expensive bracelet?”

Elliot nodded. “That’s a good point about the bracelet, but for motivation, his sermons and interaction with you reveal a lot about his character, and his ideas about what a woman should, and
should not, do.” He leaned back against the squab and rested his foot on his bent knee. “Let’s just say Mr. Spencer is worth investigating. Since you are writing to the bishop, ask about Spencer’s credentials. I can’t imagine a bishop approving someone such as he for this post. Or any other, for that matter.”

The rest of the trip continued with them both lost in thought. Charlotte gathered her things when the carriage came to a stop. “Do you wish to come in for tea? I feel as though I could use a bit.”

“Yes, tea would be nice.”

As soon as they stepped on the first stair, Charlotte’s heart gave a thump. “Is that something by the front door?”

Elliot narrowed his eyes. “Stay here.” He took the steps two at a time until he reached the top. He picked up what looked like flowers and a piece of paper. “You can come up now.”

Slowly, Charlotte made her way to the top. “What is it this time?”

“Very innocuous. Let’s go inside.” Just then the door opened, and Bridget stepped back. “Good afternoon, Mr. Baker, ma’am.”

Elliot gave her a smile. “Did you see or hear anything this morning by the front door?”

The girl shook her head, her red curls dancing alongside her head where they’d come loose from her lace cap. “No, sir. But I haven’t been by the door except when I heard the carriage pull up just now.”

He stepped aside to let Charlotte enter and followed her down the corridor to the drawing room. She got as far as the center of the room, and turned. “What is it?”

Elliot handed her a bouquet of flowers. Roses. Red and perfumed. Nothing at all the matter with them. They were wrapped in paper, tied with a ribbon. She looked up at him, her brows furrowed. “Did I see you pick up a piece of paper?”

He held out a sheet of very expensive vellum. Charlotte opened it.

From your admirer

She sank into one of the chairs and laid the flowers and note on the table alongside her. “What do you make of this?”

Elliot rested his hands on his hips. “I don’t know. Either our mystery man is extremely clever, or this is not from him, but someone who is actually an admirer.” Truth be told, this rattled him more than the other packages. Could Charlotte have an actual, shy admirer who would now complicate the investigation, or was their man so clever he was attempting to thwart their course of inquiry with the flowers?

Charlotte rubbed her arms and cast a furtive glance at the flowers. “I don’t want them.”

Without comment, Elliot moved to the bell pull and summoned a maid. Nothing was said until Bridget appeared. He retrieved the flowers and brought them to her. “Please dispose of these, and bring tea.”

She bobbed a curtsy, casting an uneasy glance at Charlotte. “Yes, sir.”

“I think after the morning you’ve had, a bit of sherry before tea would be a good idea.”

“I believe you are right.”

He headed to the library, then poured a brandy for himself and a healthy dose of sherry for Charlotte. When he returned and handed her the small glass, she took it from him with shaky hands.

He settled across from her, swirling the brown liquid before taking a sip. “If this is an actual admirer, it is certainly poor timing. If, on the other hand, the flowers and note came from our villain,
he has made a mistake.”
Charlotte placed the glass on the table in front of her. “What is that?”
He gestured toward the glass of sherry. “Drink that.” Once she had taken a sip, he continued, “We have his handwriting. Up until now there has been no correspondence, except for the card that was left with the box of biscuits.” He picked up the note once more and studied it. “I have a handwriting expert I work with on occasion. He should be able to tell us something about the man from these words. Also, if I can get several people we are looking at to write a few words, I can compare it to this note.”
It bothered him how much Charlotte had changed from when she’d first appeared at his office. Now, there seemed to be a perennial crease in her forehead, and the dark circles under her eyes spoke of sleepless nights. Even though it had only been a few weeks, her clothes seemed looser, and her hands never stilled. Like now, as she picked at the folds of her dress.
Thinking of the schedule of her social engagements she’d given him, he asked, “Are you still expecting callers this Tuesday afternoon for your monthly book discussion?”
Before she could answer, the door opened and Thomas entered, pushing a tray with tea, small sandwiches, and pastries. He rolled it to Charlotte who thanked him with her ever-present gracious smile. Which disappeared as soon as the man turned to leave.
“Thomas, did you see anyone lurking about the house this morning while Mrs. Pennyworth was away from home?”
Thomas came to a halt and faced him. “No, sir. Since Mrs. Pennyworth gives us Sunday afternoons off, we are all generally busy getting things done before we leave. I asked the others when Bridget showed me the flowers, but no one heard anything.”
“Thank you.” Elliot turned toward Charlotte and accepted the tea and plate of apple tarts.
“To answer your question, yes, this Tuesday afternoon is my monthly book club meeting. I am expecting twelve people.”
He grinned as he swallowed a bit of pastry. Attempting to lighten the somber mood the church service and the arrival of the flowers had caused, he said, “Hopefully, not the good vicar, Mr. Spencer?”
“Heavens, no.” She offered a genuine smile for the first time all morning. “Definitely, no.”
After departing her home, Elliot walked the few miles to his house, preferring the sunny fresh air to the crowded omnibus, believing it would help clear his head. The image of an edgy Charlotte kept intruding into his thoughts. She was showing the strain of these disturbing events. It had taken all his control not to gather her into his arms and comfort her, tell her it would be all right. Sometimes she appeared so fragile, as if she might shatter into pieces.
To maintain his sanity and the temptation she posed, he needed to solve this case quickly. At least having the man’s handwriting helped. If, indeed, it was the culprit who sent the flowers, and not an actual admirer.
Why did the thought of Charlotte having an actual admirer annoy him? Since he was not a stupid man, he knew exactly why it annoyed him, and that annoyed him even more.

Elliot’s senses went on alert as soon as he entered Charlotte’s drawing room the following Tuesday. Her cheeks were flushed, and her voice high-pitched as she flitted from group to group. He recognized most of the guests: Mr. Talbot, Baron Von Braun, Miss Garvey, Mr. Conrad, Lord and Lady Monroe, Mr. and Mrs. Glenmoor.
And the good vicar, Mr. John Spencer. Bloody hell.

Now he understood Charlotte’s disquiet. The vicar sat in the corner, holding a forgotten cup of tea, the beady eyes behind his spectacles following every move Charlotte made. Elliot strode across the room, nodding to those he knew, forging a direct path to the vicar. “Good afternoon, Mr. Spencer. How nice of you to honor Mrs. Pennyworth with your presence.”

Startled, the vicar looked up, his eyes narrowed and his poor attempt at a smile not quite making it. “Indeed. I thought to visit some of my congregants’ homes to see how I may assist them in their daily lives. However, until I arrived, I had no idea Mrs. Pennyworth has a book discussion each month. I am anxious to hear what books they are reading.” Apparently, the idiot hadn’t heard the sarcasm in Elliot’s voice.

He could well imagine the glee Mr. Spencer would experience when the book discussions began. He doubted there were any books of which the man approved, which would give him the chance to berate everyone in the room at once. Taking the opportunity to move his investigation forward, he sat in the comfortable chair next to the vicar. “There is something you may assist me with, vicar.”

The man’s eyes glowed with righteous fervor at the opportunity to bring judgment down on another sinner’s head. He placed his tea on the table in front of him and rubbed his hands together. Elliot got the distinct whiff of some sort of liquor from the good man’s breath. “I would be happy to help you in any way, Mr. Baker.”

Elliot pulled a small notepad and pencil from his pocket and handed them to the vicar. “You may assist me by noting a few of your favorite Bible passages.”

Spencer’s brows furrowed. “Oh, but there are so many, it is hard to choose. I find sin in so many places, that I have a long list of quotes to cover all of the commandments and deadly sins.”

The man was serious. Elliot was sure his selection would have nothing to do with love and forgiveness, and everything to do with condemnation and the damnation of one’s soul. “Perhaps just one or two to begin with?”

Nodding his approval, the vicar bent to scribble on the pad. Elliot would take the writing, along with the note left with the flowers, to Mr. Drovers at the Foreign Office, the next morning. Elliot had sent around a message to request a meeting with the handwriting specialist, and had been granted an appointment at ten on Wednesday.

While the vicar scribbled, Elliot observed the other guests. His time spent with Drovers tomorrow would be better served if he had several specimens to offer him. He glanced at the vicar who had already filled one page, and was flipping to begin another. Elliot placed his hand over the man’s. “That is plenty, sir. I am sure that will keep me busy for quite a while.”

The vicar reluctantly closed the notepad and handed it to Elliot. “Yes, that should give you a good start on the path to righteousness.”

“I am sure it will. Thank you.” He tucked the notepad and pencil into his jacket pocket and nodded as he rose and made his way through the guests to join Charlotte, chatting with Mr. Conrad, Miss Garvey, and the baron.

Now he only needed to figure out how to get Talbot and Von Braun to scribble in his pad, too. Three men who had come to his notice as possible suspects. His gaze roamed the room. Everything seemed perfectly normal, with perfectly ordinary people visiting in anticipation of discussing books.

But one of them was dangerous. Which one?
Charlotte leaned against Elliot’s chest as he drew her into the circle of his arms and began to massage her shoulders. This was becoming a habit, and although she enjoyed it, the idea of him being so familiar with her person rang a warning bell.

The last of the book club guests had departed, and she was so very tired. Dodging Mr. Spencer, who she’d been quite dismayed to see appear at the drawing room doorway, had been an exercise in futility. When she had attempted to ignore him, he’d followed her about until she’d given him her attention. As soon as she was able to rise from the comfort of Elliot’s embrace, she would leave strict instructions with every staff member that he was never to be granted access to her home again.

Of course, the vicar had objected to each book they discussed, and she’d had to place a staying hand on Elliot’s arm to keep him from bodily removing the man.

“Can I pour you a brandy, or would you prefer tea?”

That was another thing that had begun to frighten her. She was becoming much too dependent on Mr. Elliot Baker, Private Investigator, and his care for her. Even if she were foolish enough to place her heart in jeopardy again, he was not the man to fulfill that role. He was such a black and white individual. He allowed no gray areas in his world. You were either good or evil. Right or wrong. Honest or dishonest.

Were he to learn of the outstanding warrant for the theft of Lady Barton’s jewels, he would haul her off to jail. Yet, she was falling for him in a worrisome way. All she had ever wanted in her life was security and happiness. She’d had it for a brief time with Gabriel, but then fate—and his recklessness—had snatched it away.

In one of his tirades, Mr. Spencer had sermonized that Gabriel’s death was the Lord’s punishment for wrongs she had committed in her past. When he’d said that in front of Elliot, her face had flamed, and she’d wondered if Elliot had noticed. Surely, no loving God would take away the life of a young, virile man to punish his wife for wrongs not committed, but of which she’d been unfairly accused.

“A sherry would be welcome.” She felt so content in Elliot’s arms but forced herself to move back, and sit on the settee. There was no point in harboring such foolish hopes of anything between them. She couldn’t trust him with her secret, and he’d been employed to solve a problem for her, not rub parts of her body that ached.

Well, then. That thought certainly brought heat to her middle. Dismissing the images now at the forefront of her mind, she forced her attention back to Elliot’s rigid beliefs.

It was ironic that the very reason she was hiding something from him was because she didn’t trust him to trust her. She sighed. It was all so convoluted.

He returned from the library with drinks in hand and held one out to her, then joined her on the settee in front of the fireplace. “Your head hurts again, doesn’t it?”

The relief from the shoulder rub he’d just given her had already worn off. She closed her eyes and nodded. She could not remember the last time she’d had a carefree day with no headache and no stress. Elliot put his drink down and took her by the shoulders. “Turn around.”

“No. Not again. This is not a good idea. I feel foolish with you constantly feeling the need to massage my head.” She took a sip of her sherry. “I will be fine.”

“Can you not think of it as part of my duties?”

A smile twitched her lips. “Duties as a solicitor or a private investigator?”
Elliot grinned back. “Perhaps I shall add ‘masseur’ to my list of services offered.” He twirled his finger in the air. “Now turn around, and let me help you get rid of this headache.”

Against her better judgment, but knowing how helpful his ministrations were, she leaned against his chest. His warm hands rested on her head, and he tangled his fingers in her hair. He rubbed her scalp, and she moaned. “That feels wonderful.”

Despite her unease at allowing him the freedom to touch her in this way, the rumble of his low voice, offering soothing words as he manipulated her flesh, blocked all the evil and fear tying her into knots.

She rotated her neck as he continued. The air seemed clearer, the room warmer, and a sense of peace drifted over her like a heated blanket on a cold morning. She felt safe and protected here in his arms.

He grunted, and she suddenly noticed there was something very hard pressing up against her lower back where she sat snug between Elliot’s legs. Oh good Lord, he was becoming aroused, and that aroused her. He anchored her head so it settled snugly against his shoulder and continued to rub her scalp. Feeling decadent, she relaxed, took a sip of her sherry, and enjoyed his attention.

After a few more minutes she began to grow quite warm, and parts of her body that she had ignored since Gabriel’s death began to tingle and swell. Elliot began to shift also, and then his lips grazed her neck. Warm, and moist. He kissed her skin, then tugged on her earlobe with his teeth. Sighing softly, she bent her head to grant him better access. One of his hands slid from her hair and rested on her shoulder and squeezed. She should not be allowing this intimacy. It would only encourage something with which she was not prepared to continue.

Before she could form another thought, his hand slowly slid from her shoulder, and his strong fingers closed over her breast.

His thumb skimmed leisurely over her nipple, bringing it to a sharp point. The tingles turned into needy throbs when he removed his other hand from her hair and grasped her chin, turning her head to take her mouth in a searing kiss. She shifted until she was practically sitting on his lap, but it wasn’t close enough. Clothes hindered the skin-to-skin touch her body craved. A slight knock on the drawing room door had them springing apart like two youths caught stealing kisses in the stables.

“Yes.” Lord, was that her voice? She slid off his lap and smoothed out her skirt. “Come in.” She glanced at Elliot, but the blasted man slumped on the settee, his arm resting on the back of the sofa, looking perfectly at ease, as if he fondled women in their drawing rooms every day.

Perhaps he did.

Bridget entered. “Cook wanted to know when she should serve dinner, since your guests have only just left.”

“Will you join me for dinner, Mr. Baker?” Didn’t she sound all proper and composed? He was not the only one who could quickly pull himself together.

“I will pass on the invitation, since I have unfinished legal work I must see to before tomorrow.”

Bridget viewed them oddly, no doubt smirking inside at their stilted words, which, added to the flush Charlotte knew covered her face, gave the girl reason to believe something improper had occurred. She stiffened, refusing to bow to embarrassment in front of her employees. “Since Mr. Baker is leaving, please have a tray sent up to my bedchamber, but I would like a bath first.”

Bridget dipped a curtsy and left the room, closing the door quietly behind her. Charlotte stood and shook out her skirts. Raising her chin, she said, “I will see you out.”

Elliot rose and grasped her arm, turning her back toward him. “There is nothing to be ashamed of, Charlotte. We are adults, and we did not do anything wrong.”
Nothing wrong, indeed. More than ever she wished this entire matter over with, so she could go back to her very pleasant, uncomplicated life. A life that did not include a most unsuitable man with whom she was becoming a bit too attached. “I have no idea what you are talking about.” She headed to the door.

Once Elliot had donned his hat and coat, he grasped her chin and turned her head to study her. “You look quite fatigued. A bath and a dinner tray are precisely what you need.”

Despite her immediate reaction to his highhanded manner, she found she hadn’t the strength to argue. “I am so very tired of this. I no longer enjoy attending events with the people I have grown close to over the year. Some of these people had been Gabriel’s friends, others I befriended myself. But since this all started, I find myself withdrawing from them, suspecting every man who smiles in my direction. On the other hand, I do not wish to become a recluse who hides behind my curtains, peeking out each time someone passes my house.”

“I have an idea. Why don’t you enjoy a day out without friends? You and I will take a trip to the art museum. No suspicious individuals to be wary of, no talk of flowers, packages left on the doorstep, or men who lecture you about sin and damnation.”

She was certain an excursion to the art museum was another service not normally provided by a private investigator. Nevertheless, the idea of just the two of them, with no others, greatly appealed. “That sounds wonderful. I love the museum, and I can easily become lost in the treasures there.”

“Then it is all set. I will escort you to the museum tomorrow. Be ready to depart about ten o’clock.”

Why was this man so nice? Why couldn’t he be the typical ex-inspector turned private investigator with jowls, a cigar jammed between his teeth, and a paunch? No, her private investigator was handsome, well-built, charming, and a definite threat to her sanity and well-being.

Charlotte attempted to quell the excitement in her middle as she waited for Elliot. This trip to the museum was for fun, and she had no intention of allowing conversation about the investigation. Today, she was merely Charlotte, and he was merely Elliot, and they were going to enjoy the day.

The smile he gave her as he entered her house assured her he did not view this trip as part of the investigation, either. He bowed as he stepped into the entrance hall. “Are you ready for a day of no worries?”

“Yes, indeed.” She turned to have Elliot help her with her pelisse. After tying the ribbons on her bonnet, they left the house.

It appeared the weather had also decided to cooperate with their sense of ease and adventure. The rare sun shone brightly in the cool, crisp air, warming her back as they descended the stairs and he helped her into her carriage.

“I’m sure this sounds silly, but I feel as carefree as a young girl.” Charlotte almost giggled as she settled in. The sun shining through the window, lighting up the green velvet interior of the coach, cheered her, as well.

Elliot grinned back. “Not at all. You need this day out to forget about everything, except having fun. I thought about the science museum, but then I realized women do not generally view science with the same vigor as men, so that venue might not be your idea of fun.”

“Actually, I do have an interest in science. However, since this is to be a lighthearted day, I am happy we are headed to the art museum. Have you been there before?”

His demeanor sobered. “Once. But my companion was not very interested in art, so we did not stay
Assuming Elliot referred to Annabelle, Charlotte changed the subject. “I, on the other hand, am very interested in art. In fact, I had at one time thought to study art but never had the means to do so.”

Elliot’s brows rose. “Do you paint?”

She blushed. “A bit. That is, if one considers applying paint to a canvas as painting.” She could hardly call her attempts at artistic work “painting”, but she loved working with oils, and charcoals, as well. The hobby had helped her during her mourning period when she’d been confined to her home more than she was used to. Now, since her life had taken a turn toward perverse matters, she’d shoved that all aside.

“Someday you will have to show me some of your work.”

Charlotte waved her hand. “Oh, it is not good enough to show.”

“I have found that an artist’s opinion of his or her work is rarely honest.”

“But mostly accurate,” she said with a light laugh. “At least in my case.”

“I shall have to see and make the judgment for myself.”

She’d never shown her work to anyone, and the thought of allowing Elliot to have a peek into that part of her life was both exciting and unnerving. Even Gabriel had shown no interest in her artwork when she told him about it. He’d merely offered her that benevolent smile that gave her the feeling that she was a dog that he’d just patted on the head.

The rest of the afternoon passed in pleasant conversation and a light luncheon at a small café only a block from the museum. She discovered they enjoyed the same type of artwork, and eschewed the same type, as well.

“It appears we have a great deal in common,” Elliot said as they made their way back to the carriage later that afternoon.

“So it seems.” She took in a deep breath and smiled. “Thank you so much for this day. I really enjoyed myself, and for a little bit of time forgot…”

Elliot’s finger drew circles on her hand resting on his arm, the slight touch comforting. “Try as best you can to put it from your mind. I promise you I will unearth this cad and return your life to normal.”

Two days after the trip to the museum, Elliot left his rooms shortly before the dinner hour with a whistle on his lips. The note that had arrived with the flowers, along with samples of Vicar Spencer and Baron Von Braun’s handwriting, were tucked away in his pocket. It had been blind luck that he’d stumbled upon Von Braun at his club the night before, not realizing he was a member. They’d sat and chatted until Elliot could think of a way to have him write something. Taking out a stubby pencil and small pad he always carried, he handed them to Von Braun and asked him to jot down the title and author of a book he was encouraging Elliot to read. The man had graciously agreed, and Elliot had tucked it into his pocket, happy to have more than one sample.

Upon arrival at the Foreign Office, he found Drovers in his office, his head bent over some papers, a magnifying glass in his hand, as he perused the document in front of him. The man’s hair stood on end, as if he’d run his fingers through it several times. So great was his concentration, he didn’t hear Elliot enter the room.

“Hard at work, as usual, I see.” Elliot moved farther into the room and took a seat in front of the worn, wooden desk.

The man looked up, not at all startled. “Good evening, Baker. Come with samples for me?”

Elliot withdrew the paper with Von Braun’s scrawl. He laid it on the desk on top of the paper...
Drovers had been studying. “What can you tell me about this specimen?”

Not one to rush through anything, which, of course, in his line of work was imperative, Drovers studied the sample with his magnifying glass. After a few minutes, he pushed the paper back to Elliot. “This man thinks a great deal of himself.” He leaned over and pointed to a sentence. “See how he forms these letters? That shows rigidity, a man not able to bend to anyone else’s opinions.”

“Is this man capable of leaving a number of frightening items on a woman’s doorstep meant to disrupt her life?”

Drover grinned, one of the few times Elliot had ever seen such. “Given the right circumstances, I believe most people can do things out of the ordinary.” He leaned forward and folded his hands together. “However, based on your letter to me outlining the problem, to do it over and over, takes an individual who has something wrong up here.” He tapped his temple. “But to answer your question, yes, this man is capable of doing so. But, that doesn’t mean he did.”

“Well, that clears that up.” Elliot chuckled in frustration.

“When dealing with human nature, and what man can justify to himself, nothing is clear-cut. You, of all people, should know this, Baker.”

Elliot stiffened, assuming Drover was referring to his slip-up with Annabelle. Until the man waved his hand and continued, “I’m not referring to your matter, but to the general population that you have dealt with in your line of work. I, myself, have been surprised many times by the cruelty and downright degradation one can foist on another human being. And find justification for it, as well.”

He snorted. “People rarely change. If they are evil, they will always be evil.”

Drover tsked. “Such a rigid stance for a young man.”

“Lesson learned.” Elliot placed the sample of the vicar’s writing on the desk. “This one?”

Again, the man studied the sample carefully. “Ah, an interesting one. Your friend here is erratic, critical, and methodical. He could be a bit unstable, or merely had a poor tutor when he was learning his letters.”

“I’m afraid that doesn’t help.”

“In any event, I don’t think you will find your perpetrator by analyzing handwriting. It is much too hard to predict what someone is capable of doing by studying how they write.” The man sat back and adjusted his spectacles.

“Perhaps not, but I must pursue every avenue.” At last Elliot pulled out the paper from the man who had left the flowers. “What I’d like to know about this one is if it matches either of the other two.”

Drovers studied the sample, then laid the other two alongside it. He looked back and forth, and finally looked up at him. “This is an interesting one.”

Elliot sat forward. “Yes, go on.”

“Whoever wrote this one is trying to disguise his handwriting.” He moved his magnifying glass over the sample. “It doesn’t match either of the other two, but my educated guess is the scribe is left-handed and tried to write this note with his right hand.”

Drover removed his spectacles and rubbed them with a cloth. “Languages are different in more ways than one. Those that are written left-to-right, like English, are harder to write with the left hand. You see, a right-handed person writes away from his body and pulls the writing instrument, while a left-handed individual must write toward his body and, therefore, push the instrument.” He tapped the paper. “This person is left-handed and is writing with his right hand.”

Feeling encouraged by that information, Elliot stood and tucked the paper in his pocket. “Thank you for your insight. I do appreciate your expertise.”

Before Elliot had crossed the room and closed the door, Drovers had once again returned to
perusing the document on his desk with his magnifying glass.

A light rain had begun to fall when he exited the building. Elliot opened his umbrella and decided to catch an omnibus instead of walking. What he was looking forward to now was an evening in his rooms with a brandy, a warm fireplace, and thoughts of Charlotte.

Now there was a true conundrum. Truth be told, he would enjoy an evening in his rooms with a brandy, a warm fireplace, and Charlotte sitting on his lap. Curled up with her head resting on his shoulder, her plump breasts pressed against his chest. He would slowly unbutton the back of her dress and ease it off her silky-smooth shoulders.

His lips would cast feathered kisses over her neck, his teeth nipping her earlobe. Then, he would—

The devil take it, he was hard as a rock and sweating just thinking about her. This nonsense had to stop. She was his client, nothing more. The kisses they’d shared were an aberration. They should not have happened and would not happen again. Yes, she was a lovely woman, but she was hiding something. He sensed it, and his past experience with Annabelle made him more attuned to deception.

He hailed the omnibus and climbed aboard. The light drizzle had turned to a steady rain. Darkness had descended earlier due to the weather, and he shivered, anxious to be home in dry clothes. The horses plodded along, stopping to allow riders to alight and board the vehicle.

Eventually, the conveyance came to a stop a block from his rooms. He stepped onto the pavement and opened his umbrella. He raised the collar on his jacket, and head down against the rain, he hurried toward home. Before he even identified the sound as footsteps behind him, he was thrown to the ground, a large body landing on top of him with a grunt.

All the air in Elliot’s lungs whooshed out of his body, and the side of his face smacked the pavement. The cold steel of a gun nudged against his temple as very bad breath wafted over him, followed by whispered words. “Leave off yer a’en’ions ‘o the lady. She ain’ yers.” He pressed the gun harder against his head. “I’m bringin’ ye ’his message as a cour’esy. Nex’ ’ime I won’ be so gen’le.”

The lumbering ox fisted Elliot’s hair and slammed his face into the ground once more, bringing stars to his eyes. The footpad climbed off him, leaving Elliot still gasping for breath. After a few minutes, he stumbled to his knees and emptied the contents of his stomach. The side of his face throbbed, and he shook his head to clear it. Warm liquid ran from his nose over his lip to drip on the stones under his knees. He swiped his face. Blood mixed with rainwater.

There was no need to attempt to follow the man, since he had disappeared into the mist. Elliot made it to his feet and with the help of the handrail, dragged himself up the stairs to his front door, fumbling until he could insert the key and enter the building. He viewed the stairs he needed to climb to reach his rooms, and with a deep breath and shaky legs, slowly made his way up the steps.

He collapsed face down on the bed, not caring that he smeared blood all over the pillow. After he gave himself a few minutes to rest his throbbing head, he would tend to his injuries. His thoughts swirled around in his mind at the attack. It was apparent Charlotte’s situation had gone from frightening to dangerous. He did not think the man who had attacked him was the same one leaving the packages. This man had been hired to put the fear of God into him. Which, of course, would not work, since he did not scare easily. And now that he knew how serious her “admirer” was, he would take every precaution to protect himself.

And Charlotte.
“This just came for you, ma’am.” Charlotte opened the missive Bridget handed her, butterflies doing a tango in her stomach. Her life had become so unpredictable that a simple note set her nerves aflutter.

*My Dear Mrs. Pennyworth,*

*I have met with an unfortunate accident, and I fear I will be unable to attend you for a few days.*

*Mr. Elliot Baker*

She read the words over and over, trying her best to convince herself that Elliot had merely stumbled into a table and bruised his leg. Or perchance he had sliced a bit of fruit and his finger got in the way. Of course, there was also the possibility that he’d missed the last two steps on his way out the door and twisted his ankle.

*Don’t be ridiculous, Charlotte, you know this “accident” is somehow connected to you.*

“Bridget, ask for my carriage to be brought around, and help me change into another gown.” She had to see for herself, or she would not rest easy. Elliot was a strong, virile man, who would not be unable to attend her due to a *mere* accident. The mishap must have been serious. And even if it was not connected to her, as a good Christian woman, she should see to his comfort.

Thankfully, her driver knew where Elliot lived. She was probably breaking some type of rule by visiting a bachelor in his rooms, but she had to discern for herself his condition. After all, as his employer, she owed him some sort of consideration.

With those thoughts firmly fixed in her mind, she climbed out of her carriage and proceeded up the steps to the building Bones indicated was Mr. Baker’s residence. She dropped the knocker and waited. After a few minutes the door opened, and a rotund woman with rosy cheeks and a large apron tied around her middle offered a warm smile. “Yes, miss, what may I do for ye?”

“Is this the residence of Mr. Elliot Baker?”

The woman’s easy demeanor changed as she drew back and regarded her with narrowed eyes. “Aye, it is Mr. Baker’s residence. I don’t allow ladies to call upon my gentlemen boarders.” She sniffed. “It appears to me ye are a lady, so I would advise ye to send a note if you must gain Mr. Baker’s attention.”

She began to close the door, but Charlotte slapped her palm against it to stop the door from closing. “Now see here, young lady, I told ye I do not allow lady visitors.” The woman’s face grew even more rosy.

“Please. I do not intend to stay long. In fact, I will not even remove my cape. I had a note from Mr. Baker this morning that he has had an accident, and I just wish to see if there is anything I can do to help him.”

“An accident? I didn’t hear anything about an accident.” The woman looked aghast that someone in her house should have an accident and she was not informed. If Charlotte wasn’t so anxious, she would have laughed at the woman’s attitude.

“I’m sorry you weren’t aware of his mishap, but may I please enter and just take a quick look?”

After a few moments of consideration, the woman stepped back. “I will go with ye.”

“Fine.” Charlotte breathed a sigh of relief. “Where are his rooms?”

“Follow me.” The woman climbed the stairs, puffing quite laboriously by the time they reached the top. The boards creaked beneath their feet as they walked down a corridor and stopped at a wooden door at the end. The woman tapped on the door. “Mr. Baker?”
“Yes, Mrs. Murray,” came the voice from inside.
“Ye have a visitor here who says ye had an accident.”

Within seconds the door opened, and Elliot stood there. Charlotte and Mrs. Murray both gasped. The entire side of his face was scraped and black and blue. His nose was swollen, and might have been broken. Despite his injuries, he smiled his usual greeting and bowed slightly from the waist.

“Good afternoon, ladies.”

“What happened?” Charlotte didn’t even recognize her breathy voice.

She followed Mrs. Murray as she pushed her way inside and waved her finger at him. “Why didn’t you come to me for aid, Mr. Baker? Ye look dreadful.”

“It is nothing, I assure you. I merely slipped on the wet pavement last evening.”

Both women regarded him with disbelief. This was no slip. Elliot looked as though someone had slammed him to the ground.

“I will fix ye some of my tea. It will help with the healing.” Obviously forgetting she was breaking her rules by allowing Charlotte to remain alone with Elliot, Mrs. Murray hustled from the room.

They both stared at each other until Elliot waved to a chair. “Won’t you have a seat?”

Elliot studied Charlotte as she moved past his neatly made bed, wooden dresser, and two chairs around a small table. She no sooner sat on the blue and white striped chair facing his bed then her face flushed, and she hopped up and stammered, “Is there a drawing room?”

He tried to hide his laughter as he said, “Not exactly a drawing room, but we would be much more comfortable in my sitting room.” He led her through a door to his small, well-appointed sitting room. The furnishings had come with the flat, a rose damask settee and two rose, white, and green printed chairs forming a semi-circle around the cold fireplace. His several bookshelves were loaded with books, and his ancient desk groaned under stacks of papers.

Once she settled in the chair by the fireplace, with him taking the settee, her eyes grew wide as she took in his appearance. He wore trousers, with a banyan over it, open at the neck, revealing his bare chest, with dark swirly curls visible. A rush of heat rose to her face, and she unbuttoned her cape and began to shrug out of it.

Elliot moved gingerly, sore from his beating, to help her, and could not stop himself from smirking at her reaction to his appearance. He folded the cape and placed it on the settee next to him.

Charlotte took a deep breath. “How did you hurt yourself? And please do not insult my intelligence by repeating that story about you falling on wet pavement.” Her eyes kept darting to his chest, licking her lips in such a way that he wanted to hoist her over his shoulder, stride to his bed, and dump her on it.

Her discomfort was causing his blood to race south. He shifted on his seat, wondering if she already suspected the attack had something to do with her. “It did happen on a wet pavement.” His grin did not appear to distract her.

“And?” She raised her cute little chin in the air.

He stood and ran his fingers through his hair. He ambled to the window and rested his hands on his hips. “As you probably surmised, I was attacked on purpose.”

Charlotte followed him to the window and stood alongside him, taking in the sight of an apple cart being pushed down the street by a vendor. A little girl clung to her mother’s hand as they entered the bakery across the way from the building. Everything looked perfectly normal, but Charlotte’s life had not been perfectly normal for some time now.
He turned and leaned his hip against the windowsill, crossing his arms over his chest. It would probably be best if she did know the truth. He could not be with her twenty-four hours a day, and she needed to be aware that the villain making her life miserable could very well be dangerous.

Reaching his hand out, he tucked a loose tendril behind her ear. “Whoever it was who attacked me warned me to stay away from you.”

Charlotte sucked in a deep breath. “I knew it.” She raised her fist to her mouth and shook her head. “This is all my fault.”

Elliot rested his hands on her shoulders. “No, Charlotte. This is not your fault. It is the fault of the man pursuing you, and whoever he hired to attack me.”

“So, you don’t think they are the same man?” Her beautiful eyes filled with tears, and he pulled her close to him, resting her head against his chest.

“No. I am almost certain your tormentor is someone from your social circle. Whoever attacked me was from the lowest rung of London. He’d been hired, there was no doubt.”

“Here is your tea, Mr. Baker.” Mrs. Murray, thankfully, backed into the room, pulling a rolling cart with teacups, a tea pot, and biscuits. He and Charlotte sprang apart before she could turn and catch them embracing.

Mrs. Murray had been adamant when he rented the rooms that she did not allow women to visit her “gentlemen boarders.”

“I run a respectable home, sir,” she’d said as she’d handed him the key to his door when he first took possession of the rooms. “I don’t allow women or heavy drinking. Ye pay yer rent when due, allow my girl time to come in and clean, and keep the noise down.” Her eyes had narrowed. “Ye don’t play one of those musical instruments, do ye?”

When he had assured her he had no musical talent whatsoever, she nodded and continued. “If you abide by those rules, we will get along just fine.”

Elliot had been happy the five years he’d lived here, and only recently had begun to think that the money he’d been tucking away could buy him a small house. In fact, one day he might take a wife and think about having a family to occupy that little house. While those thoughts crowded his mind, his eyes drifted over Charlotte as she poured tea for the two of them.

“You do that very well.” He reached out for the cup. “And you remembered how I like my tea.”

She smiled, then her lips tightened as she regarded his face. “Yes, pouring tea is something I believe women are born knowing. English women, at least. However, what I want to know now is where do we go from here?”

He pushed away the thoughts of the two of them, drinking tea together, having meals before a cozy fireplace, and then proceeding, hand-in-hand up to the bedchamber where they would spend leisurely hours discovering new ways to pleasure each other.

Pulling his thoughts from that dangerous path, he said, “We continue on as before. Mr. Drovers believes whoever wrote the note that came with the flowers is left-handed, but wrote the note with his right hand.”

Charlotte sucked in a breath and paled. “Mr. Talbot is left-handed.”

“Is he, now? That’s interesting. Whoever it was, he was attempting to disguise his handwriting.” More than interesting, in fact. But then again, they had no reason to believe the flowers were in any way connected to the other packages. Though, given what Elliot had noticed of Mr. Talbot’s behavior, the man did seem to have a *tendre* for Charlotte.

“He also made some observations on both Von Braun and the vicar’s personalities that makes me believe they need to remain on our suspect list.”
He placed his empty teacup on the table and leaned back, resting his foot on his bent knee. “We will continue appearing together at various functions until someone slips up.” Seeing the distressed expression on her face, he moved to the edge of his seat, taking her cold hand in his. “Trust me.”

Charlotte cringed at his words, trying hard to hide her mistrust. She had trusted Lord Barton to be a good employer, and he’d made false charges against her after she’d refused to warm his bed. She had trusted Gabriel with her heart and her happiness, and his recklessness had let her down.

Trust another man? With her very life?

“Here now, I think it’s time you finished up yer visit.” Mrs. Murray bustled into the room, a frown on her round face.

Charlotte stood, embarrassed at the necessity for the woman to remind her. “I am terribly sorry, Mrs. Murray, you are right. It is time for me to take my leave.”

Elliot stood and helped the landlady gather up the tea things. As she rolled the cart from the room, Elliot reached out and stopped Charlotte. “When is your next social engagement?”

She placed her cape around her shoulders and fastened it at the neckline. “Tomorrow evening. I accepted an invitation for both of us to the Milford’s dinner party. But you cannot go like that.”

He shook his head. “No. But I do not want you to go alone. Things have taken a turn down a path that makes me uncomfortable.”

Charlotte had never been a ninnyhammer, but the idea of someone so enamored of her that he would hire a criminal to hurt the man she had employed to act as her escort was a frightening situation. This entire matter had gone from annoying, to fearsome, to downright dangerous. “I believe you are correct. I will send a note offering our regrets.”

Noticing Mrs. Murray lingering at Elliot’s doorstep, she pulled on her gloves and headed out of the room.

“Send a note with your future engagements, and I will let you know when I will be able to attend.” Looking as if he would like to do more than stand by the table where they’d shared tea, Elliot gave her a warm smile and a quick wink instead.

Her last glance at his bare chest peeking out from under his banyan was a powerful reminder why Mrs. Murray found it necessary to tap her foot as Charlotte breezed by. “Good day, Mrs. Murray.”

She climbed into her carriage and leaned back with a sigh. Elliot had looked awful. He had taken quite a beating at her expense. He’d tried to slough it off, but the turn of events was worrisome. The guilt she felt at the injuries he’d sustained nearly crippled her. She should stop the nonsense now by selling her house and moving far away. Maybe even to the continent. Surely whoever was plaguing her would not travel to another country to pursue her.

If she moved, she could always make new friends. Her eyes filled with tears as she gazed out the window at the shoppers going peacefully about their lives. Something she’d had since her escape from Lord Barton, but hadn’t truly appreciated.

All she wanted in life was to be left alone. To have friends, social engagements, and a quiet life.

Of course, if her attraction to Elliot Baker continued, her life would not be as peaceful as she’d planned. The man certainly raised her temperature. And the sight of his chest under that banyan still had her flapping the sides of her cloak to fan herself. After he’d held her against that warm chest, she’d felt wanting and needy.

She and Gabriel had had a pleasant, if not passionate, sex life. He had been quite patient with her
virgin state, taking their first encounter slow, trying hard not to shock, or upset her. However, in their short marriage, she had wondered if there should be more to their joining, since she’d never felt as relaxed when it was over as Gabriel seemed to be. He would withdraw from her, kiss her on the cheek, roll over, and promptly fall asleep, leaving her tense and frustrated.

Her late husband had seemed to use up all his passion on racing, gambling, and drinking with his friends. As far as she knew, he had not wandered to other women’s beds, but truth be known, he had never stirred her blood the way that simple glimpse of Elliot’s chest had.

Even if she were willing to risk her heart once again, she knew Elliot had some reservations about her truthfulness. It seemed no matter how hard she tried, he believed she was hiding something from him.

I am.

However, she would continue to hide it for as long as she was convinced he would haul her off to the magistrate if he learned about her outstanding warrant. He’d been humiliated by the woman he’d had to arrest for theft. No doubt, he’d have no trouble turning her in, as well.

The carriage came to a rolling stop in front of her townhouse. She accepted Bones’s hand and stepped out of the vehicle, shaking her skirts. Just as she started up the steps, something caught her attention. She turned to the right and saw a figure rounding the corner at a rapid pace. There seemed to be something familiar about the person’s form and walk, but she could not place it.

*Good heavens, this entire thing is turning me into a muddlehead.*

Unable to shake off the feeling that whoever had just left the area had been there watching her house, she hurried up the steps, searching the ground for any more packages or notes.

Nothing.

She breathed a sigh of relief as she entered her house and closed the door behind her. She removed her cape and bonnet and handed them to Bridget, concerned to see her hands shaking. “Bridget, some tea to the drawing room, please.”

After only a few steps, she decided she’d had enough tea to float a ship. “Never mind, Bridget. Just let Cook know she can serve luncheon whenever it is ready. I’ll be in the drawing room.” The familiarity of her drawing room gave her some comfort, but she still felt unsettled. Despite the time of day, she walked to the library and poured herself a sherry. She chuckled softly. With all the drinking she’d been doing lately, it would serve her well to move the sideboard from the library to the drawing room.

She wandered the room, touching things, smelling the flowers in her favorite vase, fingering the embroidery she’d finally finished, a sense of peace descending at the comfort her home brought. Her sanctuary. She was safe here. She trusted her servants, there were sturdy locks on her doors, and no one could harm her here.

If only she believed it.
September 23\textsuperscript{rd}  
1:00 p.m.  

\textit{My Dear Mr. Baker,}

\textit{It has been five days since I visited you last. Thank you for your kind note asking after my welfare. As you requested, I have not left the house, awaiting your recovery before I resume my social engagements.}

\textit{I have received an invitation to dine at Sir Alfred Penrose and Lady Penrose's home two days hence. Since that is only a short carriage ride, I believe I shall accept.}

\textit{Yours sincerely,}

\textit{Mrs. Charlotte Pennyworth}

September 23\textsuperscript{rd}  
1:30 p.m.  

\textit{Dear Charlotte,}

\textit{You are not to leave the house unless I accompany you. I thought I was clear on that matter. I expect to have a full recovery soon.}

\textit{Yours sincerely,}

\textit{Elliot}

September 23\textsuperscript{rd}  
2:00 p.m.  

\textit{Dear Mr. Baker,}

\textit{I assume you wrote your last note while not feeling quite yourself, because I am sure you did not intend to order me about.}

\textit{As much as I love my home, I am quite weary of staring at its walls. A short carriage ride with Bones protecting me would not cause a danger.}

\textit{Sincerely,}

\textit{Mrs. Pennyworth}

September 23\textsuperscript{rd}  
3:30 p.m.  

\textit{My Dear Charlotte,}

\textit{In retrospect, perchance I was a bit out of sorts when I penned my last note. I, too, am quite discontented with staring at my own walls. Unless you wish to be squired about town with an escort who resembles a pugilist, I suggest you continue to wait a few more days until I can accompany you on your so very important social life.}

\textit{Elliot}
September 23rd
5:00 p.m.

Mr. Baker,

So very important social life! Yes, perhaps my social life is important to me, but that is hardly cause to demean my life.

Mrs. Pennyworth

September 24th
11 a.m.

Charlotte,

I apologize profusely. I had no call to send such a scathing note. Being cooped up in my rooms is no excuse. Please forgive me, and I will be happy to accompany you to the Penrose dinner. We are both intelligent adults, so surely we can come up with a reason for my injuries.

Warmly,

Elliot

September 24th
2 p.m.

Dear Elliot,

Thank you so much for the beautiful roses. I think we have both been somewhat irascible of late. I appreciate your concern for my well-being, but I have arranged with Mr. and Mrs. Murdock to pick me up and deliver me back home to the Penrose dinner tomorrow night.

Warmly,

Charlotte

Sick to death of sitting in his rooms, Elliot tossed aside the latest note from Charlotte, grinning at the change in her temperament. Roses generally did the trick, but in all honesty, he had been an arse. His only excuse was his confinement, the fact that he’d been taken so unaware by the attack, and that Charlotte might be in more danger than he had initially considered.

Although certainly not fit to escort a woman to a social event, there was no reason he could not visit his club. A quick look in the mirror over his shaving stand showed the scratches had healed, and the black and blue marks had faded to a sickly yellow and purple. His nose, thankfully, had not been broken in the attack, and the swelling had gone down.

Mrs. Murray had been quite attentive, bringing him soup three times a day. He still did not understand why women believed a bowl of soup cured all ills. Wrapping up against the unusually chilly day, he left his rooms and breathed in the fresh air. Well, as fresh as London air could be. The short walk to his club did quite a bit to restore his good humor. He made sure to keep an eye on his surroundings, and anyone nearby.

He handed his coat to the man at the door and spotted Christopher Jennings across the room. He and Jennings had attended school together as youths and managed to stay in touch still. Married to his wife for several years, with three little Jennings running about his house, Jennings represented the epitome
of a contented married life, something Elliot had often envied.
“What the devil happened to you?” Jennings lowered the newspaper he’d been reading, as Elliot took the seat across from him.
“A bit of a mishap.” He waved at the footman to bring him a brandy. “Those of us who do more for our living than sit behind a bank desk, run into trouble now and then.”
Always easygoing, Jennings only grinned at the insult and took a sip of his drink. “Ah, but I have three little ones at home who provide me with quite enough in the way of mishaps.”
Once again, Elliot had reason to envy Jennings his life. Soon Elliot would have to seriously consider taking a wife. The thought had always been at the back of his mind, but lately, the idea of settling down appealed more and more. More so since he’d made the acquaintance of one Mrs. Gabriel Pennyworth.
He could easily see her in the role of wife. His wife. The thought brought both pleasure and concern. Was he ready to give his heart away again?
Elliot leaned forward, the glass of brandy dangling from his fingers. “How well did you know Mrs. Jennings before you married?” He hoped he didn’t sound like a fool, but he was always the private investigator.
What he’d learned about Charlotte during conversations with her acquaintances was a bit of a surprise. It had seemed Charlotte had popped up in London almost two years ago, with no information on her prior life forthcoming. She’d been an employee of a London bank where her late husband held his accounts. From what he’d learned, they’d met, courted, married, and within weeks, she’d become a widow.
The few times he’d questioned her, she’d become flustered and uneasy. As his client, it made no difference what she was hiding, as long as it didn’t pertain to her current situation, which he firmly believed it did not. Some people were very cautious about opening themselves up and protected their private life.
On the other hand, if he were to seriously consider courting her, whatever she held firm to her bosom could become extremely important. He would not be made a fool of again by a pretty face and a charming smile.
“I met my wife through my mother, actually. Miranda and her mother were members of a sewing circle Mother belonged to. Since mothers are notorious for matchmaking—mine being no different—it was only a matter of time before Miranda and her parents were invited to dinner.”
“And what happened?”
Jennings grinned again. “We thoroughly disliked each other.”
Elliot laughed. “Why?”
“Most likely because there was a strong attraction between us, and neither of us wanted our parents to select our mate.” He leaned back and rested his foot on his bent knee. “We tried for weeks to ignore each other, but our parents made sure we were thrown together enough times that it became a chore to continue the charade.
“Eventually, we met once again at an assembly and waltzed. We did nothing the entire time but stare at each other. When the dance was over, I took her by the hand, dragged her outside, and proposed.”
“What did she say?”
“It’s about time.” They both laughed loud enough to catch the attention of a few other members who regarded them with raised eyebrows.
“That was certainly an interesting courtship.”
“Indeed, it was. We were so anxious for each other, we insisted on a wedding within weeks. When her mother complained about the rush, Miranda reminded her she had started it all.”

“And you’re happy.” It was a statement, not a question. Anyone who spent more than a few minutes in Jennings’s company knew he was happy, content, and in love.

_Dare he even think of such a thing? Was he willing to take a chance again, suspecting there was something she was holding back? Of course, it could be something as simple as a spurned sweetheart._

His attention was drawn to Jennings as he stood, folded the newspaper, and placed it on the table in front of them. “Now I must pay the penance a man must in order to have a content life. Miranda becomes upset if I am not at home for the hour before dinner to inspect the little ones and listen to tales of their day.”

Elliot watched as Jennings walked across the room, his stride one of a man happy with his life, and anxious to return to it. He reached over and snatched the newspaper but soon found himself not reading the words, but instead, envisioned returning to his rooms, with no adoring wife to greet him, or little ones to climb on his lap to tell their tales of the day.

Charlotte tugged on her beige kid gloves as she joined Elliot at her front door. They were off to the Adelphi Theater, their first outing together since the attack. The dinner she’d attended a few days before had been nice, in that she was finally among friends again and not staring at her walls, but she’d missed him.

_A startling thought, that._

He looked quite dapper in his polished shoes, well-creased trousers, fine wool overcoat, and silk top hat. In fact, they made quite a pair with her rose silk gown and matching fur-lined cape and bonnet.

Elliot extended his arm, and she took it, sneaking a final glance in the entrance hall mirror at the two of them. “We look quite stylish tonight, Mr. Baker.”

He helped her down the stairs and into the awaiting carriage, holding a large umbrella over them. “Indeed, we do look dashing, Mrs. Pennyworth.” Elliot glanced around the area, before stepping into the carriage.

He tapped on the roof, and Bones began the trek to the theater. They enjoyed companionable silence on the ride to the theater. The only sound was the familiar clip-clop of the horses on the cobblestones, and the creak of the carriage wheels as they turned.

They arrived early enough to take a stroll around the theater lobby before the call to take their seats. After surrendering their outerwear to a footman, Elliot tucked her hand into the crook of his arm. “I understand _Union Jack_ is quite a successful play.”

“Yes, it is. I have seen it before, but I never turn down tickets to the theater, so when Mr. Talbot offered them, I was happy to accept. Plus, I find that the various actors bring a different tone to the characters.”

“A very insightful observation, my dear.”

Charlotte loved the theater and had been thrilled when Mr. Talbot had appeared unannounced one afternoon with the tickets in hand. At first she’d been uneasy, since she had grown wary of his attentions, along with a few other men who Elliot had put on his “suspect” list. But, he had been ever the gentleman, presented the tickets, waved off her offer of tea, and bid her good day.

“It was very nice of Mr. Talbot to invite us.”
The tickets turned out to be excellent seats. Mr. Talbot had also invited Miss Garvey who insisted on sitting next to her. The woman was still a stranger to Charlotte, and there was something about her she found odd. She seemed to be a pleasant sort, though she spoke very little. Once or twice Charlotte caught her staring at her in a peculiar way. The thought crossed her mind that the woman sought Elliot’s attentions, and saw Charlotte as a rival.

Although Miss Garvey and Mr. Talbot appeared together at many functions, she didn’t think they were actually courting. She got the impression from the way they behaved toward each other that theirs was no more than a friendship.

*Union Jack* lived up to its reputation. The story of Captain Morton, a nasty sort who was blackmailing Sir Philip Yorke with a view toward marrying his ward, Miss Ethel Arden, captivated her. A poor petty officer, Mr. Jack Medway, fell in love with Miss Arden, and Jack’s sister, Miss Ruth Medway, was in turn seduced by Captain Morton. Sir Phillip killed the captain, and was arrested, which left Jack free to marry his love, Miss Arden.

The four of them took a short walk during the intermission. Mr. Talbot secured lemonade for him and Charlotte, both Elliot and Miss Garvey declining the offer for refreshment. “It appears you are loving all the intricate plot twists that are thwarting the lovers.” Mr. Talbot regarded Charlotte with amusement.

“But I am expecting a happy ending.”

He nodded. “It has been my experience that women love happy endings.”

“Only women? I imagine everyone loves a happy ending, do you not agree, Miss Garvey?”

The woman smiled for the first time that evening. “Yes, I think the idea of happy endings is what makes us step from our beds in the morning.”

Charlotte grinned. “Well put.”

A footman announced intermission had ended, and they headed back to their seats. “Happy endings?” Elliot leaned in, close to her ear. “Mr. Talbot was correct. Women are indeed staunch supporters of happy endings.”

“Are you suggesting men do not, or just you?”

“I am not like all men. Perhaps we should find someone to write a happy ending for your troubles.”

She smirked. “Isn’t that what I hired *you* for, Mr. Baker?”

“Ah, *Mr. Baker* again. I must be in trouble with the lady.”

Charlotte sighed. “I sometimes wish I had a magic wand that I could wave, and all my worries would vanish.”

“Yes, that would be wonderful, but at least we’ve had a nice—albeit temporary—escape.” Elliot guided her to their seats, and they settled in to enjoy the rest of the performance.

After the play, Mr. Talbot and Miss Garvey invited them to a late supper at Ship and Turtle on Leadenhall Street.

“I am sure you will enjoy the cuisine.” Mr. Talbot smiled broadly as they all took their seats. “I have eaten here many times and have found the food to be splendid.”

The menu did seem impressive, and there was plenty of discussion among the four of them about the best dishes to be had.

Once their orders had been placed with the waiter, Charlotte took a sip from her water glass and turned her attention to Mr. Talbot. “Did you enjoy the play?”

“Yes, I did, and you certainly seemed to. You were riveted.”

“Indeed. It amazes me how someone can take words and turn them into a book or a play. It takes a great deal of talent to entertain an audience.”
“Yet you said you have seen the play once before,” he said.
“I have seen it before, but the theater captivates me.”
As the conversation around the table continued, she couldn’t help but remember how much she liked Mr. Talbot and how helpful he had been right after Gabriel’s death. As he chatted easily with Elliot, she tried to imagine him running a sharp blade over a rat’s throat. She shivered and ran her hands up and down her arms. No, that just didn’t seem likely.
“Are you unwell, Mrs. Pennyworth?” Miss Garvey viewed her with concern, drawing Charlotte from her thoughts.
“No, not really. I just felt a slight chill for the moment.”
Elliot turned to her, breaking off his conversation with Mr. Talbot. “Perhaps you should put your cape back on.”
“He is right, Mrs. Pennyworth, we would not want to see you take ill.” Mr. Talbot frowned at her.
Goodness, such a fuss. She was beginning to feel embarrassed with their regard, but thankfully, the waiter appeared with their food. She leaned back to allow him to place her dinner plate in front of her and glanced over at Miss Garvey who was glaring at her.
Startled, she quickly looked down. Perhaps the woman thought Mr. Talbot was paying too much attention to her. She offered the woman a slight smile, and she smiled back.
Since Charlotte did not wish to encourage Mr. Talbot anyway, she had better be careful around him if Miss Garvey had a fancy for the man.
It was quite late when Charlotte and Elliot entered her carriage for the ride home. In all, it had been a pleasant evening, with Mr. Talbot very much like she remembered him when he used to visit her and Gabriel, which cheered her. She didn’t like thinking of him as someone evil.
Miss Garvey remained an enigma, but Charlotte was sure she had feelings for Mr. Talbot, which she found quite interesting.
To her surprise, instead of taking the seat across from her in the carriage, Elliot chose to sit next to her. The warmth from his body, and the pleasant scent of man, leather, and bergamot, did something odd to her stomach.
Perhaps she was merely tired.
As the vehicle started up, he took her hand in his and began to stroke the sensitive skin on the inside of her wrist. “Did you enjoy yourself tonight?”
His murmured question was lost by the sound of her thumping heart. She was squeezed so far against the wall she was practically climbing out the window. Unfortunately, she had an overwhelming desire to place her hand at the back of his neck and pull his head down for a kiss, although she knew it was not a wise move. The other kisses they’d shared had left her rattled, and unsure of herself.
“Am I making you nervous, Charlotte?” God help her, he moved even closer.
“No, of course not.”
Liar.
“Good. Because I want to do something that I hope you would welcome.”
“What is that?” A mouse had settled in her throat to squeak out the question.
“This.” He released her hand, and his fingers framed her face. His head descended, blocking out the light from the lantern on the wall of the coach. His lips touched hers, and the butterflies in her stomach danced a cotillion.
“Why are they still traipsing around together? I thought I paid you to take care of that.” M slammed down the glass of bourbon so hard, the liquid sloshed out of the sides, onto the black lacquered table.

The lumbering ox of a man discharged a stream of tobacco juice in the spittoon M kept by the door. Disgusting thing, tobacco. “You paid me ’o warn ’im. I did. You didn’ say nuttin’ abou’ killin’ ’im. If hats wha’ you wan, ’he price jus ’ripled.”

Narrowed eyes took in the fool who had been hired to get rid of this Baker fellow. “Whatever you did apparently did not dissuade him.” M turned toward the window. “Leave me now. Be sure to make that delivery.” A nod toward the package on the table drew the man’s eyes.

“Once you pay me.”

“I’ve paid you plenty. Make that delivery, and watch them. In three days, report back to me. Then we’ll see about more payment.”

*And what the next step will be.*

Once the obnoxious idiot had left, M dropped into the chair by the fireplace and sighed. This was taking much too long. Did Anne not realize the items left on her doorstep were a reminder of their love, and punishments that had been necessary to remind her to obey? That as a submissive to her master, she held no control?

How many times had Anne awoken to a dead animal on the pillow—as a reminder that she had been a naughty girl? That she was deserving of punishment for the hurt she’d caused her lover? Until the ultimate betrayal when Anne had been lost forever.

But she was back. Miraculously alive and well, and living in London. And M would have her. It was only a matter of time before Anne realized her mistake and that she’d been claimed for eternity.
Chapter Thirteen

Elliot bade Charlotte a good night, checked the area outside her house, refused her offer of the use of her carriage, and began the walk home. He needed the fresh air to clear his head and calm his body. What the devil was wrong with him that he kept kissing her? He’d never found a woman irresistible—except Annabelle—and look how that had turned out. Keeping his hands off Charlotte was nearly impossible.

What he should be doing is narrowing down his suspects to put an end to this terror she was living under. Mr. Spencer, with all his spouting of righteousness and Bible thumping, could certainly believe he was punishing Charlotte for what he perceived was a wanton life. The packages had begun arriving at her doorstep around the same time he’d settled in at St. Michael’s.

The main problem with Mr. Spencer as their suspect was his lack of wealth. The vicar could not have afforded the expensive jewelry that had been left on the front steps.

Then there was the ever-solicitous Mr. Talbot, a close friend of Charlotte’s deceased husband. Mr. Pennyworth had died in an accident after racing in a carriage—acting on a dare from one of his friends. Not the sort of behavior he would expect from Talbot, who seemed meek, and even fussy, in some ways.

Nevertheless, after time spent together this evening, he was no longer convinced that the pleasant and somewhat banal man would do such a thing. Unless he left the items to frighten her—which they had—so she would turn to him for help—which she hadn’t. And furthermore, were either the vicar or Talbot of a mind to hire someone to threaten his life, if he didn’t leave Charlotte alone?

That brought him to Von Braun, the newly arrived, mostly unknown, member of the social circle. He was hard to figure since he kept to himself but seemed to spend a great deal of time studying Charlotte.

What bothered him the most was the niggling belief that none of those men were tormenting Charlotte. Could there be someone so elusive that Elliot had completely overlooked the true culprit? On the other hand, was his assumption that it was someone in her social circle completely off?

The man he’d hired to discreetly speak with Charlotte’s neighbors and the tradesmen she saw on a regular basis had discovered nothing of interest. Again, he was stumped by the expensive jewelry. There were not a lot of people who could afford such luxuries.

So far, he had interviewed a number of jewelers in an attempt to unearth the purchaser of the bracelet. What he’d found thus far was a reluctance on the part of the horologists to reveal the names of customers.

Elliot sighed and waved down a passing omnibus. The walk had not cleared his head but had, at least, taken his mind off how enticing he found his client. Best to get the matter cleared up, and move on to another project that didn’t involve a beautiful damsel in distress.

The next morning, he spent more than an hour listing his suspects, and the reasons why, and why not, each one could be the antagonist. As he studied the names on the list, he was left with the feeling that he was missing something.

After cleaning up correspondence with Mr. Gleason that had piled up during this investigation, he took time to speak with three more close-mouthed jewelers. Frustrated at his lack of progress, he headed back to Charlotte’s house to escort her to a card party. Von Braun was expected to be present, which would give him time to study him further. He would also begin looking at other suspects.
Charlotte was descending the stairs to the entrance hall as he entered her house. Despite the errant curl dangling on the side of her head, and the flattering dark-green two-piece suit with black piping down the front that hugged her body, he promised himself he would keep his hands off her.

“Good evening, Mrs. Pennyworth.”

She smiled, no doubt amused at the formality since the last time he saw her, their lips had been locked together, and their bodies pressed against each other.

“Good evening to you, Mr. Baker.” She smirked, seemingly to confirm her memory at their last meeting. “It appears we are both early. Would you care for a brandy before we leave?”

“Yes, I would.” He pulled his timepiece from his vest pocket. “We have about a half hour to spare.”

Once they were settled in front of the fireplace, glasses in hand, he said, “I find I am stymied in my investigation, which annoys me quite a bit. Today, I made a list of my primary suspects, and while each of them have reason to be on that list, I feel as though there is something I am missing.”

“I assume Mr. Talbot and Baron Von Braun are on it?”

“Yes, as well as Mr. Spencer.”

The golden light from the fireplace emphasized her burnished curls and raised eyebrows as she viewed him over her sherry glass. “Do you believe a man of the cloth could do such vile things?”

“Perhaps this man of the cloth could, but what keeps me from considering him as a serious contender is a lack of money. Very few vicars can afford the type of bracelet that was left on your steps.”

“True. Mr. Talbot certainly does come across as my unwanted guardian—for lack of a better word—which does concern me. However, I have reason to believe Miss Garvey has a tendre for him. Perhaps him for her, as well? Another thought. You must admit, after his genuinely warm manner last evening, it is difficult to cast him into the role of tormentor.” She shifted in her seat, turning so her knees brushed his leg. “I have always thought of him as a friend—not one to wish anyone ill.”

Elliot contemplated her words for a minute. “He does present himself in that light, but if we rule out him and Spencer, we are left with Von Braun, who has nothing more to land him on my list other than he is new to your circle of friends, and watches you a great deal.”

…

They finished their drinks and left the house, settling into the carriage. Deep in thought, Charlotte stared out the window at the misty evening. The gaslights along the way loomed in front of them to brighten a small area on their passage, then the carriage was plunged back into darkness once more until the next light appeared.

She felt as though her life followed the same path. She had wonderful friends, an active social life, and enough money to provide her with the essentials and even some luxuries. Then the first disturbing package had arrived, plunging her into darkness.

She turned her head to view Elliot, who studied her closely. “I do not think of myself as a coward, although I am not foolishly brave. Nevertheless, I have been considering leaving London, and possibly finding a small house in Bath, or the countryside.”

He seemed to consider her words as his fingers tapped a cadence on his thigh. “I can certainly understand your desire to put this all behind you. However, there is no guarantee that whoever is harassing you will not follow you to the next town.”

She gasped. “Do you think this vile person is so determined to frighten me that he would pick up and move to another town, merely to keep this up?”
“Charlotte, at this point we have no idea who this is, and therefore, no solid idea of his motivation. Can you once again assure me there is nothing in your background that would precipitate this? No one who has a grievance against you? A past lover whom you scorned?”

She continued to dismiss the idea of Barton. He would never be so subtle—not that dead animals fell into the subtle category.

If only she could tell Elliot about the incident in Melbourne Station, even to merely assure herself that Lord Barton was not the person behind this. But, given his history, she had no reason to trust Elliot with that information.

“No. Nothing,” she answered. “And as to your statement about a scorned lover, please remember, I am not free with my affections. There have been no lovers in my past, scorned or otherwise. Only my husband.”

Maybe every widow he knew was taking lovers, but no man had appealed to her in that way. Her heart gave a thump when she realized the man sitting in the carriage with her could very well be the first man she would consider. But lovers needed to trust each other, and she didn’t trust Elliot, and she was certain, based on his questions, that he did not trust her.

The vehicle came to a stop, and as she took Elliot’s hand to step out, a few raindrops landed on her face. Bones opened an umbrella over them, and they hurried up the pathway to Mr. and Mrs. Glenmoor’s house.

The townhouse, set on Grosvenor Road, sat nestled among a row of townhomes belonging to London’s upper crust. This house sported a red front door, with a black and gold knocker.

A staid butler let them into a tasteful entrance hall, with a highly polished wooden floor, covered by a red print Aubusson carpet. Dark red wallpaper covered the area, leading to an oak staircase.

A maid took their coats and hats and directed them toward the drawing room where several tables had been set up. Charlotte spotted a handful of friends standing around, drinking lemonade. The table along the wall was arrayed with drinks and tidbits of food for the guests.

“Thank you so much for coming out on this nasty night.” Mrs. Glenmoor bustled across the room, a smile on her cheerful face, her hands extended. A pleasant, plump woman, she and Charlotte had been friends since before she’d married Gabriel. Her husband was a retired globetrotter and had held the group captive many a night with tales of his adventures, and the places he’d visited.

Charlotte had always desired to travel, but first she couldn’t afford to, then she was grieving her short-lived marriage. Now that she was free to enjoy her independence, perhaps once this messy business was cleared up, she would take a trip to the continent. Or even, perhaps to America.

Mr. Glenmoor joined his wife, giving Elliot a slap on the back. “The ladies have lemonade set up, but I have a fine French brandy, or a Scotch whisky. What’s your favor?”

“The idea of brandy on this cool fall evening sounds like just the thing.” Elliot followed Glenmoor as he led the way, waving his hands about, no doubt with another story.

Mrs. Glenmoor watched them walk away. “Mr. Baker is such a pleasant man. We are all so happy for you to have found companionship since dear Gabriel is gone.”

Charlotte felt a bit of a fraud since Elliot was not a companion, as such, but someone she hired. Although, given the kisses they’d shared recently, it had become hard for her to remember she was merely his client.

_Does he kiss all his clients?_

She stifled a giggled, thinking since most of his clients were surely men, she doubted Elliot had kissed any of them. While sipping her lemonade, she had the opportunity to examine the men in the room as more guests arrived.
Perhaps neither Mr. Talbot nor Mr. Spencer nor Baron Von Braun were the culprits. If not, who else here would hate her so much as to leave such horrible things? Was it possible that one of her female friends had harbored feelings for Gabriel, and was just now playing the woman scorned? More than a year after they’d married?

Then again, she could not imagine any woman doing such a dastardly thing, and Gabriel was deceased. Her attention was drawn to the room’s doorway where Mr. Talbot entered the room with Miss Garvey.

After greeting their hostess, they made a beeline for her. “Is Mr. Baker not with you this evening? I thought for sure we would see him.” Mr. Talbot offered his usual warm smile.

“Yes, he is here.” She turned to where she’d last seen them, but both Elliot and Mr. Glenmoor had disappeared.

…

Elliot took a sip of his brandy and studied the portrait of the distinguished-looking man that Glenmoor had just identified as his great-uncle, Colonel Richard Foxworth, who had fought under Wellington during the Napoleonic wars.

They had left the drawing room when Glenmoor asked Elliot to take a walk with him before the rest of the guests arrived. The room he’d taken him to was two doors down from where the others had gathered, and where the hum of conversation reached their ears. For all intents and purposes, it seemed to be a library, but one wall was taken up with portraits, rather than bookshelves.

“Yes, sir, he was a great soldier. He was my inspiration to join the military, don’t you know? I found I greatly enjoyed the travel involved in the military life, and that is how I became a wanderer.”

Glenmoor continued to stare at the likeness of his relative. “Most of the men in my family were in service to the Crown in one way or another. I was raised to believe in duty to my country. ’Twas drilled into me it was the proper thing to do. But nothing inspired me more than the tales about this man.”

Glenmoor cleared his throat a few times, and then as they continued to stare at Colonel Foxworth, he said, “I brought you here for a purpose, Baker. There is a matter I would discuss with you, seeing as how you are a good friend of Mrs. Pennyworth.”

Elliot was caught off-guard by the man’s abrupt change of subject. “What is that?”

Glenmoor turned to him, a slight frown on his face. “Against my better judgment, Mrs. Glenmoor invited that new vicar for dinner one night last week.” He shook his head. “There is something odd about him. I know he is a man of the cloth, but he strikes me as not the forgiving or loving type of vicar.”

“I must agree with you. The few times I have been in his presence, he appeared judgmental and an opinionated arse. Please excuse me for denigrating a vicar, but he insulted Mrs. Pennyworth the last time I saw him.”

“That is what concerns me. He spent much too much time that night asking questions about her. Wanted to know all about Mr. Pennyworth, how long ago he had died, and what her relationship to you was. Things that I was most uncomfortable speaking about.”

Elliot frowned, his senses going on alert. “Did he indicate to either you or your wife what his interest in her was all about?”

“No. Both my wife and I changed the subject several times, but eventually he was back to asking about Mrs. Pennyworth again. It was quite disturbing. I just thought you should know since I did not want to distress Mrs. Pennyworth with this information.” Glenmoor backed away from the portrait.
and waved his arm. “I think we had better join the others.”

“Yes.” Elliot followed him out of the room and down the corridor. Before they entered the drawing room, Glenmoor stopped once again. “What confuses me about Spencer is why he is even in the church. With his money, he need not earn a living, and he certainly does not seem the type of person anxious to comfort his flock.”

“Money?”

“Yes,” Glenmoor said as they entered the drawing room. “He comes from a very wealthy family. Shipping, I believe. The man is probably worth close to fifty thousand pounds.”

_Fifty thousand pounds? That kind of money could buy quite a few diamond bracelets._
Chapter Fourteen

Charlotte had barely settled into her seat in the carriage when Elliot leaned forward, his forearms braced on his knees. “I received some interesting news from Mr. Glenmoor this evening.”

“Was that when the two of you disappeared after we first arrived?”

“Yes. He invited me to view the portraits of his ancestors in his library. Since he is so proud of his military heritage, I did not find the request to join him as odd. However, as we viewed Colonel Richard Foxworth, who fought under Wellington during the Napoleonic wars, he told me of a visitor he and Mrs. Glenmoor had recently.”

Elliot looked so serious, Charlotte found herself leaning forward, as well, until their knees were practically touching. “Go on.”

“Mrs. Glenmoor extended an invitation to Mr. Spencer to join them for dinner.”

“The vicar?” Mrs. Glenmoor was ever the gracious hostess, and her events were always well-attended, but why on earth would she invite that strange man?

“Yes, the vicar. Mr. Glenmoor said he was not pleased when his wife told him of the invitation. It appears the man is no more popular with Mr. Glenmoor than he is with us. In any event, while the vicar was at their home, he peppered them with questions about you.”

Charlotte drew in a breath and placed her hand on her chest. “About me?” Her heart began to pound. Why in heaven’s name would Mr. Spencer be asking about her? “Do you suppose…”

“That he is our man? The idea had occurred to me, except for the expensive bracelet that was left. No vicar could afford to purchase such a thing.”

“That’s correct. So, I guess we can assume he is not the one?”

“Not necessarily.” Elliot sat back as their vehicle passed a gaslight that lit up the interior of the carriage, highlighting the sharp angles of his face. “Glenmoor knows Spencer’s family. I’m not sure if that was why Mrs. Glenmoor felt the need to invite him to their home. The vicar is not subsisting on a vicar’s living. He is connected to a very wealthy family, who made their money in shipping.”

“Then he could be the man.” She wasn’t sure if she was relieved or more frightened. Mr. Spencer was not someone to take lightly. “Did Mr. Glenmoor say what questions he was asking?”

“He seemed interested in your background. How long you’d been in London, how long you were married to Mr. Pennyworth, and what, exactly was your relationship to me.”

Charlotte glanced out the window, her heart pounding even harder. Mr. Spencer could very well be the person leaving the packages at her front door. Or—even worse, he could be aware of her problem with Lord Barton. If he had wealth in his background, then he would not have been hired by Barton to find her, but if he was aware of the charges against her, he could use that for some sort of blackmail.

She twisted the cord of her reticule around her finger until she realized her poor finger was growing numb.

“Charlotte? What are you thinking? If Spencer is our man, I can get this taken care of right away. A visit to the vicarage, a few well-placed threats of exposure, and it is all over.”

“Yes. That would be a relief.” Why did she not feel relieved? Because it seemed too easy? Because she now feared that Lord Barton was closing in on her?

“Are you all right?” Elliot held out his hand just as the carriage came to a stop. She ignored his offer and moved to the edge of the seat in preparation to leave. The door swung open, and Elliot stepped out and turned to her. Once again he offered his hand, which she accepted. Only the sound of
their shoes crunching on the pathway, then on the cement steps leading to her door, broke the silence. The mist enveloped them, swirling as they walked, to break apart, then settle around them like a shroud, causing her to shiver, and fight for air. Fighting a rising sense of panic, she turned to him and offered him what she hoped was a warm smile. “Thank you again for accompanying me. Perhaps this will all be solved post haste now that you have more information on Mr. Spencer.”

Elliot studied her for a minute, and she quelled the need to fidget under his regard. Finally, he nodded. “Yes, perhaps we are at an end. I will speak with the vicar in the morning and report back to you. Will tomorrow at two suffice?”

“Yes. I expect callers, but if you remain behind, we can discuss your visit then.”

He reached out and touched her cheek with the back of his index finger, running it down to her jaw, where his fingers framed her face. She closed her eyes at the sensation, wishing all her worries away. She leaned into his hand, finding comfort there. Her anxiety eased as his other hand rested on her hip in a possessive maneuver, drawing her closer. “I must admit your reaction to the possibility of finding the culprit and putting an end to his harassment has been less than I would have expected.”

“I am just tired. Weary to my soul. If it indeed turns out to be Mr. Spencer who, for God knows what reason, has some sort of a fixation on me, I will be delighted to have it end.”

Elliot’s thumb slid over her cheek, in a light caress, bringing attention to the tingling in her nipples, and warmth spreading from her lower parts. She opened her eyes to see him staring at her, a need so raw in his eyes that it should have frightened her, but instead turned the warmth into fire.

He nudged her closer so their thighs touched, his iron muscles against her softness. Even though they were shrouded in mist, she was aware that they stood in public on her front steps. Not wishing to call attention to themselves, she drew back. “Good night. Thank you again.” The words were barely a whisper.

The fire in his eyes dimmed just as the door opened, and Thomas’s cheerful face greeted her. “Good evening, Mrs. Pennyworth, Mr. Baker. Sorry I didn’t see you arrive, ma’am.”

“That’s fine, Thomas.” Without turning back, she entered the house, and Thomas closed the door. She trudged up the steps toward her room, wondering why she wasn’t happy about Elliot possibly solving the case. Did she not want to see the difficulty come to an end? Why did she feel discombobulated, almost as if she was about to lose something? Of course, she wanted to lose the fear of opening her front door and finding something frightful there. She entered her bedchamber and walked to the window, gazing out at nothing since the swirling mist shielded the entire city, and its mysteries, in secrecy.

Maybe she was concerned about losing Elliot. If the look in his eyes was what she assumed, perhaps he was concerned about losing her, as well.

Elliot had accepted the ride in Charlotte’s carriage for his return home. He sat, slumped, in the corner of the vehicle, the clip-clop of the horse’s hooves on the cobblestones adding a comfortable rhythm to his thoughts.

He’d learned over the last few weeks that despite keeping up his guard, Charlotte had crept into his life in a way he swore no other woman ever would. When he married, he had expected to take a wife for affection and companionship. For building a family and a life together, leaving his heart securely untouched.

A marriage with Charlotte could never be anything except passion and love.
The next morning, he approached the vicarage with a mixture of relief and sadness. Once he’d spoken to Mr. Spencer, this case could very well come to an end. He knocked at the door and waited several minutes before he knocked again.

“Who is there?” Mr. Spencer came around the back of the house, pulling off work gloves, and sticking them in his back pocket. “Oh, it’s you, Baker. What do you want?”

Certainly not the best way for a man leading his flock to greet a visitor. “I would like a few words with you if you have time.”

Spencer stood, his feet apart, his hands on his hips, a definite defensive stance. “What about?”

So, he was not going to make this easy. “I would prefer to step inside if it is all the same to you.” The devil take it, the man was annoying. Between his wealth, and lack of compassion for his fellow man, his choice of profession was ludicrous.

The vicar shrugged and turned his back, calling over his shoulder, “Go ahead inside. The first door on your left is my drawing room. Once I clean up, I’ll meet you there.”

Apparently, he employed no servants, or at least no one who took care of the vicarage daily. Elliot let himself in and found the room Spencer had designated. It was a typical small-house drawing room, cramped with the requisite knick-knacks, lace doilies, and numerous miniatures taking up space.

He ran his finger over the top of a wooden table. No dust. Although not readily visible, someone took care of the place. The walls were covered with deep-green and cream-colored striped wallpaper. A plush carpet covered the highly polished wooden floor. The tempting aroma of something cooking—possibly beef—wafted from the kitchen. Did Spencer do his own meal preparation, too?

A strange man.

After about ten minutes, Mr. Spencer appeared, smoothing down his damp hair, which indicated that the vicar had indeed cleaned himself up. He’d changed his clothes, also. Gone were the mud-spattered pants and shirt, replaced with dark wool trousers, a pale blue shirt, and dark vest. He pulled a timepiece out of his vest pocket. “I have only a few minutes, then I am expected elsewhere.”

Well, then. He hadn’t even been invited to sit down.

“I won’t take up much of your time.” Elliot waved to a cluster of chairs in the center of the room, arranged in a semi-circle, as if a meeting had taken place, or was about to. “May we sit?”

Spencer nodded and sat stiffly on one of the chairs. “Why are you here?”

Elliot had not spent a great deal of time speaking with men of the cloth, however, he did not think Spencer’s manner was one that would elicit a great deal of comfort on the part of anyone seeking him out for spiritual guidance.

“Since you are in a hurry, I will come right to the point. I have learned that you have been questioning people, seeking information about Mrs. Pennyworth, and I am here to establish exactly why she is of such interest to you.” There was no finesse in his statement, but the vicar had managed to put him in a frame of mind and temperament that did not allow for diplomacy.

For the first time Spencer seemed to relax, as he leaned back in his chair, crossing his arms over his chest. With what could only be called a smirk on his face, he answered, “I am not admitting anything of that nature, but even if I were to satisfy your curiosity, what business is it of yours if I am interested in Mrs. Pennyworth? She is a member of my church, after all.”

The hackles on the back of Elliot’s neck rose. The man was such a prig. Furthermore, why had he relaxed when he told him why he was here? Was he involved in something else that he was anxious to
avoid? That, however, was not his purpose here. “If you wish to obtain information on one of your
congregants, it seems to me the best way to go about that would be to speak with the person himself,
not go behind one’s back to ask questions.”

“And of course, you have a great deal of experience as a vicar?”

His patience completely shredded at the man’s attitude, Elliot stood and loomed over Spencer, his
hands braced on either side of the chair, causing the vicar to lean back to look into his eyes. “Take
this as a warning, Reverend Spencer. Keep your questions to yourself, and discontinue any further
prodding of Mrs. Pennyworth’s friends for information on her.”

Uneasiness settled across his face. “As one of my parishioners, Mrs. Pennyworth—”

— is no longer one of your parishioners. Furthermore, I have a question for you.” Elliot
straightened and tugged on the cuffs of his jacket. “Where did you buy the diamond bracelet?”

The complete look of puzzlement on Spencer’s face told Elliot what he had come to discover.
Spencer was not their man. “What bracelet? What are you talking about?”

Years of dealing with liars, thieves, and numerous other criminals had honed Elliot’s skills in
sniffing out untruths. Unfortunately, as much as he would like the opportunity to thrash the man for
frightening Charlotte, the Reverend Spencer had no idea of which he spoke. A dead end.

“Nothing.” Elliot turned to leave and got as far as the door. “Good day, Mr. Spencer. I do not plan
to see you ever again, and neither will Mrs. Pennyworth.”

“Wait.” The man hopped up and followed Elliot. “I admit I have been asking questions about Mrs.
Pennyworth. If you must know, I find her quite attractive and had hoped there might be a chance…”

Elliot’s eyes narrowed. “You began to ask about her before you even laid eyes on her.”

He shook his head. “No. I saw her at St. Jerome’s when I first arrived in London. I make visits
there once a week to provide spiritual guidance to the children.”

“Guidance, eh?”

“Yes. Children of dubious parentage need saving from the bowels off hell.” He actually looked as
though he believed that twaddle.

Elliot waved his hand. “Continue.”

“I thought perhaps Mrs. Pennyworth might be someone I could court.”

“She’s taken,” Elliot growled.

The vicar backed up, the look on Elliot’s face apparently telling him something. “Yes, right. So it
seems.” He opened the front door. “Have a good day, Mr. Baker.”

Charlotte put aside her embroidery as Bridget escorted Mr. Talbot and Miss Garvey into her drawing
room. She stood and offered Mr. Talbot her hand and was surprised when Miss Garvey drew her into
a hug. She’d never realized how very angular and solid-muscled the woman was.

“Thank you for calling.” Charlotte waved to a settee across from two chairs, with a low table in the
center. “Won’t you have a seat? If you will excuse me for a minute, I will have Cook send in tea.”

After giving instructions to Cook, she returned to the drawing room just as Bridget led General
Norwich, Sir Michael Evans, and Lady Evans into the drawing room, as well. She hadn’t expected
this many people, since her calling day usually saw no more than one or two visitors. But she was
delighted to have guests, if for no other reason than to settle her mind.

Elliot would be arriving sometime soon after his visit with Mr. Spencer, but there would be no
opportunity to speak privately with him until the guests left.

“Mary Anna, how very nice to see you. I hadn’t expected you back from Bath for some time.” The
young woman, married to the much older Sir Michael, had also been a resident of the boarding house Charlotte had lived in when she’d first arrived in London. The two young women had formed a fast friendship.

Mary Anna had been a shop girl who had caught the eye of her totally besotted husband. They had married a few months after Gabriel’s accident and had spent most of that time in Bath at his home there.

“Sir Michael missed Town and wanted to be here for the holidays.” She gazed fondly at the man. “For some strange reason, he prefers the bustle of the city in the winter, when most everyone else is escaping to the country.”

Once again Bridget appeared at the doorway, this time with Elliot. Charlotte’s stomach muscles tightened as she regarded him. Nothing in his demeanor answered any of the questions racing through her mind. It would be quite some time before they could speak in private, so she must push her anxiety away and be the perfect hostess.

Thomas wheeled in the tea cart, and for the next twenty minutes, Charlotte poured tea, offered plates of small sandwiches and sweets, and made polite, hostess-like conversation. She tried to be discreet in glancing at the long clock in the corner, wishing the time to pass quickly so her guests would take their leave.

“Mrs. Pennyworth, may I use the facilities, please?” Miss Garvey stood and smoothed her skirts.

“Of course. I will have Bridget direct you.” Charlotte rang for Bridget, who accompanied Miss Garvey out of the room just as Sir Michael and Mary Anna stood to take their leave. Suddenly, it appeared everyone was departing. There was a flurry of retrieving pelisses, coats, and bonnets, along with hugs and promises of invitations to be issued, as well as plans for walks in the park.

Mr. Talbot stood near the drawing room door, waiting patiently for Miss Garvey to return. “It was a pleasure, as always, to spend time with you, Mrs. Pennyworth.”

“Thank you, Mr. Talbot. I enjoy your company, as well.”

Elliot joined them, and they conversed until Miss Garvey returned. Charlotte walked the couple to the front door and bid them good day, and they were on their way. She breathed a sigh of relief as the door closed, and she returned to the drawing room, where Elliot paced.

“What happened with Mr. Spencer?” No point in prevaricating. She wanted to know and had waited long enough.

Elliot reached out and took her hand, leading her to the settee where they both sat. “Nothing, I’m afraid.”

“Nothing?” She felt as though a lump of coal settled in her stomach. “He is not the one?”

He shook his head and took her hand, lacing their fingers together. “I sincerely doubt it. Oh, he is a loathsome individual, and I am sure he is guilty of many of the sins that he waxes on so eloquently about from the pulpit, but he was genuinely puzzled when I asked him about the diamond bracelet.”

“Could he have been pretending ignorance?”

“That is always a possibility, but my years of experience say no.” He rubbed his thumb over her hand. “I’m sorry, Charlotte. It would have been easy had he given me any reason to suspect him. Aside from being an inadequate vicar, an obnoxious and arrogant man, he is blameless in this instance.”

Charlotte stood, pulling her hand away from his. “I was so hoping…” Now she was back to wondering who among her friends and acquaintances was torturing her.

She turned from the window where she had been gazing at the dying flowers in the garden. “Why was he asking so many questions about me, then?”
Elliot grinned. “It seems the vicar saw you at St. Jerome’s before you even officially met, and had developed a fancy for you.”
Charlotte grimaced. “Oh, no.”
“He won’t be bothering you, or asking any more questions, I assure you.”
“I must admit I am disappointed that the problem has not been solved.”
“I know. I’m sorry.” Elliot rose and came up behind her as she stared out the window, placing his hands on her shoulder. “We will find this person, I swear it.”
“Ma’am.” Bridget entered the room, carrying a box. “A delivery boy just brought this for you.”
She turned and met Elliot’s eyes. He strode out the door. “Where is the delivery boy?”
Bridget followed him out. “I asked him to stay on the front steps, just in case.”
The three of them hurried to the front door, Elliot barreling down the steps, looking in both directions. The cloudy afternoon did little to light up the area as carriages rode up and down the street, and strollers moved about, some carrying packages from the stores on the next block.
He climbed back up the steps and waved the two women into the house. “I have no idea what direction he went, nor if he had a carriage waiting.”
“What about the box, ma’am?” Bridget held it out from her body as if it were poison. It could, of course, have been anything, but since she was not expecting any deliveries, they all knew something perverse was most likely inside.
Charlotte viewed the box. “I don’t want to know. Throw it away.” She backed away and turned to hurry up the stairs to her bedchamber.
“Charlotte!” Elliot’s voice carried with her, but she had no intention of returning.
Chapter Fifteen

Elliot followed Charlotte out of the drawing room and watched as she dashed up the stairs, and made a right turn into her bedchamber. With a thud that rattled the house, she slammed the door.

“Mr. Baker, what should I do with the box?” Her face pale and eyes wide, Bridget held the container away from her body as if it would bite her.

Perhaps it would.

Although he was sure there was something unpleasant in the box, he preferred to talk Charlotte into viewing the contents with him when he opened it. “Place it on the low table in the front of the sofa in the drawing room, then you may return to your duties.”

She gave a slight curtsy and with obvious relief, returned the box to the room.

Elliot studied the steps for a minute, then decided propriety be damned, Charlotte needed him. He took the stairs two at a time and tapped on her bedchamber door. “Charlotte, open the door.”

Expecting to be ignored, he was surprised when the door opened only a few inches. “You can’t come in here. It is not proper.”

“Then come back downstairs so we can discuss this.”

She shook her head and backed up, giving him the opportunity to join her. He closed the door gently since Charlotte looked fragile enough to shatter into pieces. Her knuckles were white, and the rapid rise and fall of her chest worried him that she would soon pass out.

He held out his hand, giving her space, allowing her to make the decision to accept his comfort. “Come here.”

Thankfully, she closed the few paces between them. He opened his arms, and she settled against him. She began to pant, and fidget, finally pushing him away. “I can’t get enough air. I can’t breathe.”

“You are getting plenty of air. In fact, too much. Come.” With his arm around her shoulders, he led her to a blue and white striped settee in her sitting room. Anything to get her away from the sight of her bed, and lowered them both to the seat. “Stop breathing so hard.” He rubbed her back, but she continued to gasp. “Take slow breaths in through your nose and release them out your mouth.” He kept up the slow circles on her back. “Relax.”

After a minute or so when things did not seem to be getting any better, he said, “Stand up.”

“Why?” She barely got the word out.

“Just do as I say.” He pulled her to her feet, then turned her and began opening the back of her dress.

“What are you doing?” Again, the words barely made it out of her mouth.

“Don’t speak. Just try to relax.” Once enough buttons had been undone, he quickly undid the cord of her corset, pulling the sides of the garment apart. She immediately relaxed, taking in a deep breath.

“Why women punish themselves with these things is beyond my comprehension.” He turned her to face him and pulled her into his arms, his hand still stroking the warm flesh of her back as she slowly grew limp against him, and her breathing eased.

Elliot helped her back to the settee. He sat next to her, drawing her back to his chest. He leaned his chin on her head, the scent of wildflowers, honey, and Charlotte drifting from her hair. She was soft against him, and with his arm around her waist, he was sorely tempted to move his hand up to caress her breast.

Not now. He would not take advantage of her anxiety, although a good romp between the sheets
would definitely release some stress, and take her mind off the package downstairs.

“We must look in the box, and not just to see what he is up to now. There could very well be a clue.”

She turned, the misery in her green eyes tearing at him. “I shall post someone at the door all hours of the night and day to catch whoever is leaving these packages.”

“I had a man watching your house for weeks, but somehow he never saw anyone approach the front door. I am thinking whoever is doing this has hired another to watch the house and when no one is about, a box gets left. Although, this time, Bridget said a delivery boy walked right up the steps and knocked on the door.

“Another reason to open the box is this might not be from our suspect. Remember you had those flowers from an admirer that we never identified—although given what I just learned about the vicar, it could very well have been him.” A true would-be beau complicated the entire mess.

“Lord help me. Why can’t I be left alone? I don’t want admirers. I don’t want diamond bracelets, or flowers.”

To his horror, she covered her face with her hands and dropped her head into her lap and sobbed as though her heart would break. He did what most men did in such circumstances. He mumbled stupid platitudes and stroked her arm. Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out a clean, white handkerchief. He handed it to her, and she took it with a mumbled, “Thank you.”

After a few minutes, her sobs turned to slight hiccups. She took a deep breath and stood to adjust her gown. Raising her chin, she looked him in the eye. “Please fasten my gown, and then we shall see what’s in the blasted box.”

He grinned at her change in demeanor. Charlotte, his fearless, independent woman was back. Perhaps she needed that cry to release some of the tension in her life recently. Women apparently handled such things in that way, while a man would go to one of the boxing clubs and pound away at something hard.

Obviously, women were smarter than men, since the only result of their tears was a blotchy face that faded in a few hours, where a man could carry bruises for a week. They made their way back downstairs to the drawing room. The box sat exactly where Bridget had left it. He laughed at himself, wondering if he’d expected the container to have special powers, and leap from the table, or disappear in a puff of smoke.

Charlotte took a deep breath. “Well, let’s have at it.” She knelt on the floor, next to the low table, gesturing for him to join her. “I don’t want to pick it up, so I’ll just undo the string and wrapping paper.” Once she’d decided to open the thing, her fingers worked quickly, as if she were afraid she would change her mind and run back upstairs.

She drew away the paper, lifted the lid, fell back on her rump, and screamed, scrambling away from the table.

Two large brown spiders, the size of a man’s palm, rested in the bottom of the box. Their dark bodies were marked with creamy stripes. They began to move once the lid was removed.

Charlotte jumped to her feet and backed up, her hand covering her mouth as she stared at the box.

“What is that?”

Elliot grabbed the box and stood. “I am not a spider expert, but they resemble a picture I saw once of a fen raft spider.” He quickly left the room.

Once the weakness passed, her last meal began to rise from the back of her throat. Not being
anywhere near a chamber pot, she swallowed profusely, attempting to get her stomach under control.

“I asked Bridget to have a tisane made up for you,” Elliot said as he entered the room. “I think it is best if you lie down for a while. I will remain here so we can speak once you have recovered.”

She rubbed her eyes with the heel of her hands, trying desperately to rid herself of the sight of the nasty creatures crawling around in the box. “Spiders! I hate spiders. Whatever is wrong with this man? Why spiders? Were they poisonous?”

“I don’t believe so.”

She shuddered as she dropped into a comfortable chair. Once settled, Elliot tucked a lap robe over her just as Bridget entered, still white-faced herself, and handed Charlotte a glass of liquid.

“Drink, Charlotte,” Elliot said.

Like a toddler with her nurse, Charlotte took the glass from Bridget’s hand and gulped the liquid down, hoping the tisane would help her disappear for a while. Perhaps for months. At least until the nightmare her life had become ended.

Fleeting, she thought again of moving from her house, or possibly London, altogether. But she would not do that. Whoever this horrible person was, she would not allow him to drive her from her home. “Perhaps I should get a pistol.”

Elliot had the nerve to grin. “I don’t think that is a good idea.”

“Why not? I could obtain a derringer and keep it by my side for protection.”

“Against spiders? Would you shoot the entire box of them? Or perhaps the dead animals left here?” He leaned forward, a frown on his face. “The biggest danger from an unskilled person owning a gun is shooting oneself, or a servant. A person must be well-trained in firearms to have a gun.”

“I know of several ladies who carry guns in their reticules.”

Elliot groaned and shook his head. “Please do not even think of doing such a thing. It is too bad the government has not taken steps to ascertain that those individuals who are purchasing pistols have the proper set of mind, and the ability to own such a dangerous weapon.”

Charlotte’s eyes grew heavy as he continued to speak on the ills of uninformed and untrained owners of guns. The tisane was working. As if from a distance, she heard Elliot’s voice, now close to her ear. “I will carry you upstairs and tuck you in. We will discuss the ridiculous idea of you running about London with the pistol in your reticule, ready to shoot yourself in the foot, another time.”

She nodded and was soon lifted, carried, and tucked in as promised. It was the last thing she remembered until she awoke the next morning.

Three days after the spider debacle, Elliot held out Miss Garvey’s chair as she sat at the dining table. She was to be his partner at the dinner party hosted by Mrs. Alice Banberry, a friend of Charlotte who he had met at a few social events. Charlotte took her seat several guests down, on the same side of the table, which made it near impossible for them to communicate. It also impeded his opportunity to study the men who spoke with her. But, nevertheless, it gave him the opportunity to possibly gain more information about Mr. Talbot, since the man and Miss Garvey seemed quite fond of each other.

Tonight, the woman was dressed in a gray gown, with no adornments, almost to the point of plainness. The sleeves came almost to her fingers, and the neckline hugged her chin. Elliot did not pretend to be a master of fashion, but it was obvious to him that Miss Garvey’s outfit, while exceedingly unflattering to her, was still well-made, and of an expensive fabric.

Her silver-streaked black hair had been pulled into a bun so severe it made his own head hurt. “How are you this evening, Miss Garvey?”
"I am well, thank you." She gave her attention to her soup.
So much for pleasant social chatter with his dinner partner.
Mrs. Tilton, on his other side, drew his attention with lively repartee about her three grandsons
who, apparently, kept her daughter either brimming with love and laughter, or in the bowels of
parental hell.
Mr. Nelson, on Mrs. Tilton’s other side asked her a question, and Elliot used that opportunity to
address Miss Garvey once more. "I see Mr. Talbot is not with us this evening. He is not ill, I hope."
"No." She took care to cut her well-cooked lamb into small pieces and chewed each piece long
enough to keep her stomach from having to do any work in digestion. "He will be joining us later for
the musicale. He had matters to see to that needed his attention."
He leaned to one side to allow the footman to refill his wine glass. "I understand Mr. Talbot was
friends with Mr. Pennyworth before his unfortunate death. Were you acquainted then?"
"No." She placed her hand over her wine glass when the footman attempted to refill it, then
continued to masticate her lamb.
Well, hell and damn, he was not going to allow her to ignore him this way. Now it had become a
contest of wills. He would get information from her if he had to shake it out of her. "How long have
you been in London, Miss Garvey?"
She turned her unusual silver eyes on him for the first time since they’d been seated. "Six months."
Fortunately, Mrs. Tilton once again regaled him with stories of the three young boys who sounded
like the devil’s spawns. But, as a true grandmother, interspersed with her tales of woe, were constant
references to the “little angels.”
Sounded more like “little devils” to him.
The fruit and cheese had been enjoyed by the guests when Mrs. Banberry stood. "If you will all join
me in the drawing room, the musical part of our evening’s entertainment will begin.
Unable to let Miss Garvey go without at least one more attempt to garner information, Elliot leaned
toward her before standing to pull out her chair. "Tell me, Miss Garvey, is Mr. Talbot fond of
spiders?"
If he surprised her, she did not show it, but merely turned her head slowly to look at him with
narrowed eyes. "I have no idea. Perhaps you should ask him."
Not only was the woman unlikeable, it was obvious she disliked him.
Mr. Tilton approached Elliot as he made his way over to Charlotte to escort her inside. "I say, I
heard you ask Miss Garvey about spiders."
"Yes."
"Talbot does have a collection of spiders. Took me to his house one time to show them to me. I’m
not a squeamish sort of person—leave that to the ladies—but spiders are a ghastly thing to be
interested in, if you ask me."
"Yes, I agree. Quite nasty. Thank you for that information."
"Appalling looking things, but he was right proud of them." The man shook his head and walked off
as Charlotte approached. Based on the flub with the vicar’s involvement, he didn’t want to get
Charlotte’s hopes up again. Also, based on the friendship Mr. Pennyworth had shared with Talbot,
and Charlotte’s reluctance to think ill of the man, Elliot decided to keep the information gleaned from
Tilton to himself. But he would certainly keep a closer eye on Mr. Talbot.
The musicale had been quite enjoyable, and Charlotte and Elliot had a lively discussion about the
evening as the coach bore them back to her house. He pondered whether moving into her house might
make sense. Since her predator had taken to leaving potentially dangerous things, she could certainly use the protection. Besides that, he had a better chance of catching the culprit, if he were there when the packages arrived.

On the other hand, he would be merely feet from her bedchamber—and her bed. Things had progressed to the point where he thought about Charlotte and having her in his bed more each day.

He’d had a sufficient number of lovers in his day, but never one who’d captured his attention the way Charlotte had—not even Annabelle. And he hadn’t even gotten close to taking her to bed. Despite her pretty face and generosity curved body, she had courage not seen in a great deal of women. Most females he knew would have collapsed and taken to their beds for weeks under the stress she had experienced.

He admired her, and that was a scary thought.

He dismissed the carriage once they alighted, as the walk home would give him time to think about all that had happened so far in this case. He took Charlotte’s arm, and they moved up the steps. The sky had cleared from the earlier rain, and amazingly enough, no mist surrounded them, which allowed the area to be fairly well-lit from the half-moon.

Thomas had the door open before they reached the doorstep, a smile of greeting on his lips. Charlotte stepped inside, and Elliot wished her a good night. He turned to leave and then swung back to ask about their next event when he heard a pop, and something slammed into his arm.

He wavered for a minute, then his knees buckled, and he grabbed the doorjamb to hold himself up. “What the devil was that?” He turned to Charlotte. Her eyes were like saucers. “Oh my God. You’ve been shot.”
Chapter Sixteen

Charlotte fell to her knees alongside Elliot, whose face dripped sweat. He shook his head, as if he were about to pass out.

“Thomas, help me get him upstairs to one of the bedchambers, and send for the doctor.”

Elliot grunted as Thomas lifted him, then they proceeded slowly up the stairs. Charlotte hurried ahead of them, calling for Bridget.

The girl appeared from Charlotte’s bedchamber, carrying a dressing gown over her arm. “Yes, ma’am?”

“Find Beatrice as quickly as you can, and prepare the bedchamber across the hall from mine. Mr. Baker has been shot and will need care.”

Bridget blanched, and her hand flew to her throat. “Oh, my.” She peeked around Charlotte as the two men made it to the top of the stairs.

“Bridget, quickly, please.”

Galvanized by her words, Bridget did a quick bob, then raced down the stairs, giving Elliot a quick glance. “Oh, my.”

“Put him on my bed for now. I will help him out of his jacket.”

Elliot groaned as Thomas laid him on the bed. “Assist me with his boots, and then have Bones send for the doctor.” Charlotte tugged on one boot, and Thomas took the other. Once they were both off, Thomas left the room.

“Elliot, you need to sit up so I can remove your jacket.” He was still quite pale, beads of perspiration on his face. He grimaced as he sat up. Charlotte tried to gently remove the jacket, where fortunately, the blood had not dried enough to keep her from having to tug the material over the wound.

Once the jacket had been removed, she got a better look at the injury. The bullet had entered the fleshy part of his upper arm and had not exited, so it would require digging around in the bullet hole. As she was helping him off with his shirt, Thomas entered the room. “Please have one of the girls fetch a bowl of warm water and some clean cloths.”

The footman made an abrupt turn and went back out the door, almost colliding with Bridget rushing past him. “Beatrice is almost finished with changing the bed linens. Can I do something for you?”

“Yes, I asked Thomas to have one of you bring me some warm water and cloths. Mr. Baker’s shirt is stuck to the wound, and I will need to wet it to get his shirt off.” Bridget hurried off as Beatrice came into the room. “The bed is ready, Mrs. Pennyworth.”

“Thank you, Beatrice.” She looked down at Elliot and grimaced at his pale face. “We should probably move you now before the doctor comes. I’m afraid the bullet is still in your arm, and he will have to remove it. Once he does that, I’m sure he’ll give you something for the pain, so you are better off in the bed you will stay in.”

Despite his obvious pain, he grinned. “You mean I can’t stay in your bed? How I hate passing up this opportunity.”

She felt the heat rise to her cheeks at his words. “Certainly not.” She sniffed and tried, unsuccessfully, to put aside the thoughts of Elliot in her bed—her lying right beside him. Based on his slight chuckle, he must have guessed her thoughts.

To cover her unease, she said, “Can you stand?”
“Yes. I was shot in the arm. There is nothing wrong with my legs.” He blanched as he sat up, then swung his legs over the side of the bed. He stopped for a minute and took a deep breath, some color returning to his face.

Charlotte moved to his uninjured side and tucked her arm under his. He started to rise, then landed back on the bed. She wrapped her arm around his body, avoiding his injury. “Let’s try again.”

Slowly, he stood, and they made their way across the room and through the door. Bridget reached the top of the stairs as they left Charlotte’s bedroom. “Bridget, put the water and cloths on the table next to the bed.”

The next twenty minutes were taken up with assisting Elliot to the bed, then patting his wound to release the blood-encrusted bullet hole from his shirt. Once that was done, she helped him off with his waistcoat, necktie, and shirt.

“Did anyone go after the gunman?” Elliot’s words were clipped, telling her he was in quite a bit of pain after all the maneuvering they’d done.

“No. I never even thought of that. I was concentrating on getting us both inside.”

A slight knock on the partially opened door drew their attention. Carrying his satchel, Dr. Sanford, followed by Thomas, entered the room.

The doctor had attended Charlotte since her arrival in London. He was also the man who had advised her of Gabriel’s death. They’d summoned him directly to the spot where the accident had taken place. The doctor had made his determination and then traveled to Charlotte’s home to give her the sad news.

He’d also looked after her in the subsequent weeks when she’d been so despondent about losing her husband so soon after their marriage.

A tall, slender man, Dr. Sanford possessed a soulful face and radiated compassion and caring. He kept up with all the newest treatments for various illnesses and the latest discoveries in medicine.

“What have we here?” His low, melodious voice carried into the room.

“Good evening, Dr. Sanford. This is Mr. Baker, who escorted me to a dinner party this evening. When we arrived home, someone shot him.”

The doctor’s eyebrows rose. “Indeed? How very strange. Were you able to apprehend the culprit?”

“No. I’m afraid it all happened so quickly, and I was more concerned with getting Mr. Baker inside to tend to his injury. We never thought of that.”

“You will want to be sure to notify the Watch.” The doctor shook his head as he opened his medicine bag. “Bad business. London’s becoming a very unsafe place.”

After the beating Elliot had taken, and now this shooting, the doctor had no idea how unsafe her own little world had become.

Elliot winced as he rolled onto his side at the request of the doctor. The gunshot wound hurt like the devil. It was total stupidity on his part. He should have been much more careful after the footpad had attacked him.

He still hadn’t concluded what game the culprit was playing. Thoughts that had plagued him since the beginning of the investigation went round and round in his mind. Why was he leaving these things on the porch? To merely frighten Charlotte? Did these things have some sort of meaning for the man leaving them? Why Charlotte? Had their culprit made overtures to Charlotte that she had rebuked?

If only he could get her to tell him what it was she was hiding. Once they’d dealt with this bullet, he would have a serious talk with her. Even if she wasn’t hiding anything—which he doubted—there
was a reason she was being targeted, and until they got to the bottom of that, catching her tormentor was almost impossible.

He’d been a private investigator and police officer long enough to know that behind every criminal and every crime there was motivation. Money, greed, power, revenge, jealousy—those were the things that drove someone to put themselves on the wrong side of the law.

While leaving dead animals and live spiders on a woman’s doorstep did not constitute breaking the law, having him beaten—and shot at—certainly did, as did the near-poisoning of the children at St. Jerome’s.

“Let’s see if we can get this bullet out of you, Mr. Baker.” The doctor pulled long tweezers from his bag and looked up at Charlotte, hovering over the bed. “I have laudanum with me for his pain after I leave, but we need something now that will work quickly so I can get this nasty business over with. Do you, by chance, have spirits in the house?"

“Yes, I do. Will brandy work?”

“Yes. That is perfect.”

Charlotte turned to Bridget. “Fetch the bottle of brandy from the library.” The girl scurried off as the doctor took more implements out of his bag.

“You have done an excellent job of cleaning the wound, Mrs. Pennyworth, but I need to swath it with alcohol to disinfect it.” He looked at her puzzled expression, and continued. “That means to clean it further, so I will give Mr. Baker some of the brandy to drink, and then use alcohol from my medical bag to clean the wound.” He unrolled a white cloth and laid it alongside him on the bed. Then he placed various instruments on the cloth. “Ma’am, may I count on your assistance, or shall we call back the footman?”

Charlotte paled, but she swallowed and raised her chin. “Certainly not, Dr. Sanford. I will assist you in whatever you need me to do.”

He nodded. “Good. I don’t need any females swooning when I get to the tough part.”

Bridget returned with the brandy. Charlotte took the items from her and pouring a healthy measure into a glass, held it out to Elliot. He tried to sit up, then groaned and fell back when the pain in his arm shot right to his stomach, threatening to bring up his dinner.

“Wait.” Charlotte moved alongside the bed, near his good shoulder, then sat. With a minimal amount of pain, he raised himself up on his elbow as she moved the drink to his lips. Having been through a bullet wound before, he knew what to expect once the procedure was underway, so he gulped the contents of the glass.

Dr. Sanford accepted the cloth from Bridget. He took one look at her, and smiled. “Young lady, I think you would serve your mistress better if you went to the kitchen and prepared some tea.”

Relief flooded Bridget’s face, and she scurried away. The doctor poured some of the alcohol on a clean cloth, then patted it on the open wound. Elliot bit down, his teeth grinding enough that he feared his jaw would snap. “More brandy,” he gasped to Charlotte.

She poured another healthy dose in the glass, and he gulped that down. He laid his head down on the pillow and closed his eyes, using a form of meditation he’d learned from a Chinese man who’d lived in the same boarding house with him years ago. That, combined with the brandy he’d drunk, would help him get through the procedure.

“Mrs. Pennyworth, would you please pour a bit of liquid from the bottle of alcohol into that glass?” She held it out to him, and he dipped his pinchers into the clear liquid. “Are we ready?”

Elliot nodded and tightened his fists. He took a deep breath as the doctor began his probe. Charlotte’s cool hand took one of his, and she squeezed as he let out a low moan.
“This won’t be too hard, young man. Just lie as still as you can, and we’ll have this nasty fellow out in a flash. Luckily, it didn’t go too far into your muscle.” He probed some more, and Elliot squeezed Charlotte’s hand so hard he was afraid he’d break one of her delicate fingers.

The only sound in the room, besides his labored breathing, was the clicking of a small pink and white china clock on the dresser directly across from the bed. He focused on that, using his meditation skills once more, to bring his thoughts and consciousness somewhere pleasant.

“Mrs. Pennyworth, hand me that tin plate.” The doctor nodded at the small dish he’d placed alongside his instruments.

Elliot had no intention of releasing her hand, so Charlotte swiveled, and picked up the plate with her other hand, holding it out to the doctor. There was a sucking sound and then a slight ping as the bullet changed homes from his arm to the dish.

Charlotte rapidly swallowed the bile that rose to the back of her throat as the bullet was extracted from Elliot’s arm. Blood began to ooze from the wound as the doctor grinned at her. “It came right out. Now we just have to clean him up and do a bit of stitching.”

Oh Lord. Stitching? Surely, she would faint watching a needle go into Elliot’s skin. She looked at him, and he gave her a smile that told her the brandy had begun to do its work. That was no surprise, since with the two glasses he’d downed, half the bottle of brandy was gone. Hopefully, while he was in his cups, he wouldn’t say anything embarrassing in front of the doctor. The look he was giving her was not encouraging in that regard.

“Madam, hold this pad on his wound to stem the flow of blood while I prepare the needle and thread.” The doctor handed her a wadded-up cloth that she placed against the gaping hole in his arm. He didn’t even wince. Instead he looked up at her and winked.

Winked!

Maybe she should call Bridget back in and have her tend to the stitching. Then, she remembered her face when she’d been faced with watching the removal of the bullet.

“If you will, ma’am, pour a bit more alcohol on this clean pad, and pat the wound with it. Then I will be ready to sew.” The doctor pulled the thread through a large needle and deftly tied the end. She had the urge to cover her eyes with her hand when he began to stitch but managed to watch and not toss up her accounts. She stepped back once the job was finished and wiped the sweat from her forehead with the sleeve of her gown.

The doctor leaned over and examined his work. “That should hold you, young man.”

While he gathered up his implements, he shot off instructions. “I am leaving laudanum with you, but don’t give him any until the brandy has worn off. Also, don’t use it for longer than a day or two. I have learned this can become addictive.” One by one, he added items to his bag, making a small pile on the floor of the bloody cloths. “Mr. Baker should rest in bed for a few days. The blood loss has weakened him, so he should not fight you on that, at least.”

He snapped the bag shut and turned to her. “Infection is my biggest concern. I picked out a few pieces of fabric from the wound, and I think we cleaned it up nicely, but if he should run a fever, keep giving him water, and have one of your male servants wipe him down with a cool, wet cloth.”

They both looked down at Elliot at the same time. He was fast asleep. “Good for him. Sleep is the best curative. Our body heals itself if we just get out of its way.” Charlotte followed him as he strode from the room, shouting more instructions over his shoulder. “See that he gets strong beef broth several times a day. It will help build up his blood.”
Down the stairs, and then shrugging into his jacket, the doctor continued, “There are fool doctors who will tell you to keep the room closed up, no open windows. I say fresh air is the best thing for a sick room. Not that the air in London is very fresh, but you know what I mean.” He started to step out the door when he turned back. “I’m sorry, Mrs. Pennyworth, I never asked what your relationship to Mr. Baker was, and if it is all right for him to recover here.”

She saw no condemnation in his eyes, but she didn’t want to cause any talk, either. “Mr. Baker and I are friends. We attend social events together. Since I have the room and staff to help, including a footman, it is no trouble to have him recuperate here.”

“Good, good. Glad to hear it. No foolish nonsense about female sensibilities.” He pulled up the collar of his coat against the night air. “Be sure to call me if he has a fever that doesn’t go away in a couple of days. Also, I will remind you once again to be careful with the laudanum.” With a brisk nod, he climbed into her carriage, and Bones drove him off into the night, the vehicle disappearing into the mist.

Charlotte slowly closed the door and thought about all that had happened. She shivered and ran her hands up and down her arms. There was absolutely no doubt in her mind that Elliot’s beating, this evening’s shooting, and the strange, distasteful packages on her doorstep were all connected. Had it reached a point where she should again attempt to involve Scotland Yard? The last she’d heard, it was against the law to shoot at people on their doorsteps.

With weariness all the way to her bones, she climbed the stairs as Beatrice came down, the bundle of bloody cloths in her hands. “I’ll soak these, ma’am, and wash them in the morning.”

“Yes. Thank you, Beatrice. And then see that you and Bridget find your beds. It’s been quite an evening, and I’m sure we all need our rest.”

“Yes, ma’am. Good night.”

Charlotte thought about asking for tea, but assuming her servants were just as weary as she was, it did not seem fair. For a few seconds, she hesitated, thinking about fixing tea for herself. Instead, she climbed the stairs and entered the bedroom where Elliot was ensconced. He remained asleep, which was a good thing. He was sure to have some pain once he woke up.

She pulled the quilt up over his bare chest, with only the bandage covering his arm. She would have to have Thomas see to undressing him in the morning, and providing something more comfortable to wear. She covered her mouth to stifle a yawn and eyed the brandy bottle.

With a shrug, she crossed the room, poured some into the glass they’d used for Elliot, and took a deep swallow.

She coughed and wheezed all the way to her room, tears running down her cheeks.
Chapter Seventeen

Elliot awakened feeling strange, out of sorts. Then he attempted to roll onto his side. “Ouch!” What the devil was wrong with his arm?

“Ah, you’re awake.” The warm sound of Charlotte’s voice greeted him. Why was she in his bedroom? His eyes flew open, wondering if she was lying alongside him.

No such luck. He was in a room he didn’t recognize, and Charlotte leaned over him. Fully dressed. *Damn.*

Then it all came back to him. He’d been shot. Right in front of Charlotte’s townhouse door. Something about it tickled his memory, a fact he should concentrate on. “Yes, I am awake.” His voice was raspy, and he realized he was very thirsty. “May I have some water?”

“Yes, of course.” She moved away from the bed, retrieved a pitcher from the top of a dresser, and poured water into the glass sitting alongside it. “Here.”

He shifted to take the glass from her, and a sharp pain shot through him. He sucked in air through his teeth. Gingerly, he eased himself into a sitting position, with Charlotte helping with one hand as she held the water in the other. The water was cool and delicious. “I feel as though I had more brandy than I normally consume.”

“You did down two full-size glasses before Dr. Sanford worked his magic on you.”

“Ah, yes. I remember. No doubt it wasn’t the amount I consumed, since I’ve been known to imbibe more than that, but the speed in which I consumed it.”

Charlotte took the glass from him and set it on a table alongside the bed. She pulled over a chair and settled in, studying him carefully. “I know you’re in pain, but otherwise, how do you feel?” She reached out and felt his forehead with the back of her fingers. The coolness of her brush made him realize he felt quite warm.

“I think you might have the beginnings of a fever.” She frowned and used both of her hands to cup his cheeks. “Yes, you are definitely warm to the touch.”

“Ah, that might not be a fever, merely your touch. Are you trying to raise my temperature?” How would he not be overwarm lying in bed and her so near? And so dressed.

“I’m happy to see your injury has not dimmed your sense of humor.” Her brows rose, and she attempted to fight a smile.

“But perhaps I am not joking. Any man would be likewise affected with a beautiful woman sitting alongside him.” He grinned. “While lying in bed.”

“I can only assume the fever you seem to be suffering from has muddled your brain.” Choosing to ignore his flirtation, she continued, “Dr. Sanford had hoped a thorough cleaning of the bullet wound would prevent an infection, but it is almost impossible to avoid that with your type of injury.”

He suddenly became aware of a bodily need that he didn’t wish to discuss with his client. “Um, is Thomas around?”

“Yes, I believe so.” She tilted her head and looked at him questioningly, and then, apparently having understood his unasked request, flushed a bright red. “Oh, yes, of course. I will send him up.” She excused herself and scurried from the room, leaving him with pain, and unpleasant thoughts.

What he was trying to remember before came at him full force, much like a punch to the gut, taking his breath from him. He had turned back to say something to Charlotte when the bullet had hit him. In his arm. Which meant if he hadn’t done that, most likely it would have gone right through his heart.
Whoever shot him had intended for him to die.
A chilling thought.

Being here, under Charlotte’s roof was a blessing in disguise. He’d wanted to move into her home to be closer to where the problem was. It was a delicate issue, since, although a widow, she was still a single woman who held a prominent place in her community. Nasty talk would have surely commenced. Now he would remain, with word put about that he had been injured, and as a bachelor, was recovering in her home, with the help, and under the watchful eyes, of her staff.

Time and frustration had proved there was little to no chance of uncovering the culprit with what they’d been doing thus far. While he had certainly enjoyed the various events they’d attended together, as well as Charlotte’s company, he seemed no closer to discovering her torturer than when he’d started. He remained convinced her pursuer was among her circle of friends. However, only the vicar—who he had eliminated—Baron Von Braun, and Mr. Talbot had risen to the forefront as possibilities.

Which led him to believe either he was way off-course, or neither of the men had made a move that would clearly point a finger in his direction.

“Mr. Baker, Mrs. Pennyworth said you were in need of my assistance.” Thomas entered the room, friendly and helpful. She was certainly fortunate in her selection of help.

“Yes, if you will assist me, I would like to make use of the chamber pot. I believe I will have no problem walking, but I’m not sure where it is in this room, and since I’ve been weakened by a loss of blood, I prefer to not look for it myself and end up on the floor.”

“The house has indoor facilities, sir, but since it is located at the other end of the corridor, perhaps it would be better to make use of the chamber pot until you recover from your weakened state.”

Elliot nodded, eased off the bed, and stood, grabbing Thomas’s arm as he swayed, dizziness assailing him. He took a deep breath and smiled in the young man’s direction. “Yes, I agree. I do feel a bit drained, but I think I am all right now. Lead on.”

After taking care of his business, he had Thomas send for water and shaving equipment, which the young man assured him was quite available, since Mr. Pennyworth’s things were still packed away in a box and easily accessible.

A wash, a shave, and a clean nightshirt—apparently Mr. Pennyworth had been almost the same size as him—left him feeling immensely better. But there was no doubt he was beginning to suffer a fever. Once Thomas left the room, Elliot made his way back to the bed, chills racking his body.

“Are you up to some breakfast?” Charlotte entered the room, bringing radiant sunshine with her. What would it be like to have her happy countenance in his life every morning? He shook off the troubling thought, but somewhere deep inside he had begun to think seriously of a future with her. Or perhaps it was merely the encroaching fever scrambling his thoughts.

“Dr. Sanford recommended beef broth to strengthen you. Cook has some ready if you feel well enough.”

“Yes. I believe I do.” He closed his eyes as Charlotte left the room, and the walls began to spin.

He must have fallen asleep because when he awoke, he was covered in several blankets but continued to shake and shiver. A bowl of brown liquid sat on the table alongside him, and Charlotte rested in a chair near him, reading a book.

“How long have I been asleep?” Once again, his voice sounded raspy and dry.

She looked up and closed the book, giving him a warm smile. “About two hours. I brought the broth, but it’s cold by now. Should I send for some hot broth?”

“Please do, if you don’t mind. I’m terribly cold.” Cold didn’t begin to cover it. It was as if
someone had dumped him into a freezing lake.

Charlotte laid her book aside and stood. “I will get Thomas to stoke the fire.” She leaned over him and rested her palm on his forehead. “You are growing warmer.” She lowered the blanket to his waist.

When the devil had his clothes been removed? Ladies were not supposed to be in a bedroom with a man to begin with, let alone with one half-dressed. Even with a fever and a painful injury, he still had a hard time controlling the urge to pull her down on top of him and feel the weight of her curves against his body.

As if she read where his thoughts had wandered, she flushed. “Thomas and I removed your nightshirt while you slept, so we could check your injury. We decided it was best to leave it off, since I will have to change the bandage, as well. Can you roll to your side?”

Slowly, he turned until his wounded arm faced her. “There is a bit of bleeding through the bandage, so it’ll have to be changed. But first I will get you some warm broth.” She pulled the blankets back up, tucking them in gently, then scooped up the bowl of broth to return it to the kitchen.

After studying her swaying backside as she made her way to the door, he closed his eyes and tried to push that wayward image from his mind. However, waking up twice to her face first thing had begun to strengthen the ideas he’d had regarding Charlotte as his wife.

To move his mind in a different direction, he forced himself to consider the investigation, and lack of progress. He deliberated on his injury that should have resulted in his death. He went over everything he had learned from the beginning, frustrated with facts that did not come together, like a puzzle with critical pieces missing.

“Here is some nice hot broth.” The woman he was trying to block from his mind returned to the room, once more challenging him to deny what he tried so desperately to ignore.

Like a smack over his head, he realized, despite his mistrustful heart, he was falling in love with Mrs. Pennyworth.

Charlotte set the bowl of broth on the table and placed a basket of cloths and a jar of healing cream on the floor. She glanced at Elliot and was pleased with what she saw. His eyes were glassy, but the shivering had stopped.

Carefully, she removed the bandage Dr. Sanford had wrapped his arm in the day before. The wound looked clean, so an infection was not worrisome. “It doesn’t look bad, clean, even.” She poked at the stitches gently with her finger. Elliot winced.

No puss, only a slight amount of clean-flowing blood. “I’m sorry. I just wanted to make sure there wasn’t an infection festering underneath.”

She glanced at him, and her heart shuddered. This was very dangerous territory. Elliot lay in bed, staring up at her, with half-lidded eyes. Nothing covered his upper body, leaving her to appreciate his golden skin, muscular chest, and dark curly hair tapering down, then disappearing under the sheet. She sat alongside him, her hip touching his waist, the warmth from his fevered body raising her temperature, as well. Were fevers contagious?

“I am going to dab healing cream on your stitches, then cover it with a clean bandage. I’m thinking after you’ve had the broth, a little bit of laudanum might help you sleep.”

With his good arm, he raised his hand to slide his fingers in a lazy stroke down her cheek. “If you lie down beside me, that would help me sleep even better.” His voice was deep with passion, confirming he was not joking. When had their relationship changed from employer and employee to
potential lovers?  

Lovers?  

Almost since she’d first met Elliot, she’d been forced to confront the attraction between them. The few kisses they’d shared had only added to the passion that sizzled like a living thing when they were together. She could engage in an affair, providing the proper protections were taken. She did not want a husband, but less than that, she did not want a bastard child.

A child. Now that would be the only reason she would consider marrying again. She had hoped to be a mother by now, but that was not meant to be. She’d been numb for most of her mourning period, pushing thoughts of motherhood firmly from her mind.

But now she wondered if she was prepared to give up the idea of motherhood completely. Perhaps it would be possible to marry again, but hold her heart close. Something told her that would not be possible with Elliot. He had already appropriated a small part of her heart, and an ever-increasing part of her existence.

She finished wrapping his arm. “Let me help you sit up, so you can drink the broth.”

With some shifting and maneuvering, and Charlotte trying her best not to touch his warm, sinewy, tempting flesh, they managed to get Elliot leaning up against the headboard, with a pillow behind his head.

“No.” He stopped her from spooning the liquid into his mouth. “I am a man grown, and in possession of at least one good arm to feed myself.”

“Very well.” She took her seat and picked up her book, but watched every bit of food that entered his mouth. How could a man get shot, go through having the bullet removed, and the hole stitched up, and still look good enough to keep her lady parts humming?

Elliot leaned over, flinching as he did, to place the bowl on the table. “Do you have that laudanum handy?”

“Yes.” Charlotte withdrew the small dark-brown bottle from her pocket.

“Make it half of what the doctor prescribed. I don’t like relying on that stuff, but my arm is burning like I’ve finally arrived at my final reward.” This time she held the spoon to his lips, daring him by her raised eyebrows to mention once more that he was a man grown, and able to administer to himself. She certainly knew he was a man, for a fact. But she’d noticed his hand shaking as he took the last of the broth.

“Why don’t you scoot down, and I’ll fix your pillow so you can sleep?”

“I have a better idea. Why don’t you crawl in beside me, and I can use you for a pillow. Then I will sleep just fine.”

She fisted her hands on her hips. “Mr. Baker, you seem to forget you are my patient, and employee.” She tried her best to smother her smile, without success. She raised her chin in the air. “You must behave yourself.”

“Why?”

“Because. Well, just because.” To say she was flustered by his comments was an understatement. Yes, they’d shared a few kisses and perhaps a bit of inappropriate touching, but he’d never bantered with her like this. Is that what happened when a man was flat on his back and a woman hovered over him?

“I think your fever is rising, and you are speaking nonsense.” She sniffed and fussed with his blankets, tucking them in.

Elliot grabbed her hand, having a great deal of strength in his grip for a man recovering from a gunshot wound. He offered her a crooked smile as he ran his thumb over the skin on her inner wrist.
“Kiss me good night?”

Whatever was wrong with the man? Maybe the gunshot had rattled his brains. “It is not nighttime, Mr. Baker. It is mid-afternoon, and you need your sleep. Not kisses.”

“Ah, so untrue, my dear Mrs. Pennyworth. One always needs kisses.” He continued to slide his finger over her skin, causing goose flesh to rise on her arms. “Are you afraid?”

“No. I am not afraid. I am trying to make you comfortable, so you can sleep. Dr. Sanford said sleep was the best cure-all for any type of injury or illness.” She tugged her hand free and backed away. “I will bring these things to the kitchen, and send Thomas in to put your nightshirt back on. I will check on you in a little while.”

“Coward.” That was the last thing she heard as she closed the door and fled down the stairs.

Charlotte awoke with a start. There had been a noise. She was sure of it. Her heart began to pound, and she sat up, turning up the wick on the oil lamp next to her bed. Licking her dry lips, she climbed out of bed and put on her dressing gown over her very proper nightgown.

There it was, the noise again. She struck a match and lit the lantern she kept by her bedroom door. She picked it up, opened the door, raised the light, and looked up and down the corridor. Nothing.

That was when she heard the moaning.

Elliot!

She peeked in his room. In the shadowed darkness, she could barely make out his form. She moved closer, the circle of light from the lantern illuminating him. The blankets had twisted around his legs, and he thrashed around. If she didn’t stop him, he would pull out his stitches.

Placing the lantern on the floor next to his bed, she sat alongside him. “Elliot.” His face was hot and dry. The fever had risen. Reluctant to drag Thomas from his bed, and with her already awake, she moved to the dresser where a bowl of water and a stack of clean cloths had been left.

She carefully made her way across the room, then laid the bowl on the floor. “Shh. You must stop thrashing about. You’ll pull your stitches out.” She rested her hands on his chest, which seemed to calm him. Encouraged, she unbuttoned the front of his nightshirt, dipped the cloth in the water and ran it over his face, then down to his neck, then over his rib cage.

“Charlotte?” Even in his delirium, he remembered where he was.

“Yes. Lie still. You’re burning up. I’m trying to cool you off.” She continued with her ministrations, wiping, dipping the cloth in the cool water, wiping some more.

He settled a bit, then opened his eyes. “I’m sorry I woke you.”

“’Tis no matter. How does your arm feel?”

“’As if I slammed it into the wall, then set it on fire.” Even with his pain, he managed to offer her a smile. “Of course, having such a pretty nurse makes it all bearable.”

“Once I finish wiping you down, I can give you more of the laudanum. You haven’t had much of it.” She watched her hand holding the cloth as it smoothed over his golden skin. With the darkness right outside the circle of light from the lantern, it was as if they were the only two people in the world.

“What are you thinking?” He placed his hand on hers to stop the movement of the cloth.

“Why?”

“Because you have a wonderful smile on your face. Content. Happy. I wish I could put that smile on your face forever.”

“And how would you do that?” Her hand continued smoothing the cloth over his skin when he released her and reached up to touch her chin.

“I would start by doing whatever it takes to end this nightmare you’ve been thrust into.” His hand
snaked around the back of her neck and tugged her head down. Once they were only inches apart, he whispered, “When that was resolved, I would put an even bigger smile on your lips.”

Her mouth dried up, and she stared into his piercing eyes. “How?”

“Like this.” Then his fevered lips covered hers.
Chapter Eighteen

“What do you mean you missed?” M growled at the distasteful man lounging in the doorway. “I paid you to get rid of him. You assured me it was not a hard assignment.”

“Da bloke moved.”

“He moved! What the devil does that mean? Did you expect him to walk up to you and hold out his arms, waiting for you to shoot?”

“No. I ’ad im in my sights. I pulled ’e rigger jus as ’e turned back ‘o say sumpin ’o ’e lady. I ’it ’is arm instead ov ’is ’eart.”

“You should have shot him again.” The numbskull was not worth the skin that covered his pathetic body. Why were there so many dimwits in the world?

“If you ’hink ’is all so cushy ’o do, why don you do-i yourself?” The man, who had introduced himself as Mr. Evans, pushed himself away from the doorway, and moved into the room, standing not two feet away.

“Perhaps I should have done it myself. Whatever beating you gave him, it didn’t dissuade him from leaving the lady alone. Now you’ve put him on guard with your mishap.” M pounded a fist on the arm of the chair. “One more chance. I will give you one more chance.”

“Is ’at righ’?” His cockney accent was a reminder that he was not someone to push around. “An ’en wha?”

“I won’t pay you.”

He grinned, gaps in his smile where teeth were missing. “You’ll pay me, all righ. Righ’ now, you’ll pay me. An ’en I’m done wit you. Is bad luck ’o ’ry an kill a chap a second ’ime. ’E’ll be on guard.”

M disliked not being in control. However, in retrospect, it was probably better to pay the cretin and let him go. Anne’s Mr. Baker didn’t matter. The end was coming, anyway. The last package would be delivered soon, and it would serve as a strong message to Anne that she had been a very bad girl, and M would no longer put up with her antics. It was time for her to come home and resume her proper place. No more watching her from afar, or being close to her, touching her, smelling her, feeling her delicate skin, without bringing her to her knees.

To suffer like M had been suffering from her defection. Soon, my Anne. Soon.

…

It had been a long week of fever-thrashing, gallons of beef broth, and numerous changes of bandages. Elliot was sick to death of bedrest, and frustrated at not bringing the case to a conclusion. No more packages had arrived, and Charlotte had agreed to remain home while he was recovering. He had not notified Scotland Yard of the shooting. This was his matter to clear up, and that was precisely what he would do.

“Are we feeling a bit better this morning?” Charlotte sailed into the room, carrying a tray.

“We will be feeling quite the thing if that is anything but beef broth and bread.” He nodded at the tray she set down on the table alongside his bed. His mouth began to water at the smell of eggs and bacon, along with toast, a hunk of cheese, fruit, and a pot of tea. “Real food?” He grinned at her, feeling like a lad who was just offered a second biscuit.

“Yes. Dr. Sanford left instructions with Cook when he departed last evening that you are ready for something more substantive in your diet.”
Wincing just a bit, as he shifted and swung his legs over the side of the bed, Elliot eyed the food eagerly. With his good hand, he picked up the toast and took a bite, moaning. “Heaven.”

Charlotte took the opportunity to tuck a large cloth napkin under his chin.

“I’m only allowing you to do that because I am otherwise taken up with this wonderful food. I am not a slobbering old man, nor a babe not yet out of the nursery.”

“No, you are not. But, you are incapacitated with the use of only one hand.” While she lectured him, she cut up his eggs and bacon and poured tea into his cup, adding a dollop of cream and a bit of sugar. “I am also ready to get out of this bed.”

Charlotte stared at him, her lips pursed. “I’m not too sure about that. Between the loss of blood and the days of fever, you are most likely without your normal strength.”

In that she was correct, as much as he hated to admit it. Even to himself. He’d been managing to attend to his own personal needs for two days now, but each time he’d ambled across the room to the chamber pot behind the screen, the weakness he suffered discouraged him. But then, again, if he remained lollygagging in bed any longer, he would never recover his strength. Of course, having real food would help a great deal.

“Won’t you join me?”

Charlotte settled in the chair next to the table. “I’ve already broken my fast, but I will have a bit of tea with you.”

She looked charming this morning, in a white and deep rose striped gown, high-necked and long-sleeved. Despite being so covered, the form-fitting dress outlined her bountiful breasts and small waist. The skirts were drawn toward the back to form a small bustle, and at the same time delineated her flat stomach and generous hips. All in all, she presented a delectable image of a woman at her best.

He continued to enjoy the first real food he’d had in more than a week while he watched her graceful hands fix her tea, stir the liquid, then raise the teacup to her lips to take a sip. So engrossed was he in this last part that he’d stopped his fork halfway to his mouth and stared, his mouth agape.

“What?” She returned the cup to the saucer and smiled at him. He’d been a guest in her home for a week, but they’d spent very little time together that did not involve her nursing him. Now that he was feeling more himself, he became very much aware of the fact that he sat, only partially clothed, on a bed, and this lovely, enticing woman was a mere few feet from him.

Through force of habit, with days of him feverish, the door to the room remained closed. No one would wonder what was going on between the two of them with him delirious for much of the time.

He was certainly not delirious now, and his cock reminded him it had been quite some time since he’d enjoyed any bed sport. Right now, the only woman he wanted in bed, under him, naked and panting, was the very prim-looking Mrs. Pennyworth, no longer as relaxed as she had been while she studied him over the rim of her teacup.

“Nothing in particular.” The untruthful answer to her question slipped easily from his lips. “I am just appreciating how lovely you look this morning.” He returned to his breakfast, satisfying one appetite while another remained unsated.

“If you are truly feeling up to it, Dr. Sanford suggested a walk in the fresh air might do you good. Once Thomas has helped you with washing and dressing, I thought we might take the carriage to Hyde Park, and stroll for a while along the Serpentine.”

“That sounds like a wonderful idea. As generous as your hospitality has been, I am quite anxious to leave this room.” He finished eating and pulled the blasted napkin from his chin, chagrined to see spots of egg and tea on it.
Charlotte stood and took the tray. “I will send Thomas up, and then we shall go.”

He watched her leave the room, knowing the time was coming when they would have to speak about this attraction between them. Her flushes and fidgeting when they were together told him she was well aware of it.

Of course, he must find the culprit leaving the infernal items. So far, there had been no pattern. No certain day, no certain event preceding the arrival of the leavings. At present, the only way to find the man behind this was to catch the delivery person and either get the information directly from him, or follow him.

Twice, now, he’d been targeted for physical harm. The first time had seemed to be a warning of sorts, but this time the suspect had meant business. Had he not turned back to speak to Charlotte, he would be a dead man.

He would have to be very careful on their walk around the park. It was heavily visited, and so far, both attacks had been at night. But since they were obviously dealing with a demented individual, he would need to protect both himself and Charlotte from harm.

The frustration was growing. Who the devil was this man, and what did he hope to accomplish?

Charlotte left Elliot’s room with the tray, the dishes practically wiped clean. She was surprised he hadn’t licked the plates. The poor man must have been starving. She would have to make sure all his meals in the future were substantial.

“Thomas, please see to Mr. Baker’s needs. He will be joining me on a ride to the park, so he will need to be fully dressed.” She brought the tray to the kitchen and returned to her bedroom to fetch her reticule, pelisse, and bonnet. With some time on her hands before Elliot would be ready, she settled in the library with the intention of catching up on her correspondence.

Instead of dealing with the stack of letters and invitations sitting on her desk, she found herself standing in front of the window, admiring the last of the withering autumn flowers. Soon the garden would lay dormant, all the leaves would be gone from the trees, and winter would be upon them.

Would her tormentor be caught before then? Once again, her tired mind went through her list of friends and acquaintances, trying to ascertain who among them would do such a dastardly thing. No matter how hard she tried, she could not say with certainty that this man, or that man, was the offender.

While she was wrangling with that problem, she considered another one, more likely to change her life—her and Elliot. The mere thought of him brought a smile to her face, and a warmth to her body. Being so close to him this past week had done nothing to dissuade her from the fact that she was beginning to fall in love with him. But where would that lead?

She closed her eyes and imagined a life with a man whose work was dangerous. How would she deal with worrying every minute he was not at her side that he was hurt, bleeding, dead? She shivered. No. That would not work. She had lived that horror before and would not do it again.

Unaware that she’d spent so much time pondering her life while watching autumn die outside her window, she was startled when the door to the library opened.

“Good morning once again.” Elliot strolled into the room. Except for the sling that held his arm steady, he looked perfectly ordinary. Thomas had made the trip to Elliot’s rooms the day after the shooting and had packed up enough of his things to make his recovery at her house comfortable.

“Are we ready for our ride to the park?” He moved closer to her, a slight smile on his face. She’d been so busy admiring him, she stood like a statue. Fresh from his bath, his hair was still damp.
Thomas had done an excellent job of turning him out. Elliot was freshly shaven, and his clothes did not hang off him, even though he had eaten so little the past week.

“Yes, I am ready.” She crossed the room, picking up her bonnet, reticule, and pelisse on the way toward the door. Thomas took her things from her hands and held out her pelisse. She placed the bonnet on her head and viewed herself in the mirror next to the front door, as she tucked away the few curls that had already escaped her bun.

Thomas opened the door, and she and Elliot made their way down the steps to the waiting carriage. Elliot seemed a bit on edge, and he surveyed the area as they descended. He noticeably relaxed once they were settled inside. Having been attacked twice now while working for her, no doubt he felt a bit skittish in public for the first time. “Now that I think upon it, maybe a stroll in the park is not a good idea.”

Elliot shook his head. “Charlotte, I cannot hide in your house forever. I must go about my business.”

“Does that mean we should resume our social life?” She had to admit she was very tired of staying at home. She hadn’t realized how much of a social person she was until her activities were curtailed. Even in her mourning, once she’d overcome her grief, she’d visited St. Jerome’s and had attended small gatherings.

“Which brings me to an idea I had on how we can rid ourselves of this menace.”

She leaned forward, hopeful. “Indeed?”

“The vicar has been eliminated, and nothing leads me to continue considering Von Braun. But the fact that Talbot is left-handed, and keeps spiders—nasty creatures that they are—puts him in the forefront of our suspects.”

“I understand your reasoning, and maybe it’s simply wishful thinking, since he was such a great friend to Mr. Pennyworth, but it is hard for me to imagine him tormenting me in this way. Also, what motivation could he have for doing this?”

“My dear, it is hard to imagine anyone having a logical reason to leave despicable things on a woman’s front steps, but he does seem somewhat, shall we say, possessive of you? Almost as if, since he was your late husband’s friend, he feels entitled to inherit you?”

“Inherit? I am not a pile of money, or a box of trinkets that one bequeaths to a friend.”

“No. But he might feel as though he has the right to step into Mr. Pennyworth’s shoes.” He hesitated for a moment, studying her. “Or his bed.”

She shook her head furiously. “Oh, no. I could never think of him in that way.” Good heavens, the thought of sexual congress with Mr. Talbot almost brought up her breakfast. “Anyway, how would sending these horrible things to me equate into him receiving my affections? That doesn’t make sense.”

“It doesn’t make sense to either you or me, because we are sane, logical people. Our tormentor, whether it is Talbot or not, doesn’t think the way normal people do.” He leaned back on the seat and studied her. “Perhaps he believes if he frightens you enough, you will turn to him as you said you did after Mr. Pennyworth died.”

“But I haven’t told anyone about the packages.”

“Precisely. Which could account for the items growing more sinister. If he is our man, he is hoping you will receive something that is so horrible, you will have to seek someone’s help, and to his way of thinking, that someone should be him.”

Charlotte sighed. “I really, really hate this. I hate not knowing what will show up next, which one of my friends might be devious enough to do this to me, and when it will all end.” As her voice cracked at the end, she turned and looked out the window, tears welling in her eyes.
“Charlotte, come here.” Elliot’s low voice filled the small space. When she didn’t move but kept staring out the window, blinking furiously to avoid the tears threatening to fall at any moment, he added, “With only one good arm, I can’t drag you over here, so I will ask again that you come here.”

Taking a deep breath, she stood and moved next to him. He grinned. “On my good side, if you will, please.”

She gave him a wobbly grin and switched sides. He immediately put his arm around her and drew her against his chest. “I have a plan that’s been meandering around in my brain while I lay in bed waiting for this cursed injury to heal.”

“A plan?” She wiped the corners of her eyes.

“Yes, all the details have not been worked out in my mind just yet, but since everything points to Talbot, I am planning something that will make him show his hand. If it works, I can confront him, and with the attack from a couple of weeks ago, along with the recent shooting—which, by the way, the police tend to frown upon—I should be able to get him to confess and send him off to Scotland Yard to never bother you again.”

Charlotte rested her head on his shoulder. “I want so very much for this all to be over.”

“I know, sweetheart.” He brushed the hair off her forehead. “As do I.”

Once again, she thought of returning to the peacefulness of her old life. But could she resume life the way it had been before the strong feelings that had developed between her and Elliot? Before he’d brushed the hair from her forehead and called her sweetie?

On the other hand, was it possible this was just a job to him? Would he have no compunction in walking away when the case was resolved, and Mr. Talbot behind bars? Would he then move onto the next assignment, never to see her again, since perhaps these feelings were in her imagination? Did she want them to be only on her side, so she would not be tempted to give her heart once more to a man who might one day disappear from her life, leaving her a widow again?

The bother of these questions left her weary and confused. Always being on alert for the next package and its gruesome offerings had taken a toll on her nerves.

She pushed all of it away. It was a beautiful autumn day, the sun was shining, and the park would be lovely. She had a handsome man to stroll the Serpentine with, and that was sufficient for now.
Elliot pulled Charlotte closer to him. She fit perfectly against his side. A bit too perfectly. Although, the time had probably come for him to make up his mind.

Did he want to put aside his suspicions that Charlotte was hiding something, and jump in with both feet? Lying in bed in her house had given him thoughts not too easily dismissed. She’d nursed him diligently and had even visited him in the middle of the night in her nightclothes when his fever was high.

He’d been uneasy since his fever had ended, because now every time she came near him, he wanted to grab her by the waist, and haul her on top of his frustrated body.

The carriage paused just inside the gates to the park. Charlotte pulled away and fussed with her clothing. Bones opened the door, and Elliot stepped out, turning to help Charlotte out of the coach. A slight breeze picked up her skirts, giving him a glimpse of her half boots and part of her lovely leg.

Bloody hell. His heart rate sped up, and his traitorous cock grew. Perhaps if he counted blades of grass while they took their stroll, he could bring his body under control. Not likely with the alluring Mrs. Pennyworth walking alongside him. Nevertheless, he extended his good arm. “Shall we?”

It was a crisp late-autumn day, perfect for a stroll, with fallen leaves crunching under their shoes as they walked. They headed toward the Serpentine to find several other couples out and about, even though it was not the fashionable time for the Upper Crust to be walking and driving.

Charlotte took a deep breath, drawing his eyes to her lovely bosom, that was, unfortunately, covered by her pelisse. “Don’t you just love the fresh air, after the sultry summer weather with all the smells from the Thames?”

“Personally, I would love to leave London during the summer each year. I may one day buy a house in the country where I can spend the warmer months.” He wasn’t sure where that notion had come from, since he’d never thought about leaving London before. Unfortunately, this desire to buy a home in the country had to do with the woman by his side, and the thought that one day he might have her for a wife. A man with a family would do better away from the nastiness of the city.

“Would you come back for the holidays?” She sounded wistful, almost as if the idea of escaping appealed to her, as well. But then again, escaping might be precisely what she had in mind, due to the recent events plaguing her.

He shook his head and grinned. “No. I hadn’t thought about that. But you’re right. Once I retired to my country home, I would be reluctant to return at all. I might find the idea of lord of the manor quite appealing.” They made a slight turn to follow the winding river, nodding at passing strollers.

“Holidays in the country would be lovely.” She stepped over a small hole dug by some sort of critter. “I sometimes believe I am not a Town woman at all.”

“I had never thought about leaving London, myself, until recently. Perhaps old age is setting in.” Charlotte smirked. “Yes, I can see your hair loss and wrinkled skin. You are definitely approaching your dotage.”

He stared straight ahead, not daring to look at her. “Of course, it would be quite lonely in the country by myself.” He held his breath. Would Charlotte respond to his hint?

She was silent for a few moments, then pointed to a low-lying branch on the elm tree to their left. “Oh, look at that bird. Isn’t he a lovely color?”

*Nice deflection, Mrs. Pennyworth.*
“Yes, lovely, indeed.” They continued in companionable silence. One thing he enjoyed about spending time with Charlotte was her comfort with quiet. So many women felt the need to constantly talk, which rattled his nerves after a while. Charlotte brought a sense of peace to him, which was amusing considering all she’d been through.

“Do you have other clients whose work has been put on hold since your injury? I know this seems quite late to ask this, but the thought only just occurred to me.”

“I have no other investigation clients at present. I have not accepted any others since I began yours. However, as I told you before, I am also a solicitor, and keep an active law practice. Most of that involves reading contracts and drawing up legal papers. None of that, however, has suffered. But I will need to get back to my rooms and take care of some matters as soon as possible.”

“I see. So, I can assume you will be moving back to your home, then?” Was that a pensive tone in her question?

“No. If you remember correctly, I had intended to take up residence in your home for the purpose of bringing this to a close. However, I hadn’t expected to have it happen quite the way it did. With your permission, I will have Thomas go with me to my rooms and gather the papers I need to continue with my work.” He covered her hand with his where it rested on his arm. “I don’t feel comfortable leaving you alone in the house. I’m afraid things have gotten too dangerous.”

Charlotte shivered at his words, knowing them to be true. Twice now, Elliot had suffered injuries due to his connection to her. She tamped down the guilt that threatened to overwhelm her. Nothing he said had led her to believe he blamed her, but nevertheless, she continued to feel responsible for his injuries.

“Are you chilly? Do you wish to return to the carriage?”

“No.” She glanced at him sideways with concern. “Perhaps a walk is too much for you?”

Elliot scowled. “Madam, I assure you I could outwalk you, outrun you, and out…” He grinned. “Never mind.”

“What?”

He leaned in close. “Are you sure you want to know how I can outlast you?”

She drew herself up, her face flushing. Damn the heat that rose due to her reaction to his evocative words. “I assure you I have no idea of what you are speaking.”

“Yes. You do. And I know you feel it too, sweetheart.” He glanced around, as if just remembering they walked outdoors and someone was interested in killing him. He stopped, turned toward her, and rested his hands on her shoulders, his fingertip stroking her jaw. Lowering his voice, he said, “Let’s be honest, Charlotte. I want to take you to bed. I don’t think that is a surprise to you. We would be wonderful together, and I have enough experience to know you want the same thing. Whether we act upon this attraction or not, denying it is of no use.”

With those meaningful words, he continued their walk, leaving her blushing, and her thoughts in a whirl.

Several minutes passed while she took note of the strength of Elliot’s arm under hers, and the heat emanating from his body. She imagined them both naked, skin-to-skin, lying in her bed as he stroked her and spoke gently in her ear.

For goodness sake, she must stop this, or she would melt into a puddle at his feet. She thought of other things, pushing away the erotic images holding her mind hostage. After a few minutes, and feeling more in control of herself, she said, “You have not been on your feet this long in more than a
week. Perhaps we should turn around and head back to the carriage.” Despite her words, Elliot looked fine.

Too fine.

“I am well, actually, but I would prefer to return to the carriage. Since I mentioned the work that I have been neglecting since my injury, it now preys on my mind.”

They took a shorter route back to the coach and spent the time until they reached her house going over what information they had so far. Focusing on the investigation helped move Charlotte’s thoughts away from Elliot’s words and the images they had evoked. As they made their way up the stairs, the front door opened, and Thomas appeared at the entrance.

“Ah, Thomas. Just the man I wanted to see. I would appreciate you accompanying me to my rooms to retrieve some papers I need to go over.” Elliot stepped back from the door and allowed Charlotte to pass through.

She removed her bonnet and turned so Thomas could help her with her pelisse. “You may use the library for your purposes once your documents arrive. After I gather my correspondence from the library, I will be in my sitting room, writing my own letters. I will see you at luncheon?”

“If I may beg your consent, I would prefer a tray, so I may work uninterrupted.”

“Of course. I will see you at dinner, then.” She strode to the library and gathered up the letters she’d not done anything with earlier. Rather than eat alone in the dining room, she asked for a tray in her sitting room, as well. That was a foolish request, since she’d eaten alone at her dining room table for months after Gabriel died. But now with Elliot in residence, it seemed rather pathetic to sit at the table by herself. She’d eaten most of her meals the past week at his bedside, as she watched over him.

Charlotte was quite satisfied with the amount of work she’d accomplished by dinertime. With everything that had happened the past few weeks, she’d let a great deal of her responsibilities go. She caught up on correspondence with friends she had in London, as well as the little village where she’d been raised.

She’d also answered letters from her man of business about her investments, and household accounts. Now she was ready to put that all aside and enjoy a nice, quiet dinner with Elliot. She carefully chose her evening dress—something special. Why, she had no idea. Perhaps because Elliot was back on his feet?

She entered the library where Elliot stood, holding a glass of brandy. He looked a bit fatigued, which was natural since until this morning, he had been bedridden for days.

“I poured you a sherry.” He placed his glass on the sideboard and picked up her sherry and walked it over to her. His hand brushed over hers as she took the glass from him. She jolted at his touch, and his eyes snapped to hers. He’d felt it, too.

“Thank you.” She chastised her breathless voice, then took a seat on the silk white and green print settee. “Were you able to finish the work you and Thomas retrieved from your rooms?

Elliot sat alongside her, swirling the brown liquid in his glass. “Yes, for the most part. There are a few things I will have to research at the law library before I am comfortable with the advice I intend to give my client.”

“Do you not feel torn between your duties as an investigator and solicitor? The work seems diametrically opposite.”

“In a way, perhaps. It seems in the past year I have received much more work in my law practice than I have in the investigations area. And there are other times where I need both skills to complete the job.”
"Madam, dinner is ready." Thomas stood at the doorway, looking the proper footman.

"Thank you." Charlotte and Elliot proceeded to the dining room. He held her seat for her while Thomas poured the wine. She was still not used to all the finery this life offered her. She never would have guessed when she’d left home years ago for her first job in service that she would one day preside over such a lovely table, with a footman pouring wine.

She and Elliot kept up a lively stream of conversation as they ate the duck, sturgeon, cabbages, potatoes, and pig jelly. After clearing the table, Thomas placed a plate of fruit and cheese in the center of the table, and Charlotte fixed tea for them both.

Elliot stirred his tea, the flame from the lamps around the room casting shadows here and there, washing everything in a golden glow. Charlotte was content—the first time in weeks—she felt safe with Elliot staying at her house. Part of her was uncomfortable with the notion she needed a man, but the logical part of her knew, until the matter of the packages was resolved, she needed the security of Elliot’s presence.

“You look quite relaxed this evening.” Elliot smiled at her as he placed his teacup in the saucer.

“I feel relaxed. I don’t really know why, since nothing has happened to quell my anxiety. I’m just grateful your injury was not grievous. Although I hasten to add, I am sorry you were injured at all, but if you hadn’t turned when you had, the outcome would have been much more serious.” She shuddered, as though a wave of cool air had swept the room.

“Yes. I have oftentimes thanked whatever it was I had intended to say to you for saving my life.”

“And what was it?”

He grinned. “I don’t remember. You would think something so monumental would be forever etched in my brain.”

The teacups were empty, and the plate of fruit and cheese had been enjoyed. Charlotte stifled a yawn and stood. “I think I will indulge in one more bit of sherry and then retire. I am quite fatigued.”

Elliot stood and pulled out her chair. “I will join you.” He took her arm, and they made their way to the library. Perhaps it was their earlier conversation, but a thought brought her up sharp.

What would it be like to have this permanently? She and Elliot sharing dinner, then a drink before bed.

It did not frighten her as much as it should have.

…

Elliot had tried all through dinner to remember Charlotte was his employer—his client. She was not an enticing woman who smelled like summer flowers, in a gown that dipped low enough for him to get ideas about uncovering interesting parts of her body. She smiled at him in such a way when he handed her a glass of sherry that he wanted to snatch it back from her, and crush her body to his.

The air had crackled between them from the time he’d handed her a drink before dinner. He was sure she sensed it, too. It had been obvious in the way she’d drawn her hand back from his, as if she’d been burned. Although dinner had been pleasant, and the conversation lively, every time her eyes had met his, he’d felt it again.

He handed her a drink and settled alongside her. He rested his arm across the back of the settee, lightly skimming the smooth skin at the back of her neck with his fingertips. She sighed and closed her eyes.

Elliot studied her as he took a sip of his brandy, then placed the glass down on the table in front of them, never taking his gaze from her. When she didn’t push his hand away, he used his thumb and index finger to encircle her neck, rubbing lightly. “Does that feel good?”
“Yes.” She practically hummed the word. She rotated her neck, and he shifted so he was closer, cursing the blasted arm in a sling, keeping him from pulling her against him so he could feel her fully.

She was all gold and beauty in the light reflected from the fireplace. Her plump lips were lightly pursed, begging for his kisses. His eyes were riveted on her generous breasts as they rose and fell in rhythm with his fingers manipulating the flesh at her neck. He leaned in and left whispers of kisses against her silky skin.

To his surprise, she turned to him, placing her lips only a fraction of an inch from his. Taking that as an invitation, his mouth covered hers gently, nipping at first, then feathering kisses on her lips, then moving to her jaw, and the sensitive skin behind her ear.

She hummed and moved closer. When his mouth slid back to her lips, he looked at her, her eyes now open, half-lidded, dark with need.

He plucked the glass of sherry from her fingers and placed it alongside his glass. She watched him, the tip of her pink tongue licking her lips. When her eyes dropped to his mouth, he used his one good arm to tug her to him, breasts to chest, mouth to mouth, fitting them together like puzzle pieces. His control was slight. He could barely hang onto his restraint. He had to slow down, or he would frighten her. Hell, his desire for her almost scared him, but he had been living with it for weeks, now. Grasping her jaw, he turned her head to take the kiss deeper, consuming her, taking command of her mouth in a savage possession, marking her as his.

Elliot nudged her lips with his tongue and grunted his satisfaction when she opened, and he slid his tongue into the moistness and warmth of her mouth. She tasted like sherry, and mint, and all woman. My woman.

He was delighted when her tongue joined his and they warred like long-time lovers, touching and tasting. He nibbled her lower lip, then soothed the place with butterfly kisses.

Charlotte drew back, leaving him bereft. Hopefully, she had not decided to call an end to their enjoyment. He leaned his forehead against hers. “Do you wish to stop?”

She hesitated, but only for a moment. “No, I don’t believe so.”

Before she could re-consider, he gently touched her lovely face with his good hand and returned his attention to her lips. Plump, moist, sweet. He could not get enough. So many men spoke of how they used a kiss or two as a minor prelude to the other more important parts of lovemaking. To Elliot, kisses had always been a wonderful thing in themselves.

Charlotte’s gentle sighs spurred him to keep his hand busy while he enjoyed the pleasures to be had in her mouth. He smoothly cupped her breast, weighing it with his hand, flicking his thumb over her already taut nipple. Her sighs turned to moans, imploring him to slip his hand into the top of her bodice. He moved his fingers under her breast and massaged, continuing to manipulate her nipple.

She kept her hands busy sliding her palms up his chest, careful to avoid the sling, then encircled his neck, where she played with the ends of his hair. Despite the awkwardness of having only one good hand to work with, he still managed to unbutton several of her buttons, loosening the top of her gown, so it slid down her arms.

He moved back and gazed at her lovely breasts thrust upward by her corset. “Why do you women wear these horrible contraptions?” As much as he appreciated her breasts so enticingly displayed, the pinching garment, squeezing her rib bones in a way that had to have been uncomfortable, made him wince.

’Tis proper attire.” She took a deep breath, which seemed totally impossible to him. He moved his hand behind her body and untied the string, loosening the garment, so it slipped to her lap, leaving only a white silk chemise covering her charms.
“My God, Charlotte. You are so beautiful. I can’t get enough of the sight of you.” Charlotte blushed delightfully and lifted her hands to cover herself under his scrutiny. He drew her hand back and kissed her knuckles. “No, don’t cover yourself.”

Elliot rested his hand on her bare shoulder, her skin smooth like a young babe’s. He tugged her close and once more took her mouth in a searing kiss. The only sounds in the room were Charlotte’s sighs, and the ticking of the long clock in the corner.

His lips brushed hers as he spoke. “The time has come, Charlotte. No more games. I want you, and it’s obvious you want me. Tonight is the night I take you to bed.”
Charlotte was not surprised by Elliot’s words, since she knew that was where they were headed, but she still hesitated. She’d only been to bed with one man in her entire life, and she’d been married to him. She did not consider herself a strumpet or a doxy and did not want Elliot to view her as such.

“Don’t think too much.” Elliot covered her face with kisses. “Just say yes.”

“Yes.” The word was out before she realized she said it. But she did not regret it.

“I think you knew we would one day make love.” He kissed her on her nose. “It was inevitable, given the attraction between us almost from the very first.”

Yes. She’d felt the tingles and jolts whenever they touched. She was experienced enough to recognize the desire that sizzled between them, but innocent enough to question the suddenness of their attraction.

Elliot viewed her with chagrin. “I would love more than anything to scoop you into my arms and carry you upstairs in a most gallant manner, but alas, I only have one good arm.”

“It matters not. The servants would be scandalized if you did so.” She wrestled back into her dress, with Elliot assisting as best he could with his limited abilities. She turned to leave the room, and he wrapped his arm around her waist and pulled her back. He kissed her first with his eyes, then very slowly, his head descended and his mouth covered hers, gently, and thoughtfully.

He ran his finger down her cheek. “You go first, have Bridget prepare you for bed. I will join you when she comes down.”

Could she be so bold as to make herself ready for a lover? Yes. She was a woman grown, not a maiden, and had enjoyed her husband’s attentions, even though she’d always thought there should have been more.

She smiled. “I will see you upstairs.” With her head held high, she waltzed from the room, her heart thudding with every step she took up the stairs.

Once Bridget had helped her out of her clothes and into the prettiest nightgown and dressing gown she owned—with a smirk on her face, which told Charlotte her maid knew what she was up to—she brushed her hair until it shone, then left her.

After the door closed, she began to have doubts. She was looking forward to following the natural course of events that came from the desire she’d been feeling for weeks. On the other hand, she was taking a risk. Certainly, with her body, for she could become pregnant. But also with her heart. She was not the type of woman who could lie with a man and not have strong feelings.

She paced her room, waiting for Elliot to join her, vacillating between sending him away, or pulling him through the door by his necktie. Standing by the window, viewing the mist and darkness, her attention was drawn by a scratch at her bedchamber door. This was the moment. Either she would act on her desires like an adult, or cower like a young maiden and tell him she’d changed her mind.

She crossed the room, still not sure what to do. Elliot turned the latch and entered the room. He stopped and just stared at her. “I will never forget how you look at this moment.” He came toward her, the smile on his face making her blush. No one had ever looked at her that way.

Elliot brushed the hair back from her forehead. “You have not changed your mind, I hope.”

Had he seen the hesitation in her eyes? As if to be sure, he dipped his head to look into her downcast eyes. “Sweetheart? If you are unsure, just say so, and I will leave.”

“No, don’t leave.” She licked her dry lips and reached out and grabbed his arm. “It’s just that I’m a
He grinned and tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. “Nervous? Truthfully, so am I.”

Her eyes grew wide. “Indeed? I thought men were never nervous about such things.”

“They are when it is the first time with a woman who is special.” His lips rested against her temple as he spoke.

“Am I special?”

“Oh, yes. Very special.”

He thought her special? Or was that something he said to every woman he bedded? Elliot leaned back and smiled at her. “Stop thinking.”

“What?”

“Whatever it is you’re thinking, just stop.” He kissed her, gently at first, and then with more hunger, leaving her mouth burning, aching for more, as he sprinkled kisses over her neck, jaw, and the sensitive skin under her ear. “Climb into bed, and I will join you.”

Charlotte shrugged out of her dressing gown, then crawled onto the bed and tucked her feet under her bottom as she watched him. He continued to stare at her as he untied the sling holding his injured arm.

“Should you do that?”

“Yes. The injury is still a bit sore, but I don’t need the sling all the time. And, for what I have planned for you, my sweet, I will need both hands.”

A blush rose to her cheeks, making her feel foolish. After all, she’d been married before. But, perhaps whatever it was Elliot had planned for her would be something different. She shivered in anticipation.

He then proceeded to remove his necktie, vest, and shirt. Whether he took his time because of the pain, or to provide her with a show, she didn’t know, or care. Her heart sped, her senses caught up in the view of his body as he uncovered his chest. She’d seen his upper body before, when she’d tended to him, but he’d been lying down, and fighting pain. Now he was all golden-skinned male, muscular, and not looking at all like the patient she’d nursed.

Unconsciously, she licked her lips, until Elliot growled, “Sweetheart, don’t do that.”

Elliot removed his boots and stockings, and then climbed onto the bed, leaving on his pants. The bed dipped with his weight, causing Charlotte to slide over, bumping into his hip. Gently, he used both hands this time to cup her face and kiss her lips. The slight pain in his arm at the movement was well worth the feel of her warm, plush lips under his.

Although he did not consider himself any sort of a rake, he’d had his share of women over the years, but never had he felt this intense compulsion to have a particular woman underneath him, to hear her cries as he entered her body, feel the warmth and moistness surround his cock, and milk it dry. To own her, mark her as his, and his alone. He ran his fingers through her silky hair, loving the feel of it, and the flowery scent that drifted from the golden locks.

Unable to wait any longer, he unbuttoned the front of her nightgown, spreading the flaps, revealing her deep cherry nipples, already tightened and begging for his mouth. He pushed the gown off her shoulders, allowing the material to puddle into her lap. Gently, his hand outlined the circle of her breast, his fingers trembling as he skimmed his thumb over the taut nipple, eliciting a gasp from Charlotte. “Do you like that?” His voice was a hoarse whisper,

She nodded, again biting her lip. Almost shy, even though she’d been married. Her initial
reluctance faded as he leaned in, and covered her lips with his. His gentle kiss turned into something hard and searching, frantic and possessive, as his arm encircled her body, and he tugged her to his chest. Flesh-to-flesh. His lips continued to explore her delicate ivory skin as he seared a path down her neck to her shoulders.

Hesitantly, she placed her hands on his shoulders and leaned back, granting him access to her breasts, which he took advantage of, pulling the pouting nipple into his mouth, biting lightly, then suckling, until he felt her shift to lie down on the bed.

He stopped her. “Let’s get rid of the rest of these clothes.” Inch by inch, to avoid as much pain as he could, he pulled the nightgown off her slim body. To his surprise and delight, she unbuttoned his pants, and slid them down, taking his knickers with them.

He took his time to study her in the light from the oil lamp as he ran his palm over her curves. “You are so beautiful you take my breath away.” Sliding down, he gathered her into his arms and kissed her with the reverence and care this first joining between them deserved. She tasted of sweetness and woman. He could spend hours just kissing her, but he’d waited too long for this to not continue onto its desperately needed conclusion.

Moving his hand from her waist, he kneaded her breast, while his thumb brushed back and forth over her nipple. Her light moans, and the tightening of her fingers on his shoulders stirred him further. He moved his head down, and drew her breast into his mouth, suckling, smiling against her silky skin as she pushed herself closer.

Elliot took her hand and placed it on his cock. “I ache to feel your hands on me.”
“I want to touch you, too. Your thing feels so soft and hard at the same time.”
He choked, holding back a laugh. “My thing?”
She dipped her head. “Well, I don’t know what to call it.”

Lord, she sounded like an untried miss, and everything protective and male in him rose to the surface, overwhelming him with tenderness. Raising her chin with his knuckle, he peered into her eyes. “Cock.”

“Cock.” She said it softly, as if she wasn’t sure it was a word she wanted to add to her vocabulary. Hearing the word never before uttered from her lips tightened every muscle he possessed, his cock growing dangerously close to spilling into her hand.

“Cock.” She squeezed it and said it again, a gentle smile on her lips.

Her grip was gentle at first, then she grew bolder, squeezing, sliding her hand up and down, her thumb teasing the tip where a drop of liquid had escaped. Not wanting to discourage her newfound boldness, he gritted his teeth until he thought his jaw would snap. Finally, his forehead beaded with sweat, he took her hand to place it on his shoulder. “That is about all I can take, sweetheart.”

He shifted his mouth to give attention to her other breast, and slid his hand from her hip to the warm folds between her legs. He grunted with male satisfaction to find her swollen and moist.

At his whispered command, she parted her legs. His fingers circled her flesh, the sound of his strokes, and the scent of her arousal, driving him further. At this rate, he would burst long before he slid inside her. Not one to take his pleasure before his lover, he increased his attentions to her center.

“Sweetheart, does that feel good? What do you like? Tell me how I can help you reach a climax.”
“Climax?”
He stopped. “Yes, your woman’s pleasure?”
She shook her head.
“An orgasm?”
When she continued to study him, her brow furrowed, he realized she had no idea what he was
talking about. Both disgusted with her deceased husband for neglecting her needs, but at the same
time, elated to be the one to show her the true pleasure of lovemaking, he said, “Trust me, my sweet.”

He returned his mouth to her breast and grazed her nipple with his teeth, then suckled again, hard.
She moaned and wrapped he hands around his neck, her fingernails digging into his flesh. Slowly, he
left her breast and kissed his way down her body, using his fingers to continue plucking her nipples.
Easing down, he lingered in spots to nip and soothe her skin. His tongue dipped into her belly button,
licking, sucking at her skin.

He glanced up, catching her staring down at him, her eyes wide as he moved even lower until his
chin brushed the top of the golden curls nestled above her feminine sweetness. “Trust me, sweeting,
let me worship you here.”

He spread her legs and dipped his head between her thighs and ran his tongue over her moist,
swollen petals. She stiffened and gripped the sheets. “Oh, I don’t think that’s allowed.”

He grinned against her heat. “When we are alone together in bed, everything we both agree to is
allowed. Now just lie back and enjoy the ride. I will be here to catch you when you fly.”

His lips suckled, licked, teased, nipped until her hands fisted his hair and a low keening sound
started from deep inside her and she stiffened her legs. Her hips rose, pressing the center of her
pleasure against his mouth. “Oh, yes, yes,” she gasped.

The sight of Charlotte in the throes of passion was almost enough to bring a swift conclusion to his
own need. He continued his attentions with his lips and tongue until her body slowly relaxed, her eyes
opened, and she gazed at him. Her cheeks were flushed, and the endearing smile she cast on him went
straight to his heart.

A fine sheen of sweat covered her body, and her breasts rose and fell. “Oh my.”

Grinning, he moved forward, nestling between her legs. He brushed back the damp curls from her
forehead and kissed her moist skin. “Let me love you, sweetheart.”

He held her face gently with his hands, gazing into her eyes as he slowly entered her, aware of how
long it had been since she’d been with a man, and not wanting to hurt her. “If I hurt you, let me know.
We can take this as slow as you need to.”

“It’s fine.” She played with the hair that had fallen on his forehead, then leaned forward so she
could kiss his jaw.

The pain in his arm grew from bracing himself above her, so he shifted his weight onto one elbow,
and closed his eyes as her warmth surrounded him. He rested his chin on her shoulder. Since he’d
anticipated this joining for some time, he knew he wouldn’t last long. “I’m sorry for the rush, but I’ve
wanted you for what seems like forever.”

She moved her head and ran her tongue around the outside of his ear, a low giggle escaping her
lips. Shifting his head, he took her mouth, teasing her lips with his tongue until she opened, and he
entered, tangling with her tongue as he continued to thrust, growing closer and closer to his climax.
Even attempting to distract himself with conjugating Latin verbs didn’t help to distract him as with
one final shove, he gritted his teeth and pulled out of her, spending himself on her stomach.

Charlotte was surprised when Elliot pulled out of her, then grateful that he thought enough of her to do
so. Gabriel, naturally, had never done that, but then they had been married, and had wished for
children.

Elliot rolled off her and turned on the pillow to smile at her. “Just give me a minute, and I will
fetch what I need to clean you up.”
For some reason, even though they’d just been intimate, the idea of him cleaning her embarrassed her. “No need. I will see to it.” Before he could respond, she swung her legs over the edge of the bed and stood. And fell right back onto the mattress, her legs unable to hold her up.

When Elliot chuckled, she tried again, this time prepared for the weakness, and was able to walk to the bowl and pitcher of water on her dresser. She glanced over her shoulder to see him grinning at her naked backside. “Stop.”

“Yes. I will. Soon.” His grin grew wider, as he shifted so his head was propped on his hand.

At least it was dark, and the light from the oil lamp only covered a certain distance, so she was in the semi-darkness as she dipped a cloth into the water and cleaned herself. Feeling chilled in the night air, she hurried back to bed, picked up her nightgown where it had landed on the floor, and slipped it over her head.

Elliot raised the blanket. “Here, let’s snuggle, and you will be warmer in no time.”

His body was warm as heated bricks as she climbed in next to him. He pulled her close, so her back was against his chest. She wiggled a bit to settle herself, then sighed. This was nice, and not something she was used to—a slap on her arse, a mumbled “thanks,” and a quick roll onto his side to fall asleep had been common with Gabriel after their conjugal relations.

Elliot kissed the top of her head and tugged her even closer, fitting them together like two spoons.

“That was incredible,” he said, his warm breath bathing her hair.

She smiled. “I bet you say that to all the women you bed.”

He gripped her chin and turned her head so he could see into her eyes. The anger there surprised her. “First of all, there haven’t been so very many in my life. I do have some control over my urges. Second, I have never said that to anyone else. Ever.”

She huffed. “I don’t believe that.” Although her experience with men was somewhat limited, given Elliot was only the second man she’d ever been intimate with, she’d heard enough gossip from various female friends that men always thought sex was incredible. “Someone once told me, one woman could be substituted for another and, if it was dark, the man could not tell the difference.”

Elliot actually looked aghast. “Whoever told you that?”

She flushed, not having expected that sort of a response. She drew circles on the coverlet with her index finger. “Someone.”

Practically climbing over her, so he could see her face clearly, he said, “Each woman has her own scent, her own feel, her own way of moving. Believe me, no one could ever take your place without me knowing it.”

Something fluttered in her stomach at his words. What had he meant by that? Could he really tell women apart in the dark, or was she someone special to him?

“All right. I will concede the point.” She flipped onto her back so she could look him in the eye. “It was incredible for me, also.”

His head descended, and he kissed her, gently, almost reverently. “I am both glad and unhappy that you never experienced an orgasm before now.”

“Orgasm.” She seemed to try the word on her lips. “I’m learning so many new words.”

His lips rested on her ear. “Oh, my dear Mrs. Pennyworth, there are many more words, describing even more pleasure, that I cannot wait to teach you.”

Her lovely face flamed a bright red.

He kissed the tip of her nose. “Now I believe we need to sleep.”

“Let me help you with your sling.”

“Yes, that is a good idea. I’m afraid all this activity has strained by arm.”
Charlotte sat up in the bed and grabbed the crumpled sling from the floor by the bed. She looped it over his head, and arranged it for him to place his arm.

“Thank you.” He brushed his lips lightly over her mouth.

They both settled into the bed, with Elliot pulling her back against his chest.

“Are you sure you want to do this? You need to rest your arm.”

“My arm is well rested. Just go to sleep.” He slid his good arm under her neck, where she rested her head. He kissed her on the back of her head. “Good night.”

Despite being exhausted, and relaxed after their lovemaking, Charlotte was wide awake long after Elliot began to snore softly beside her. Their relationship had certainly taken a turn in a direction she wasn’t sure was a good thing. Her feelings for Elliot had grown over the weeks they’d spent together, culminating in tonight’s dalliance.

The overwhelming wave of pleasure that had washed over her when Elliot had done incredibly naughty things to her still had the ability to take her breath away. She now knew what she’d been missing when she and Gabriel had made love. She also understood the mysterious looks passed between husbands and wives that she had often wondered about.

It was a mystery no longer. Despite having been married before, she finally felt like a woman who knew what the joining of a man and woman really meant. How it could change one’s life.

Eventually, her exhausted body took over and sleep nudged at the back of her mind. With a wide yawn, she succumbed, and fell into a deep slumber, comfortable in Elliot’s arms.

The sun peeked out from behind the partially drawn curtains at the window. At first she was confused at having a warm body next to her in her bed.

“Good morning, sweetheart.” Elliot’s deep voice jolted her for a minute, then the memory of last night, and the pleasure they’d shared, warmed her.

She cleared her throat. “Good morning.” She rolled over and faced him. “You should have left my room earlier. Bridget will be up here soon.”

“I will scurry back to my room momentarily. But first there is something I wish to say.”

“What?”

He tilted his head as he watched her carefully. “Actually, it is more of a question.”

She returned his regard with raised eyebrows, her heart thudding. “Yes?”

He took her hand in his and kissed her knuckles. “Mrs. Pennyworth, would you do me the great honor of becoming my wife?”
Chapter Twenty-One

Despite what seemed like a surprise to Charlotte, Elliot had given a lot of thought to his proposal. It obviously appeared to her that it had sprung from their lovemaking last night. Admittedly, that had been the catalyst for his proposal, but his thoughts had wandered in the direction of her as his wife for a while. He was still unsure about her hiding something from him, but the more he’d come to know her, the more he was certain nothing nefarious could ever be attached to her.

In other words, she was no Annabelle.

“Marriage?” The shock on her face looked as if he had proposed they run naked through the streets together.

“Yes. Marriage. Based on what happened here last night,” he waved his hand at the two of them, “I think we are certainly compatible. We have been working together for several weeks, and have gotten along just fine.”

“I hadn’t planned on ever marrying again.”

He frowned. “Why not? Isn’t that what most women want? Husband, home, children?”

She shifted and sat up so she leaned against the headboard, and regarded him. “The primary reason women desire the married state is because there are very few opportunities for them to provide for themselves. I worked for a bank before I married Mr. Pennyworth, and believe me, it was not a pleasant undertaking.”

Easing himself up, trying to hold his arm steady, he joined her, leaning against the headboard. “Why is that?”

“Women are not respected in the workplace. I must have been asked two or three times every day why I was not married, and busy raising children. I was accused of depriving some man of his livelihood. In fact, when Mr. Fenster hired me, he told me in no uncertain terms that the only reason I got the job was because no man had applied for it up until then, and he needed someone right away, since the man I was replacing had died.”

“Yet, you did marry.”

She gazed off into the room. “I married Mr. Pennyworth because he was charming, and at that point I had no reason to eschew marriage.”

“But you do now?”

“Not to dishonor the dead, but my husband was a bit foolish.” She gave him a wistful smile. “He worked hard at his law practice, but every hour not spent at his office was filled with games of chance, races, visiting his club, and accepting stupid wagers.” She shook her head. “Aside from Mr. Talbot—and I never understood why they favored each other—Gabriel’s friends were of a silly nature, also. It was one of their wagers that cost him his life.”

Sensing her reluctance to continue, he covered her hand with his. “You have done a fine job of dodging my question, sweeting. Will you marry me?”

A light scratch on the door drew their attention, and he swore Charlotte breathed a sigh of relief. “That is Bridget. I will send her away, and then you must go back to your room before she returns.”

Charlotte quickly pulled on her dressing gown and padded to the door and opened it, her body blocking Bridget’s view of the bed. “I am feeling a bit lazy this morning. Can you please bring me a tray? I shall return to bed.”

“Yes, of course.” The girl hurried away, and Charlotte turned back to him.
“You must leave now.”
He gathered his clothes and hurriedly dressed himself. As he reached the door, he turned back to where Charlotte sat on the edge of her bed. “I will expect an answer…this morning.” With those words, he gave her a slight kiss on her lips and left the room to return to the bedchamber he’d been occupying.
With Charlotte having a tray in her room and not joining him for breakfast, he was left alone in the dining room, contemplating the night before, his proposal to Charlotte this morning, and her reluctance to accept.
When she hadn’t appeared from behind closed doors by mid-morning, he gathered up the papers he’d been working on and stuffed them into a satchel. He had to visit one of his clients regarding some legal work. He caught Thomas at the door and reminded him that any packages delivered should not be presented to Mrs. Pennyworth, until his return. She was not to open anything without him present. He also reminded the footman that he should attempt to stop any delivery person and hold him until Elliot returned.
Feeling as though he’d covered everything, he caught the omnibus to the business district where his client’s offices were located. The day was chilly, a certain reminder that winter was on its way. He pulled his coat tighter around him as he left the vehicle and walked the two blocks to Mr. Granger’s office.
He had his head down against the wind that threatened to blow him off his feet when he glanced up at the jewelry store across the street. The door to the shop opened, and Mr. Talbot stepped out. Every time Elliot saw the man, he became more suspicious. He waited until Talbot had rounded the corner, and then switching directions, Elliot crossed the street and entered the jewelry shop.
An elderly man stood behind the counter and glanced up when Elliot closed the door. Two women stood at the end of the counter, examining watches. He approached the man. “Good morning.”
“Good morning, my good man. How may I assist you?” Despite the wrinkles, the man’s bright smile brought youth to his face.
“I am interested in purchasing a bracelet. One with diamonds. Do you have such a thing?”
The man’s eyes lit up at the possibility of selling an expensive piece of jewelry. “Yes, indeed I do. Excuse me for a moment.” He ambled to the opposite end of the counter from where the women stood and removed a velvet tray that he placed on the counter in front of him. He pulled back a black linen cloth to reveal three bracelets. “These are my finest pieces.”
Elliot studied them. “But none of them are what I am looking for. I was hoping to find a bracelet similar to one the man who just left had shown me. It was gold, with rubies and diamonds imbedded. He said he had purchased it here.”
Elliot watched the man as he considered for a minute. “Oh, yes. Mr. Talbot. He did purchase a lovely bracelet, just like the one you described.” His smile faded. “I’m afraid that was the only gold diamond and ruby bracelet I had. I am expecting more in my next shipment, but that won’t be for another month.”

Yes!
“Thank you for your time, anyway, sir. I will continue to search.” Elliot left the shop lighthearted. Between the spiders, Talbot being left-handed, and now this new bit of information that Talbot had purchased the bracelet, it was plain he was their man. Why he would leave the horrible packages for her was still a puzzle. The only reason that made sense at all was his previous consideration that Talbot intended to frighten Charlotte into believing she was not safe living alone, and he would have
eventually stepped in to offer his hand in marriage. Whatever the man’s reasoning had been, Elliot intended to take care of the legal matters he needed to deal with, and then make a visit to Mr. Talbot’s home.

Charlotte spent the first few hours of the day practically hiding in her bedchamber. After breaking her fast with the tray of toast, coddled eggs, and tea that Bridget had brought her, she had a hot bath in her newly installed bathing room. While she soaked in the tub, easing the soreness between her legs due to the unfamiliar activity, she thought long and hard on Elliot’s proposal. 

Marriage.

True, her experience with marriage had been short and sweet, but dare she take the chance to again place her heart in danger? Elliot had such a perilous job, it terrified her. While Gabriel had been charming and a bit of a daredevil, Elliot was more solid and steady. She doubted she would have to worry about him staying out all night playing cards, or recklessly racing around Hyde Park in a carriage. But with him, she had other worries, if she were to place her trust, her life—and most of all—her heart, into his hands.

He could be killed on one of his assignments—much like he was almost killed helping her. Another concern was her reluctance to share her problem with him on the Lord Barton matter. Would he become her champion, and confront Barton? Or would he assume she had been guilty as charged?

Feeling the beginning of a headache coming on, and tying herself into knots over the issue of marriage, and, in particular, marriage to Elliot, she stepped out of the tub and rang for Bridget to assist her with dressing. Once dried, dressed, and ready for the day, she left her room and went in search of Elliot, only to find he had left the house earlier and had still not returned.

She was just sitting down to luncheon when Elliot strode through the door, a bright smile on his face. “I believe we have our man.”

“Really?” Her heart thudded at his announcement, and she waved to the chair across from her. Thomas quickly set a place for Elliot as she regarded him with excitement. “Tell me who, and why, and…” Unable to form a coherent sentence with the idea of this all coming to an end, instead, she passed him the plate of warm bread that Thomas had just placed on the table. His words, along with the fragrance from the bread, and the lovely scent from the fish stew, brought her a sense of comfort and peace she hadn’t felt in weeks.

Elliot spread butter on his bread as he spoke. “I just happened to be passing by a jewelry store on Bond Street and saw Mr. Talbot coming out of the shop.”

“Mr. Talbot!” Her stomach knotted at hearing her old friend’s name. She shook her head. “I am sorry for my outburst. I am quite distressed.”

“On a hunch, I went into the store and spoke with the owner. I asked about purchasing a diamond bracelet, and told him the gentleman who had just left his shop had showed me one. The shop owner knew Mr. Talbot by name, and said that yes, he had bought a diamond and ruby bracelet from him a few weeks ago.”

All the breath left her lungs, and she collapsed back onto her chair. “I am so surprised to hear this.” She shook her head, tears forming in her eyes. Was the end of the torture worth the pain she felt at Mr. Talbot’s betrayal? “What did you do?”

“Nothing yet. I am sure Talbot is our man, but since I have no concrete evidence, I must think of a
way I can get him to confess. Up until I had been attacked, and then shot at, no crime had been committed, so there had been no reason to alert the authorities. Things have changed now, so we must have absolute proof, or a confession, in order to call in Scotland Yard.”

She shook her head, still reeling with the idea of Mr. Talbot leaving such disgusting and terrifying things on her doorstep. “Where do the flowers fit in?”

“I don’t know. But if his mind is so disturbed as to leave dead animals on your doorstep, then who knows how the flowers fit in?” He shrugged. “I admit I am at a loss to explain human behavior. Word at Scotland Yard is that the so-called Jack the Ripper is a doctor or surgeon. Who would ever think someone with that sort of an education and brain would suddenly begin to attack prostitutes?”

“It is a sad world we live in.” Her appetite gone, Charlotte pushed the dish of stew away from her, pulling her cup of tea forward with shaky hands.

“Have you thought over my proposal?” In all the excitement of narrowing down the tiny list of suspects to just one, and planning how to bring the matter to an end, Elliot had pushed the idea of marriage to the back of his mind. Now sitting here with Charlotte, it emerged as an important issue to be settled.

Charlotte raised her chin. “Yes, I have thought it over, and I do not see why we should marry merely because we…” She flushed.

He grinned and covered her hand with his. “Made love?”

“Yes. I am no longer a maiden. We are adults, neither of us have made a commitment to anyone else, so there is no reason to assume that we must therefore rush into marriage.”

“So then, you wish to have an affair?”

She gave him a brief nod, looking far too determined for his liking. He realized he did very much want to marry Charlotte. She was smart, beautiful, graceful, and everything he ever wanted in a wife. She would be a wonderful mother to any children they had. Which brought him to another point.

“Suppose there is a child?”

Charlotte reared back as if she’d been slapped. “A child?”

“Yes, those little people who have a nasty habit of appearing about nine months after a couple spend time together doing what we did last night.”

She sighed. “I am well aware of that. But I was married to Gabriel and never conceived. And,” she added, “you took precautions.”

“You were certainly not married long enough to consider yourself barren, and yes, even though I withdrew, that method is not foolproof. Many children have made an appearance after coitus interruptus.” He chuckled. “That is another new term to add to your growing vocabulary.”

Proposing marriage had seemed the gentlemanly thing to do when he’d suggested it this morning, but now after careful consideration, he truly did want to marry her. “So, we are at a stalemate. Should I assume from your comments that you are rejecting my offer of marriage?”

She turned from his regard and chewed her lip. “Marriage is a big step.” She picked up her teacup and sipped. “What are your plans as far as Mr. Talbot is concerned? Shouldn’t we be discussing that? I am quite anxious to put this all behind me.”

It was apparent she was not going to give him an answer straight away, but she hadn’t flat out rejected him, either. He would bide his time, and concentrate on clearing up the Talbot matter before he pushed her. But now that his mind was made up, push her he would. Tenacity had always been one of his strong points.
"I will visit with the man tomorrow. I’m not exactly sure just yet how I will approach him. Sometimes the correct procedure is for one to see what a suspect has to say for himself before making accusations."

"I would like to go with you."

"No. Absolutely not." That was not something on which he needed to think about.

"Why not? If he has betrayed my friendship in this manner, I want to be there to see him admit it."

"Sweetheart, have you forgotten this man arranged for me to be beat up, and then shot? He is much too dangerous. You will stay right here, and I will report back to you the minute I am through with him."

The next afternoon, Elliot signed the final piece of correspondence Mr. Gleason had sent over, and laid down his pen. With his thumb and index finger, he rubbed his eyes, forming in his mind how he intended to begin the conversation with Talbot.

Given the injuries he’d already received from the man’s henchman, he pulled open the middle drawer in his desk and removed his pistol. Thank goodness his injury had been on his left side. Although he’d removed the sling, his arm and hand were still a bit sore and stiff. Assured that the gun was loaded, he tucked it into the side pocket of his jacket.

He double-checked the direction Charlotte had given him, which she’d copied from her invitation list. Just as he rose to leave, Charlotte entered the library.

"Are you ready to go, then?"

"Yes."

She gripped her middle and looked out the window. “I wish you would bring someone from Scotland Yard with you.”

He walked over to her, wrapping his arms around her from behind. She leaned into his warmth.

“Please remember I am a trained officer of the law, and I am carrying my gun.”

She turned in his arms and viewed him with fearful eyes.

“I will be fine. Soon this will all be over, and you can go back to your peaceful life.”

“He is dangerous. You’ve said so yourself.” She leaned back and searched his face. “And, based on what he’s been doing to me, he is not mentally balanced.”

Elliot tapped the edge of her pert nose. “He is not dangerous. He hired someone who is dangerous. I am willing to wager Talbot does not expect me to show up at his house. The cretin he hired will not be there to act as his lackey.”

Did all this worry stem from feelings she had for him? Feelings that he might use in the future to get her to marry him? Reluctantly, he pulled away from her. “I must go.”

They walked together to the door, where she offered him a stiff goodbye. He handed Thomas the letters with instructions to see them posted, then turned to Charlotte. Although Thomas stood only a few feet from them, he pulled Charlotte into his arms, and kissed her with all the longing he felt.

The weather outside was cold, a blustery wind kicking up dust as he left the omnibus and headed to Talbot’s townhouse. As he approached the front door of the direction written on the paper, a servant stood on the steps, draping the door with a length of black fabric.

After double-checking to make sure he had the correct address, Elliot bounded up the steps. “Has there been a death?”

The servant turned, his face pale. “Yes, sir. Mr. Talbot has left this earth for his final reward.”
Several hours had passed since Elliot had left the house, and every minute had been torture for Charlotte. She’d pushed away the luncheon Cook had sent in and spent most of her time pacing the library, or staring out the window.

The sound of the front door opening made her race—very unladylike—to the front door. She released a huge breath as Elliot stepped into the entrance hall, looking hale and hearty. He gave her a grim smile—what did that mean?—and shrugged out of his coat and handed it, along with his hat and gloves, to Thomas. He rubbed his hands together as he walked toward her. “I skipped luncheon and am famished.”

“Yes, of course.” She looked at Thomas. “Please have Cook send in a tray to the library for Mr. Baker.”

They both entered the room, and he closed the door, heading directly to the fireplace, where he extended his hands to warm them. Charlotte attempted to be patient, but finally gave up. “What happened?”

His grim countenance troubled her. He looked as though he hadn’t been injured, but he also did not have the look of someone who had solved a difficult problem, and was ready to tell her about it. Had they been wrong? Had Mr. Talbot disputed all of their facts that had led to their conclusion?

Without answering her question, Elliot moved to the sideboard and poured a brandy for himself. She was a bit confused when he poured a sherry for her, also. Crossing the room, he handed the glass to her just as Thomas entered the room with a tray of bread, cheese, cold meat, and fruit.

“Just place it on the table.” Charlotte waved to the small table between the deep green-and-white striped settee and matching chair.

They took their seats, and Elliot downed his glass of brandy and set it alongside the plate of food. He sliced a piece of cheese from the block and looked up at her. “Talbot is dead.”

Charlotte hopped up from her seat. “Dead?” Her shrill voice echoed in the room. “Did you kill him?”

He shook his head and took a bite of cheese. “He was dead before I got there.”

That meant Elliot never got to speak to the man. In that case, there was no reason for him to put aside the meal he apparently needed. “Go ahead and eat. We can discuss it later.” She hesitated. “Although, if you never got to speak with him, there isn’t much to be said, is there?”

He swallowed and wiped his mouth with the napkin. “There is more to tell you, some of which is rather gruesome, I’m afraid.”

“Oh, dear.”

“Yes.”

She pointed to the table. “Why don’t you finish up your meal, then.” Perhaps a spot of sherry would be just the thing, after all. She took a sip, shrugged her shoulders, then tossed down the rest of the liquid.

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Once Elliot had finished his luncheon, he picked up their two glasses and refilled them. “You may need this.”

Settled on the settee, he twirled the liquid in his brandy glass, staring into the contents. “It seems
Mr. Talbot’s body was found along the London docks by a man returning from an all-night visit with one of the ladies of the evening."

Charlotte sucked in a deep breath. “That’s terrible. What happened to him?”

“He’d been bludgeoned, and left for dead.” He swirled the brandy once more, then took a healthy swallow. “I found his servant draping the front door with black, and after he told me Talbot was dead, and had not merely expired in his bed while he slept, I went to Scotland Yard.”

Elliot stood and placed his hands behind his back, and walked to the window. Everything seemed normal and peaceful out there, as opposed to his insides, which were still churning after his visit with Scotland Yard, and viewing Mr. Talbot’s body.

“The Yard has determined that Talbot had visited one of the pubs along the London Docks and was robbed, then beaten.” He didn’t intend to tell Charlotte the truly gruesome part of the tale.

Talbot’s calling cards had been on his body, tucked into his waistcoat, and word had been sent to his home. Because Talbot had no relatives, his valet had gone to the Yard to identify the body. When Elliot had entered the morgue, Talbot’s body was about to be autopsied. Anxious to know if it was the beating that had killed him, he’d remained to watch.

It had not been his first autopsy, but it was the first time he’d known the victim. The doctor confirmed that Talbot had died of blunt force trauma to the head. What made the discovery of the body so much worse was the fact that animals apparently had gotten to the corpse before it had been discovered.

He shuddered at the memory of the missing limb, and walked back to the table where he’d left his brandy, and took a deep draught to help keep his luncheon down. He sat next to Charlotte on the settee. “I stayed for the autopsy, and the doctor confirmed that the beating is what killed Mr. Talbot.”

She shook her head. “That is dreadful.”

“The not-so-dreadful part of the story is, since more than likely Talbot was our man, you should no longer receive packages on the front steps.”

“That is a relief.” She stood and rubbed her palms up and down her arms. “I don’t even know if Mr. Talbot has family that would see to his burial.”

“Somehow Mr. Spencer got word of Talbot’s death, and I met him on my way out of Scotland Yard. He said the church would see to the man’s burial. He intends to hold the funeral tomorrow at ten o’clock.”

“We must attend.”

Elliot nodded. Talbot’s death had ended any need for him to confront the man and go through all the legal machinations that would have been necessary had he been charged with hiring the man who had beaten, and then shot at him. However, instead of feeling satisfaction at the closing of an assignment, he felt at loose ends. Perhaps it had ended too swiftly, too easily.

Too opportunely.

Or maybe he felt that way because he hadn’t gotten to accuse the man to his face, and hear his explanation. That would always remain a mystery. Why had Talbot thought harassing Charlotte in that way would drive her into his arms? Or had that even been his motive?

On another note, Charlotte still had not answered his proposal. He watched her as she paced, growing paler by the minute. “Charlotte?”

“Yes.” She stopped in front of him, fumbling with the buttons on her gown. “What is it?”

“You don’t look well.”

She collapsed onto the settee. “Yes, I don’t feel well, either.” She turned, facing him. “I have known Mr. Talbot for some time, and I can’t help but remember how nice he was to me after Gabriel
died.” Tears formed in her eyes. “He was such a source of strength for me. I just find it hard to…”

Elliot drew her to him, wrapping her in his arms. “I understand.”

Charlotte spoke into his chest. “I did not want to believe he was the one. I really, really did not want to believe it.”

“Honey, the evidence was all there.”

“I know.” She wiped the corner of her eye with her knuckle. Elliot withdrew his handkerchief from his pocket and handed it to her.

She smiled her thanks, and then proceeded to twist the scrap of linen into knots. “Oh, dear. I wonder if Miss Garvey knows. She seemed to be quite friendly with him. We have to be sure to notify her, oh, and some of our other friends, if Mr. Spencer is holding the funeral as soon as tomorrow.”

The thought of things to be done seemed to offer Charlotte some peace and control, which was a good thing.

“If you write notes to your friends, and give me a list, between me and Thomas, we can get them all delivered this afternoon. It would be quite sad if there were only the two of us at the funeral.”

“Yes. I can do that.” Charlotte retrieved a lap desk from a stand across the room and returned to sit with him. “One problem I already foresee. I don’t have Miss Garvey’s direction. I never got her card from that night at the assembly.” She tapped the pen against her lips. “As much as I am not too fond of the woman, she does need to be notified.”

“Would anyone else in your circle of friends know where she resides?”

Charlotte shook her head. “I doubt it. She first appeared with Mr. Talbot, and as far as I could see, she never became overly friendly with anyone else.”

“She is an odd duck.” Elliot would have preferred to call her something else after the cold reception he’d received from her at the last dinner party, but he agreed it was necessary to find a way to notify her. “Maybe Mr. Spencer knows more.”

“Yes. A good idea. Would you mind taking the carriage and going to the vicar’s house and seeing to that? In the meantime, I will write out the notes which you and Thomas can deliver when you return.”


The morning of the funeral dawned perfect for the somber event. Low clouds threatened rain, the air was cool, and the last of the autumn leaves tumbled to the ground as he and Charlotte rode the distance from her townhouse to the small church.

Mr. Spencer stood outside, in his formal robes, as they drove up. Three other carriages arrived at the same time, all four coaches stopping behind each other. Elliot opened the door and held out his hand to Charlotte.

Nodding to each other, they all moved inside. Elliot was surprised to see Detective Longforth in the last pew of the church. It was not unusual for a police officer to make an appearance at the funeral of someone who had been murdered, especially when they were still looking for suspects. But Elliot thought they had determined that Talbot had been accosted by footpads, robbed, and then beaten. Those sort of criminals were rarely caught.

All homicides were investigated, and all suspects sought, but because most cases of murder at the docksides went unsolved, the paperwork was generally shoved into a file cabinet somewhere. Due to public outcry, every available detective was busy tracking down the so-called Jack the Ripper.

The crowd gathered, taking up three pews, with the casket in front of the sanctuary. Elliot recognized some of the mourners, most of them from the circle of friends he had grown to know through his association with Charlotte. Talbot’s servant, who Elliot had seen draping the doorway
with a black cloth, sat at the back of the church, along with a few others, most likely Talbot’s staff.

Mr. Spencer, of course, took the opportunity to berate those attending the funeral about the dangers to be had in frequenting unsavory establishments in dangerous locations. He had very little to say about the deceased, no surprise there, since Spencer hadn’t been vicar at the church very long.

Charlotte dabbed at the corners of her eyes with a perfume-scented lace handkerchief. When she rested her hands in her lap, Elliot placed his hand on top of hers and squeezed. He recognized how difficult this must be for her, since Talbot was also a link to her deceased husband.

While Spencer rambled on, Elliot’s thoughts drifted to Talbot, and the assumption that he’d been the one leaving the packages. There had been several things that pointed to him, but Elliot would have felt much better had he been able to confront the man. He still felt a sense of incompletion.

Once Spencer finished berating the mourners, he led the procession to the graveyard, where Talbot was to be interred. A light sprinkle started as they left the church. Elliot leaned in close to Charlotte, who had begun to shiver. “Perhaps it would be best if you waited in the carriage. There is no need for you to stand by the graveside.”

At first it appeared she would argue, then she nodded, and he motioned for Bones to come and escort her.

Charlotte settled in the padded seat and leaned back, closing her eyes. She felt weary all the way to her bones. Since she’d received the news from Elliot yesterday, she’d been tied in knots. She was extremely sad that Mr. Talbot had come to such an unfortunate end. He’d been such a good friend to her. She had fond memories of his visits when Gabriel had been alive. He and her deceased husband had spent many a night at her dining room table, arguing horseflesh and wagering. Those had been enjoyable times.

Then there was the strong possibility he’d been the one leaving packages on her front door step. To what end? That was the question that troubled her more than anything, and had kept her awake since Elliot had discovered Mr. Talbot had purchased the bracelet.

Why would he do such a thing? Spend a great deal of money on something he intended to give away, along with a dead animal? Elliot seemed to think it was a twisted sort of courtship. Admittedly, she was no investigator, but certainly no one in his right mind would think dead animals were a way to profess your love for a woman.

But then, no one in their right mind would do the things he’d done, anyway. She sighed and looked out the window. It was all so complicated, and enervating.

As she viewed the mourners surrounding the casket, she took note of Miss Garvey. She stood apart from the rest of the group, her head bowed, hands clenched together. The poor woman. She and Mr. Talbot had been friends, and no doubt she was suffering more than anyone else present.

At least Charlotte would have some peace now, and not have to shudder every time she opened her front door. She could return to her very quiet life.

With all that had happened yesterday, and the funeral today, she’d pushed Elliot’s proposal to the back of her mind. Now it presented itself front and center.

“Will you marry me?”

She was in love with him. There was no doubt about that. However, she did not want to be a widow again. At least not for many, many years. Elliot had already been shot in his line of work.

She had been happy with her life just as it was. But, after knowing Elliot, spending time with him, and above all, what they’d shared intimately, her life could never return to the way it had been.
Should they marry, all the things she enjoyed about her life: her charitable work, the group of friends she saw on a regular basis, the trips to the museums, theater, and parks, would not change. What would change—a man in her life again—might not be so terrible, based on the time they’d spent together as companions, and more so as lovers.

Additionally, in favor of his marriage proposal was something Elliot had pointed out, that truth be known, was dear to her heart. Babies had a way of making an appearance after marriage. She’d dreamed of becoming a mother from the time she’d been a little girl. It had seemed a reality once she and Gabriel had married. Then that dream, upon Gabriel’s death, had been snatched from her.

She had to face it. She was a coward. Once a woman depended upon a man, she lost a certain amount of control over her life. For better or worse. She was capable now, in control, able to take care of herself. But aside from his work, she knew Elliot would be a fine husband.

Were she to admit it, the main reason she hesitated was not his work, but starting off a marriage with a lie—even a lie by omission—was definitely the wrong way to begin married life.

The carriage rocked as Elliot climbed up and entered. She’d been so engrossed in her meanderings, she hadn’t noticed the group of mourners had broken up and were all headed toward their carriages.

“Lord and Lady Monroe have invited everyone to attend a small reception and memorial for Mr. Talbot at their house. I told them I would see if you are up to it.”

“This is to take place now?”

He nodded.

“I am so torn. In one way, I am very sorry that Mr. Talbot has died, and under such horrible circumstances. On the other hand, if he was truly the man harassing me, and hired someone to kill you, then he was not the man I knew and cared about.”

Elliot placed his hand on hers. “It is up to you, my dear.”

She chewed her lip and gazed out the window at the light rain that had begun to fall. Tears from the sky. Fitting for a funeral. “Yes. I think we should go. No one, except us, has any idea of what he was capable of, and why tarnish his memory for those who knew him all these years? We will go, pay our respects, and then leave.”

Elliot stepped out of the carriage to direct Bones to follow the other carriages. He settled back in, but instead of taking the bench across the way, he sat on the seat alongside her and drew her head to his chest.

Comfort. Another reason why she enjoyed Elliot’s company. He would make a fine husband. He was very thoughtful of her, kind, and gentle. “You appear fatigued. Did you get much sleep last night?”

She sat back, immediately regretting the loss of his warmth. “No. I’m afraid I tossed and turned a great deal.”

He studied her, and for a moment she thought he might once again ask her about his proposal, but he merely gathered her into his arms as the carriage continued on to Lord Monroe’s townhouse.
Chapter Twenty-Three

Charlotte was reluctant to breathe a sigh of relief at having Mr. Talbot deceased, and the dreaded arrival of packages stopped. But after a week had gone by with nothing new appearing on her doorstep, she began to believe that Mr. Talbot had truly been the one harassing her.

She drew on her gloves and viewed herself in the mirror at the entrance hall. Elliot was to arrive shortly to escort her to an assembly. After the funeral, he’d moved back into his rooms, and she hadn’t seen him since. He sent a note around that he’d been quite busy catching up on work that had been neglected while he’d worked on her case. The next day, he’d sent another note asking her to attend the assembly with him.

During their time apart, she admitted to herself that despite her best intentions, she’d fallen hopelessly in love. She’d tried ever so hard to avoid it, but once he was gone, she knew it to be true. Her concerns about marriage to a man with such a dangerous occupation had taken a backseat to her newfound, or perhaps, her newly acknowledged, feelings for him.

She drifted into the drawing room to await his arrival. The fact that he had not mentioned his marriage proposal concerned her. Had he changed his mind? Too restless to sit, she walked the room, trying to settle her restless mind.

A rap at the front door drew her attention. Once she heard Elliot’s voice, she left the drawing room to join him. Her heart pounded and her breath caught as she spotted him speaking with Thomas. His hair had still not dried completely from his bath, and damp curls fell on his broad forehead.

His overcoat accented his broad shoulders, and the muscles on his arms. He turned as she approached and offered her a bright smile. Her knees turned to jelly, and she knew right then if he were to repeat his proposal, she would accept. With pleasure.

“Good evening, Mrs. Pennyworth.” He gave her a slight bow and took her extended hand. “You are looking lovely this evening, as always.”

For goodness sake, she felt a blush begin in her middle and rise all the way to her face. “Thank you, Mr. Baker. You are looking quite well, yourself. I assume your arm has continued to heal?”

“Yes.” He rotated his arm. “Still a bit sore, but otherwise, I am as good as new.” He took her coat from Thomas and held it out for her. Feeling like a young miss on her first outing with a man, she stifled a giggle and turned to allow him to assist her into the garment.

Elliot extended his arm. “Shall we be off?”

The ride to the assembly was quite pleasant, with them chatting about recent events in the newspaper.

“One story that did not make the newspapers, took place in my office.”

Charlotte offered him an encouraging smile. “Oh?”

“A woman made an appointment for this morning. She told my secretary she wished to draw up a will. When she arrived, it was with a great deal of pomp and circumstance. She brought a maid and footman with her, who held four dogs on their laps. The woman requested tea even before she sat down and had me rearrange the chairs in my office to suit what she said was a ‘more pleasant arrangement.’”

“Well, that was pretty pretentious of her.”

“The best is yet to come.” He rested his foot on his knee, his grin growing wider. “She apparently had a great deal of money. We went through the usual procedure of to whom she wanted to leave
various items. When we reached her—considerable—fortune, she handed me a list of names. “Client confidentiality prohibits me from stating the names, but there were seven first and last names. All the last names were the same as hers, so I assumed they were siblings, or perhaps children.”

The assembly rooms rose out of the mist, the lights from inside the building casting a glow on the carriages that stopped to discharge passengers. “You must finish your story. The humor in your eyes tells me there is something very funny about this.”

“Indeed. When I questioned her further, it turned out the seven heirs to her fortune were dogs.”

“Dogs?”

“Yes, dogs. The four who had accompanied her to my office, along with three others she told me were at home, not enjoying travel as much.”

Charlotte burst out laughing, thinking how she had missed him, and how entertaining he could be. They both laughed so hard, they could hardly catch their breath.

Once their vehicle came to a stop, a footman hired for the evening to assist the guests opened the door to the carriage. Elliot stepped out first and nudged the man aside, so he could help Charlotte out. She smiled to herself at the glare he sent the footman, who backed away, and returned to his post at the door.

It felt good to be out and about once again. She found it amusing that she’d attended numerous events by herself before Elliot had come into her life, yet she had refused two invitations since he’d gone back to his rooms, because she had not wanted to attend alone. As they reached the doorway, it occurred to her that she would not see Mr. Talbot here. She sighed, again feeling conflicted at the loss of her friend. A quick glance around the room told her Miss Garvey was absent, as well. Perhaps they would not see her again, either, since Mr. Talbot had seemed to be her only close friend.

“Is everything all right?” Elliot leaned down and spoke quietly into her ear. “You seem somewhat saddened.”

She shook off her malaise. “Yes, everything is fine.” Offering him a bright smile, she walked with him into the room, greeting friends she hadn’t seen since the funeral. A trio of musicians finished tuning up, and the master of ceremonies announced the first set, a cotillion. She and Elliot joined the line of dancers.

Once they returned from the rigors of the dance, Elliot fetched her a lemonade, and Lord Monroe approached her to request a dance. She reached out to take the glass from Elliot, as he bent toward her. “Save at least one waltz for me.”

She grinned and waved her dance card at him. “Just pick one.”

A list of the dances that would be played throughout the evening was printed on her dance card, along with a space for a gentleman to write his name. Elliot picked the supper waltz, scrawled his name there with the small pencil attached to the card and winked at her. “I will see you later.”

He strolled away, stopping a couple of women, and writing his name on their cards. It amazed her how annoyed she felt when one of them batted her eyes at him. Mr. Glenmoor stepped up and requested a dance, and she walked to the line of dancers on his arm, all the time watching Elliot make his way around the room, chatting, and requesting dances.

Elliot tried his best to pay attention to Miss Chalvers, whom he was partnering in the quadrille. The woman relentlessly chatted on about nonsense to the point that he blocked out the sound of her voice, and instead let his eyes wander toward Charlotte. After this set, the supper waltz was next, and he
could not wait to hold her in his arms.

He’d missed her almost to distraction in the week they’d been separated. He’d had, as he’d told her, work that needed his attention. The time chasing down Talbot, and then recovering from the attack, and then the gunshot wound, had put him far behind in his law practice.

Several times over the past couple of years he’d considered dropping the investigation part of his business. His legal work was taking up more time each month, and it was far less dangerous. But, after his years in police work, he had enjoyed the investigatory part of his business, and had been reluctant to relinquish it.

Thankfully, the quadrille came to an end, and he escorted Miss Chalvers back to her mother and wended his way through the crowd to Charlotte. Mr. Jones-Smith was just returning her to a group of her friends when he reached her. “You seem a bit flushed. Would you care for a stroll on the patio before the next dance?”

Charlotte waved her fan in her face. “Yes, that would be pleasant. It is warm in here.” After a slight nod to the ladies she was speaking with, he extended his arm, and she walked with him through the throng and out the French doors to the patio.

“Ah, this feels much better. I was really quite warm.” Charlotte took in a deep breath of air.

“It’s stuffy in there, but you must be careful because it is chilly out here in the night air.”

When Charlotte had joined him in her entrance hall earlier, he’d decided that whatever it took, he would have her consent to his marriage proposal.

Once they had entered the carriage, he’d vowed to press his suit that very night. Now that the problem of the gruesome packages had been solved, he wanted to move forward with his life. With Charlotte.

“It feels odd to be at one of these events and not see Mr. Talbot across the room, chatting away with someone.” Charlotte sighed. “I still have a hard time with it.”

Elliot took her hand in his, interlacing her fingers. “We never truly know anyone, sweetheart. Talbot had some sort of obsession that manifested itself in leaving things for you.”

“But why dead animals?”

He shrugged. “I’m afraid we will never know. But it is best if you put it all behind you.”

The musicians started up the waltz, and he turned to her. “My dance, I believe?”

They returned to the room, and he swept her into his arms. This was precisely where he wanted Charlotte. They obviously suited. In every way.

The dance did not last long enough for his liking, and he released her with reluctance, but he had the privilege of escorting her into supper. The tables were set with platters of cold meats, bread, cheese, soups, and jellies. A separate table held sweets and fruit.

He filled two plates and made his way through the crowd to where Charlotte sat, conversing with Lord and Lady Monroe. Once again, his heart lifted at the sight of her. Yes, he was in love. Perhaps foolishly, but nevertheless, there it was. She was his.

Once he placed the plate in front of her, he settled next to her and waved to a footman to bring them drinks. Unfortunately, at the assemblies no alcohol was served, so he had to imbibe warm lemonade.

“Mr. Baker, I was just telling Mrs. Pennyworth about the new art collection that has arrived at the museum. I am sure the both of you would enjoy viewing it.”

Elliot looked at Charlotte. “Would you care to go??

“Yes, I believe I would.”

“Excellent. Perhaps the four of us can take the trip there. I haven’t been there yet, myself, but I hear it is spectacular.” Lord Monroe leaned forward, the enthusiasm in his voice contagious.
Elliot hadn’t delved much into the art world, since it had never been one of his favorite types of activities. However, when he had escorted Charlotte, he’d discovered that it was rather interesting, and not at all as tiresome as he’d assumed.

“Shall we say Thursday, next, then?” Lady Monroe beamed at the two of them.
Elliot turned to Charlotte. “Is that acceptable to you?”
She nodded, and the date was set. They continued to chat amicably until the musicians started up again. He leaned toward her. “Do you wish to continue with the dance, or would you prefer to return home?”

Charlotte considered Elliot’s words. In truth, she was not very tired, but she did want some time alone with him. Would he repeat his proposal?

“Yes, I am feeling a bit weary. Perhaps we should take our leave.”
Elliot stood and pulled out Charlotte’s chair. “If you will excuse us, my lord, my lady, Mrs. Pennyworth and I are making an early night of it.”

“Yes, of course. You do look a bit peaked, my dear.” Lady Monroe smiled fondly at Charlotte. “I will see you both Thursday next for our jaunt to the art museum. I will send around a note with the time we can meet up.”

Once in the carriage, Elliot began, “I would like a few words with you once we arrive at your home, or are you truly feeling fatigued?”

“A bit, but certainly not enough to retire just yet. I could use a sherry to finish out the night.”

Elliot nodded, and Charlotte gazed out at the passing streetlights that appeared in the mist. Elliot seemed so grim. Had he changed his mind about them, and was not looking forward to telling her goodbye?

Once they arrived at her home, they gave their coats to Thomas and moved to the library. Elliot poured their drinks and walked toward her, his eyes never leaving hers. He handed her the glass and sat. After they both took a sip, he removed the glass from her hand, and placed both glasses on the small table in front of the settee.

Taking her hand in his, he kissed her knuckles, then cleared his throat. By the time he began to speak, Charlotte’s heart was pounding so hard that she thought, surely, he must hear it.

“Charlotte, I asked you this once before, and I’ve yet to receive an answer. I understand other matters have gotten in the way, and then I was busy catching up on work that I’d been neglecting. But the time has come to be straightforward.”

He went down on one knee and took both her hands. “I would like to offer you a life as your husband that I promise will not be perfect, but if you agree to become my wife, I will make sure you never want for anything. I am reasonably young, healthy, and earn a good living. I want you more than any woman I’ve ever met, and I intend to be a good, faithful husband. And I love you.” He tilted his head to one side and smiled a crooked smile. “Will you marry me?”

Tears filled her eyes, and she was finding it hard to breathe. This was what she had hoped he would say, and she was very sure of her answer. “Yes, Elliot. I will marry you. And I love you, too.”

His crooked smile turned into a grin, giving him a boyish look. He reached into his pocket and withdrew a small box. He opened it to reveal a beautiful diamond ring. He slipped it onto her finger, and amazingly enough, it fit perfectly. “Can I get up now?”
Charlotte burst out laughing. “Yes, you may rise.”
Elliot stood and pulled her up and into his arms. His mouth covered hers with a tenderness that
soon turned to a burning possession that completely consumed him.

“I want to scoop you up and take you upstairs and make love to you until neither of us can walk, but I do not want my future wife’s reputation sullied. I will have the banns called starting this Sunday, so we can plan on a wedding in three weeks.”

Charlotte laughed at his worry about her reputation. On the other hand, she found it endearing, and knew he was correct. With him no longer needing to recover from his injury, staying at her house all night would be improper. She walked with him to the door and accepted a chaste kiss after Thomas helped Elliot into his coat.

Once he was gone and on his way, Charlotte drifted upstairs, thinking about weddings, flowers, churches, marriage, and a life she never thought to have again once Gabriel had died.

After a good night’s sleep, Charlotte stayed in bed for a while admiring her ring. She finally rose, washed, and dressed for the day. The sun shone brightly, mimicking her mood. Truth be known, she was still concerned about Elliot’s work as an investigator, but hopefully, his law practice, which he admitted was growing, might keep him too busy to take on dangerous assignments.

She broke her fast with a boiled egg, toast, and an orange, then settled behind her desk in the drawing room to take care of correspondence that had piled up. Once that had been completed, she stood and stretched. A walk in the park would be a good idea. It wasn’t often that London had such a bright day, and she did not want to waste it.

“Going for a walk, ma’am?” Thomas greeted her as she approached the door, pulling on her gloves.

“Yes, indeed. The weather today is much too fine to stay indoors. Winter is coming, and once it is upon us, we will be stuck indoors more often than not.”

He smiled and bowed slightly as he opened the door. Charlotte stepped out, and something at her feet caught her eye. She glanced down at one of her gloves. How odd, it was indeed her white satin glove, and strangely enough, it was the one that had gone missing a few weeks ago.

She bent to retrieve it, frowning at the heaviness of the glove. It felt stiff, and bulky. The skin on the back of her neck tingled as she turned it over and examined the open end of it. She dropped it like a hot coal and screamed. Over and over she screamed, and backed up.

“Mrs. Pennyworth, whatever is the matter?” Thomas’s voice cut through her cry. She turned to him and her eyes rolled into the back of her head. She felt Thomas grab her around the waist as darkness surrounded her, and she slipped to the ground.
Elliot looked up from his paperwork as the wood and glass door to his office flew open and banged against the wall. Bridget stood there, her eyes wild. “Mr. Baker, please. You must come. Quickly.”

Good God, had something happened to Charlotte? He stood and grabbed his jacket from the back of his chair. “What happened?”

He rounded his desk and sprinted to the door. The poor girl could hardly catch her breath as she waved him to Charlotte’s carriage, standing at the edge of the pavement in front of his office building. “It’s Mrs. Pennyworth.” She gulped as they climbed into the carriage, Bones snapped the reins, and the horses took off before the door was even closed all the way.

His heart was in his throat as he watched the girl attempt to speak. Had Charlotte fallen? Was she gravely injured? Was she dead? The last thought hit him like a sledgehammer, taking all the breath from his body. “Calm down, Bridget. Tell me what’s happened.”

“Mrs. Pennyworth got another of those things on the front steps.” She twisted her fingers in her skirts, her eyes pale, the freckles on her face standing out. “But this one was horrible.”

Another package? That was the last thing he expected to hear. Talbot was dead. Unless before he’d died he’d left instructions for something to be left there. “What was the package, Bridget?”

“Oh, sir, I can’t even say.” She burst into tears and dropped her head into her lap.

He obviously was not going to get any further information from the maid. The girl was beyond distraught. He had to know one more thing. “Has Mrs. Pennyworth been harmed?”

She shook her head and continued to cry into her skirts.

Elliot tapped his thigh and stared out the window, feeling as though he should just leave the carriage behind and run to her house. Every minute it took Bones to get them there brought up a new image of the horror to which Charlotte had been subjected.

Finally, they reached the block her townhouse was located on, and Elliot rapped on the roof. Before the coach came to a complete stop, he opened the door and raced down the pavement, and took the stairs to her door two at a time.

Thomas, who must have been watching for him, opened the door as Elliot’s foot hit the top step. “Oh, thank goodness you are here, sir. Mrs. Pennyworth is extremely overset.”

“Where is she?”

“In her sitting room, upstairs. Beatrice attempted to give her a tisane, but she refused.”

“Thank you.” He bolted up the stairs and burst into her room. Charlotte turned and gasped. “Elliot.” She flew across the room into his arms, almost knocking him off his feet.

His thudding heart slowed when he saw she was well. Yes, she was extremely agitated, but she did not appear to have any injuries, which eased his mind somewhat. “Charlotte, you must calm down, so you can tell me what’s happened. Bridget was of no use whatsoever.”

She pulled back and looked into his eyes. “Another package.” Her voice shook, and he feared she might faint. “How can that be?”

“Come, let’s go downstairs to the drawing room and get you a bit of sherry to drink.”


Once they were settled on the settee with drinks in their hands, Elliot placed his hand over hers. “Tell me what happened.”

Charlotte took a rather large sip of brandy, coughed for a moment, then took a deep breath. “I had
intended to go for a walk since it is so very nice outside today. We won’t have many more days like
this one, you know. With winter coming, we will soon be unable—"

“Charlotte, love, you are rambling.”
She closed her eyes for a moment. “Pardon, you are correct. Forgive me. When I opened the door, I
noticed something on the step. Needless to say, since Mr. Talbot is deceased, it never occurred to me
that it was another one of those dreadful leavings.”

Elliot gestured to her glass. “Drink.” He placed his hand at the back of her neck and rubbed.
She took another sip and clutched the glass firmly between her two hands. “I bent down, and
noticed it was one of my white satin gloves.” She chewed her lower lip and closed her eyes. “I
picked it up. It seemed heavy to be only a glove. I turned it over…” Tears leaked from her eyes, and
she shook her head. “I can’t say it.”

“Where is it now?”
She shook her head and opened her eyes. “I have no idea. I’m afraid I passed out, and when I came
to, I was lying upstairs on the settee. I’m assuming Thomas did something with it.”

Elliot pulled her close and kissed her on the forehead. “I’ll speak with Thomas.”

He found the footman right outside the door. “Thomas, where is the glove Mrs. Pennyworth found
on the front step?”

Even the footman turned pale when Elliot asked him for it. “I would have preferred to toss it into
the fire, but I knew you would want to look at it. I wrapped it in a cloth and placed it on a high shelf
in the kitchen.”

“Get it for me, please.”

The man was obviously uneasy with Elliot’s request, but he had to see for himself what they were
all in a dither over. He paced the entrance hall while he waited for Thomas. How the devil had
another package arrived? With the way Charlotte had described finding it, there had been no one
lingering around for them to question. A niggling doubt prodded at him. Could he have been wrong,
and it hadn’t been Talbot harassing Charlotte?

Thomas returned, holding the wrapped package. Elliot took it from his hands, and his heart thudded.
This was not just a glove. It was much too heavy. “Thank you, Thomas.”

Not wanting to upset Charlotte again, Elliot took the package to the library, closing the door behind
him. He placed the item on the desk and stared at it for a minute. Then, he removed the cloth, and
studied the innocuous-looking white satin glove. But he knew, by everyone’s behavior, that there was
more to it.

He picked it up. It was stiff, hard. Not just a glove. He turned it around, and immediately dropped it
on the desk. His breathing increased, and he broke into a sweat. Dried blood had stained the edge of
the glove, with a smear going up one side, the brownish red streak wrinkling the satin, pulling it
together. The fabric had been stretched, breaking the threads on two of the fingers.

He closed his eyes, trying to erase the image from his mind.

Stuffed inside Charlotte’s white satin evening glove was a severed human hand.

Charlotte paced the Aubusson carpet in her sitting room. Her arms gripped her middle as if to keep
herself in one piece. She might never feel safe again. The horror of finding that hand stuffed into her
own glove brought bile up the back of her throat.

“Charlotte?” After a light tap, Elliot entered the room, thankfully not holding the glove. He held his
arms out, and she walked into his embrace, wrapping her arms around his middle, and tucking her
head against his chest. "What does it mean?"

He walked her over to the settee in front of the window. The sunny day made a mockery of the horror she had just witnessed. "I don't know. I thought this would all end when Talbot died."

"Do you suppose Mr. Talbot was not the one leaving the packages?" How could they have been so wrong? Everything had pointed to the man, even though she still had a difficult time accepting it.

Elliot leaned forward, bracing his elbows on his thighs, and ran his fingers through his hair. "One thing I can say for certain is Talbot did not arrange for that to be left on your doorstep."

"How can you be so certain?"

He took her cold hands into his warm ones and rubbed them. She felt as though she would never be warm again. "I have every reason to believe the hand inside that glove belonged to Talbot."

She reared back. "What?" The gasped words barely made it past her dry lips.

He nodded and stood. "When Talbot's body was found, his hand was missing. Scotland Yard believed animals had gotten to him."

"Oh God." Charlotte jumped up and raced through the doorway to her bedchamber. She flew across the room to the chamber pot, leaned over, and brought up her last meal.

She fumbled in her dress pocket and pulled out a handkerchief to wipe her mouth. Blindly she stumbled to the dresser and poured a glass of water from the pitcher, rinsed out her mouth, and spit into the bowl. With a heavy heart, she walked back to the sitting room.

"I think you should take the tisane Bridget mentioned and try to lie down for a while."

"I can't," she wailed then turned, her hands fisted at her side. "Don't you understand? The monster was here in my room! Right here in my very bedchamber! He took one of my gloves!" Her knees gave way, and Elliot rushed forward to catch her before she hit the floor.

He carried her out of the bedchamber and brought her to the room he'd used when he stayed here, and placed her on the bed. "Thomas!"

The footman raced up the stairs. "Yes, sir."

"Have Cook fix a tisane for Mrs. Pennyworth."

"Yes, sir."

Charlotte rolled to her side, bringing her knees up to her chest and moaned.

Elliot sat with her until she drank the tisane and fell asleep. When he was sure she was in a deep slumber, he made his way downstairs in search of Bridget. He found the young maid in the kitchen, sitting at the table, looking quite pale herself. "I placed Mrs. Pennyworth in the room I used a few weeks ago. She should not return to her own bedchamber until this is solved. I suggest you take a lie-down also. I am sure Mrs. Pennyworth would be fine with it."

"Oh, thank you, sir. I believe you are correct. I am not feeling quite the thing right now."

Elliot fetched the disgusting glove and left Charlotte's townhouse, heading directly to Scotland Yard. Leaving human remains on someone's doorstep was against the law, and he needed to report it.

"Talbot's hand, eh?" Detective Finch leaned his chair back on two legs and regarded Elliot. "So that's what happened. I thought for sure an animal got it."

"I did, too, but this has to be his hand." Elliot unwrapped the package and placed the glove on the detective's desk.

The man blanched and sat forward, the front legs of his chair hitting the floor with a thump. "Nasty business. What with the Ripper fellow cutting up prostitutes and leaving their innards all around the place, and now this, it makes me wonder what the bloody hell is going on in London."
He picked up the glove with two fingers and turned it in several different directions. "I don't suppose your—fiancée, did you say?—wants the glove back."

He offered the detective a grim smile. "No. While the entire thing disturbs me, what worries me more is Mrs. Pennyworth swears that glove, and its mate, has always been kept in the wardrobe in her room."

"So, our fellow was in her house, eh?"

"Her bedchamber, actually."

Finch shook his head. "We'll dig up Talbot and see if this fits, although I'm sure it will, since you tell me you had reason to believe he was leaving strange offerings on her doorsteps."

Elliot leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms. "Now I'm not so sure it was him. Because things had been quiet since his death, Mrs. Pennyworth and I assumed it had been Talbot. For what purpose we were never able to ascertain, but now it seems a moot point because he certainly didn't cut off his own hand, stuff it into a glove, and leave it with someone to place on her doorstep in the event of his death."

"I'm thinking you're right there, mate." Finch pulled on the end of his mustache as he studied the glove.

Elliot stood. "I have things that need my attention, so I will leave that with you. If you come up with anything, I would appreciate hearing from you."

"Yes. You can count on that. In the meantime, I suggest you keep a close watch on this fiancée of yours."

"I intend to. Once I clear up a few legal matters, I will seek a special license and marry her, so I can see to her safety while we're dealing with this mess."

Four days later, Elliot sat at his desk in his office, clearing out the pile of correspondence and court documents so he could head over to Charlotte's house. He had finally been granted the special license due to a high-ranking client's intervention. Slowly, he'd been moving his things from his rooms to her house. At her tearful request, he'd stayed at her house the first night after she'd received the glove, but since then he'd been reluctant to do so.

He tried to convince himself that because she had received such a gruesome item, it didn't necessarily follow that she was in physical danger, but the entire mess made him uncomfortable. Once they were married, he would take her on a wedding trip, as far away from London as possible.

Of course, the problem remaining was, who'd left the glove? He had examined the situation from every possible angle, and he was growing more confident every day that Talbot had not been the person responsible for everything that had happened to Charlotte. Now his primary focus was getting married and leaving this all behind them, hoping her marriage, and absence for a time, would make her tormentor step back.

The door to his office opened, and his secretary, Mr. Gleason, entered. "Mr. Baker, there is a man here who says it is most important he speak with you."

Elliot dropped his pen to the desk and rubbed his eyes with the heels of his hands. "I was hoping to make this an early day. However, since I plan on leaving town in the next couple of days, I should probably see the man." He stood and shrugged into his jacket. "Send him in."

He settled into his seat as the door opened once again. A small man, short, slightly bald, and wearing a suit of clothing that bespoke of moderate means, entered the room. He took small steps, almost as if he was afraid to commit himself to the interview. He clutched a large book to his chest.
Elliot waved to the seat in front of his desk. “Please have a seat, Mr.—”
“Davis, sir. My name is Malcolm Davis.”

Elliot reached across the desk to shake the man’s hand. “It is a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Davis.” The small man fumbled with the book he clutched, then shook Elliot’s hand.

Once they were both settled, Elliot pulled on the cuffs of his shirt and placed his folded hands on his desk. “What can I do for you, Mr. Davis? My secretary indicated you needed to speak with me on a matter of importance.”

The man nodded his head briskly, then wiped his upper lip with his finger. “You must understand, Mr. Baker, as an employee, I would never break such a confidence, but I felt it was in your best interests for me to see you, as soon as I found this.”

Elliot frowned, not sure he liked the way the conversation was starting off. In his best interests? It sounded almost like a blackmail scheme was about to be presented. He leaned back in his chair. “Is that right? What can you have that would be in my best interest?”

“Before I say any more I want to make it clear this is not something I would ordinarily do.”

“As you have already stated. I have other matters to deal with today, Mr. Davis, so may I ask that you please enlighten me? What information do you possess that would be in my best interest?”

Mr. Davis took a deep breath. “I am, or I should say, I was, valet to Mr. Talbot.”

His heart pounding, Elliot came alive, and sat up in his seat, his arms leaning on his desk. “Do tell. And what about being Mr. Talbot’s valet is of interest to me?” What sort of information could the man have?

“Only yesterday I was able to bring myself to begin to pack away Mr. Talbot’s things. He had no family, therefore, I had intended to give his clothing to the church, so they could distribute it as they saw fit. Mr. Talbot was a good man, and I know he would have wanted me to share any worthwhile things with the less privileged.”

Davis sighed and seemed to need time to compose himself. “Mr. Talbot had a will, and left a tidy sum to each of his employees.” He stopped and took out a handkerchief and blew his nose. “He was a most generous employer.”

Elliot gave him a moment, the man obviously quite distressed at the loss of his employer. He lowered his voice and asked, “What is it you came to see me about today? How do I figure in Mr. Talbot’s things?”

The man laid the book he had been holding on the desk, all business once again. “I would never think to read anything of a personal nature of my employer.” He tapped the book. “This is Mr. Talbot’s journal. He wrote in it every day.” He smoothed his hand over the cover. “He left the book open at the last page he wrote, which is why I was able to read his final entry.”

“Yes.” Would the man drag out his story forever?

“When I saw your name mentioned in here, and what Mr. Talbot wrote, I thought it was my duty as a good citizen to bring it to your attention.”

Elliot reached out. “May I read it?”

Mr. Davis nodded and flipped open the cover. He thumbed through the pages until he reached the one he wanted. He read it over and then turned the book around, so Elliot could see it. He pulled the book toward him and began to read.

Elliot frowned as the words began to make sense. Then he sucked in a breath of air as his eyes skimmed the page. His eyes grew wide, and he looked up at Mr. Davis. “Bloody hell. Bloody, bloody hell and damnation.”

Elliot jumped up, practically knocking his chair to the ground, and rounded the desk. “If you will
excuse me, Mr. Davis, I must leave immediately. Thank you very much for sharing that with me. My secretary will see you out.” He raced from the room, whipping past Mr. Gleason. “Please see Mr. Davis out. I am on my way to Mrs. Pennyworth’s house.”

*Dear God, how would I have ever guessed?*
Charlotte viewed herself in the mirror and cringed. In the five days since the glove had arrived, she’d slept fitfully, eaten very little, and cried quite a bit.
And looked it.
As horrible as it had been viewing the severed hand, the fact that whoever had done this had been in her bedchamber brought on another bout of nausea. She’d slept in the room Elliot had occupied since the discovery. Thankfully, Elliot had requested a special license, so they would not have to wait the three weeks for the banns to be called, and could marry immediately. Once he was here, in her house, every night, she might feel safe again.
He had questioned every one of the staff and had been convinced that no one had taken the glove, or had allowed anyone into her bedchamber. Of course, the glove did not just walk out of the house and into the hands of the perpetrator. That, however, was just one of many questions racing through her exhausted mind.
“Ma’am, you should try to eat a little more. You are not getting enough food to keep a small bird alive.” Bridget entered the room and eyed the tray of toast, eggs, and an orange that Charlotte had not even touched.
“I know.” She turned from the mirror and sat on the edge of the bed. “I will try to do better, but everything gets stuck in my throat.”
“Tis a lovely day. Perhaps a short walk would do you good, and work up an appetite.” She loved the way her staff looked after her. Elliot had left strict instructions with Thomas that she was not to be allowed out of the house without the footman accompanying her. He also had the entire household checking windows and doors when they retired for the evening.
The strain had grown to the point where she was ready to sell the house and move away. Possibly to Bath. The waters there might calm her nerves.
An hour after luncheon, when she was able to force down a bit of the mutton stew Cook had made, she sat in her drawing room, trying desperately to read Miss Nellie Bly’s latest novel, wishing Elliot would finish up his work and return to her.
“Ma’am, Miss Garvey has called and asked if you were at home.” Thomas stood at the open doorway, his protective manner warming her.
Miss Garvey was not one of her favorite people, but she felt sorry for the woman in an odd sort of way. The poor thing must be lost since Mr. Talbot’s death. Charlotte had no idea what their relationship had been, but surely there had been some affection on either side for them to spend so much time together.
Even though she would prefer not to receive the woman, perhaps a bit of tea and conversation with her would distract her until Elliot arrived. “Yes, send her in. And please ask Cook for tea.”
Miss Garvey entered, looking ghastlier than ever. Her hair was in disarray, and her clothing wrinkled. If Charlotte believed she looked out of sorts, Miss Garvey looked far worse. She must be suffering, and Charlotte vowed to make this visit as pleasant as possible for the poor woman. “Won’t you have a seat, Miss Garvey? I’ve sent for tea.”
The woman sat, clutching her coat around her.
“Would you be more comfortable if you took your coat off?”
Miss Garvey shook her head and continued to stare at Charlotte. A growing uneasiness sent shivers
up her spine.
“How are you getting on?”
Miss Garvey’s eyes bore into her, then she abruptly shifted in her seat, making Charlotte jump. Good Lord, she was on edge. But something about her guest alarmed her. She’d never been completely comfortable with the woman, but now her heart pounded, and a fine sheen of sweat broke out on her face.
“Fine,” Miss Garvey mumbled.
“I noticed you did not attend the assembly last week.” Charlotte fisted her skirts, her damp palms creating a mess of wrinkles that would have to be ironed out later. “We missed you.”
“Did you? You and Mr. Baker?” She snarled his name, her voice so low, she had to lean forward to hear her guest.
“Yes.” Charlotte tried a cheerful smile. “It was a lovely event.”
The door opened, and Thomas entered the room with a tea tray, reminding her that everything was normal, it was just her overwrought nerves playing tricks on her. She waved at the table between her and Miss Garvey. “Just set it down there, Thomas. Thank you.”
Every nerve in her body was strung as tight as a bow, and she took a deep, calming breath, telling herself this was foolishness. Miss Garvey was most likely distraught at the death of her friend, which explained her strange attitude.
Once Thomas left the room, Miss Garvey stood and walked to the door. Was she leaving? Charlotte sighed in relief. Instead, the woman closed the door, flipped the lock, and then turned to face Charlotte, leaning against the door. “I wish to discuss something personal with you, and I would prefer if your servants did not hear.”
Although it did not seem possible, Charlotte’s heart sped up, almost choking her. She had the urge to barrel past Miss Garvey out of the room. Then she berated herself. Her nerves had been rattled of late, and she was seeing danger everywhere. Perhaps the poor woman needed a female confidante.
“Certainly, Miss Garvey. If you feel more comfortable with the door closed, that is fine.”
Miss Garvey nodded and returned to the chair she’d vacated. Charlotte picked up the teapot, not surprised that the tea splashed onto the table as her hands continued to shake. She glanced at the long clock in the corner, hoping Elliot would arrive soon. “How do you like your tea?”
“Cream and sugar, if you please.” Then she stared directly at Charlotte. “But then you know that, don’t you?”
Confused, Charlotte smiled and fixed the woman’s tea. If she pretended everything was normal, perhaps Miss Garvey would do the same, and she could get this blasted visit over with. She passed her the cup and then fixed her own. She tried desperately to find a subject for conversation, and unfortunately, ended up with the weather. “It looks as though the colder weather is definitely on its way.”
Miss Garvey took a sip of her tea and regarded her over her cup. Her sunken cheeks, pale skin, and dark piercing eyes reminded Charlotte of a corpse. She shuddered.
“What is it you wished to speak with me about? You mentioned a personal matter? What can I help you with?”
Her guest put her cup down and leaned forward. “Stop this act, Anne,” she hissed. “You do not fool me.”
Charlotte frowned. “I’m sorry, Miss Garvey, my name is not Anne, and I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Her heart was pounding so loud, she was sure Bridget could hear it upstairs.
“Don’t try to pretend you don’t know me. You know what we shared. You know you belong to me,
Charlotte went on full alert, all the blood draining from her face. It had not been her imagination, or her nerves. Something was definitely wrong with Miss Garvey, and the time for politeness had ended. She stood. “If you will excuse me, I just remembered an engagement for which I must prepare. I will escort you out.”

With one quick move, Miss Garvey whipped out a huge kitchen knife and stepped between Charlotte and the door. Amazed at how quickly she moved, Charlotte just stared at her, her mind a complete blank. There was a loud buzzing in her ears, and she felt as though she might faint. Somehow common sense told her with the large knife in Miss Garvey’s hand, fainting was not the best thing for her to do.

She had to compose herself and get out of the room. In one piece. “Sit down, Anne. And don’t call out. It’s long past time we had this conversation.”

The knife was big enough to slaughter an animal, and it appeared Miss Garvey was quite comfortable with it. As if a bright light had lit up the room, Charlotte understood completely. Her jaw dropped, and she gasped. “You’re the one who has been leaving the packages on my doorstep.”

“Yes, of course it was me. I had to punish you, Anne. You have been a naughty girl.”

Charlotte closed her eyes, hoping when she opened them, this nightmare would be over. She licked her dry lips and tried once more to reason with the woman. “Miss Garvey, please listen to me. You are mistaken. I am not this Anne you are referring to. My name is Charlotte, and before you appeared at our social events, I had never met you before.”

“Silence!” Miss Garvey waved the knife around, coming quite close to Charlotte’s face. She jerked back, certain if she hadn’t, she would have lost her nose. Dear God, if only one of the servants would attempt to come in. Finding the door locked, they would know something was amiss.

She could not scream for help. Before anyone could break down the door she would be dead. Miss Garvey was slight, but Charlotte remembered from hugging her once that she was quite muscular.

Miss Garvey sneered. “You are trying to do it to me again. I told you the last time when you tried to leave me for that man”—she spit the word out—“that I would not lose you. You belong to me.”

She used the knife to wave to the settee at the far end of the room. “Sit down.”

Charlotte was frantic. If the servants had followed Elliot’s orders, the French door leading to the patio was locked. As were all the windows.

They both sat, and Miss Garvey’s shoulders slumped. “We had such a wonderful relationship. Do you remember the good times we had? The times I spent making love to you?” Her face grew dark. “And punishing you because you had been bad? Don’t you remember, Anne?”

*Making love to me?*

Her stomach churned and the room became stifling, the walls closing in on her, taking away her air. She had to keep her senses, or she would end up dead. She moved to the end of the settee. “Tell me about the good times we had.” Maybe if she could keep Miss Garvey talking, it would distract her and give Charlotte time to figure out how to escape.

“Move back, Anne.” The deep voice almost didn’t seem to come from the woman. Then she smiled like a young girl speaking of her first love. “We loved each other. When you were afraid, I held you. When you were lonely, I read your favorite books to you.” The knife seemed to slip from her hand, but she quickly recovered and grasped it again.

“I didn’t want to kill you, you know.” She shook her head in sorrow. “No, I didn’t want to kill you, but you were determined to leave me, so I had to. You knew I was your Master, and always would be. Only I didn’t expect you to turn up here in London. How did you do that? I thought you were
Miss Garvey was obviously deranged. Charlotte could not get to either door without passing the woman and her very large knife. Keeping her talking would be the best thing to do until one of the servants attempted to enter and found the door locked. Or Elliot appeared.

*Dear God, please let Elliot come soon.*

... Not wishing to wait for the omnibus, Elliot hailed a hackney and directed him to Charlotte’s townhouse. After reading Talbot’s concerns about Miss Garvey in his journal, it all came together, and he realized they had been mistaken. Charlotte’s tormentor had not been a man. Who would have thought a woman was behind it all?  

Apparently, the mistake Talbot had made was confronting Miss Garvey with his suspicions, which was his last notation in the journal. Since Elliot was quite sure Miss Garvey had been the one to hire the man who had first beaten him, and then shot at him, she was no doubt responsible for Talbot’s death. The fact that she had his hand to stuff into Charlotte’s glove pointed to her as the murderess.

No doubt the woman was mentally unbalanced, but why she had focused on Charlotte for her attentions remained a mystery. But now, he needed to get to Charlotte and warn her to stay clear of the woman. Once he had assured himself that Charlotte was all right, he would notify Scotland Yard to arrest Miss Garvey.

Then, finally, they could put this all behind them and start their life together.

The hackney pulled up in front of Charlotte’s house, and Elliot alighted and paid the driver. “No need to remain. I will see myself home.”

The man tipped his hat and moved on. Elliot took the stairs two at a time and knocked on the door. Thomas answered immediately. “Good afternoon, Thomas. I assume Mrs. Pennyworth is at home?” She had better be since she was under orders from him not to leave the house unless Thomas was with her.

“Yes, sir, she is in the drawing room.” Elliot headed in that direction when Thomas’s words reached him. “She is entertaining Miss Garvey who arrived a short time ago.”

Elliot came to an abrupt stop, and his stomach muscles twisted. He turned back to Thomas. “Did you say Miss Garvey is with Mrs. Pennyworth right now?”

“Yes, sir.”

He patted his pocket to be certain his pistol was there. He pulled it out and checked that it was loaded. Hopefully, he would not need it, but he had to be careful. He also had to be cautious in entering the room. Miss Garvey’s visit could be quite innocuous, or it could be deadly. He had to be prepared for anything. “Thomas, have you heard anything unusual since Miss Garvey arrived?”

“No, sir. The only odd thing was after I brought in the tea tray, the door to the drawing room closed. Ordinarily, Mrs. Pennyworth leaves it partially open when she is entertaining.”

Elliot dwelled on Thomas’s words for a moment. He could think of no reason why Charlotte would change her normal habits, except if she was forced to do so. Cautiously, he moved down the corridor and leaned his head against the door. Faint mumbling was the only sound, and he made out Charlotte’s voice. She was safe, but he did not know for how long.

Taking a deep breath, he attempted to unlatch the door and found it locked. His heart thudded, and he broke into a sweat. There was only one reason the door would be locked, and that was not a good one.

Elliot turned, Thomas right behind him. “Is there a key to this door?”
“Yes, sir.”
“Get it.”

He kept his ear to the door while he waited for Thomas. Once in a while he heard Miss Garvey’s raised voice. He considered shooting the lock, but if Miss Garvey had a gun, she might kill Charlotte before he could even get into the room.

*Where the devil is Thomas?*

The footman raced up, with Mrs. Blanchard right behind him, her face flushed, key in hand. He put his finger to his lips to keep them from speaking. They nodded as he took the key from the housekeeper’s hand and carefully inserted it into the lock.

He moved the door latch up and eased the door open. Charlotte sat facing him, her eyes growing wide as she saw him. Miss Garvey had her back to him and was speaking earnestly to Charlotte. He moved silently a few steps until he saw a large knife in Miss Garvey’s hand. He slowly slid his hand into his pocket and grasped his pistol. Afraid to approach her from behind, lest she become startled and attack Charlotte, he moved around her chair until he came into her view.

Miss Garvey sucked in a breath of air. “What are you doing here? I locked the door.” Her lips twisted into a snarl. “You are the reason Anne no longer wants me.”

Elliot looked over at Charlotte and mouthed, “Anne?” She shook her head and shrugged.

The woman was mad. The only thing he could do, short of killing her, was to play into her discourse and try to dissuade her from hurting Charlotte. “Miss Garvey. If you do love Anne, I suggest you put the knife down. You certainly don’t want to harm her.”

She narrowed her eyes and raised the knife, causing Elliot to lose his breath. She would have to lunge to reach Charlotte, but he was not certain he could stop her with a bullet before she did.

“Don’t think you can fool me. Anne tried to run away with another man. Yes, that’s right. You look surprised. She’s tried this before. But I stopped her. And I will stop her again.”

“It seems your anger should be directed more toward me. Aren’t I the one who is taking Anne from you? Why don’t we let her leave the room, and you and I can talk this out? Maybe come to a compromise.”

“She’s not leaving,” Miss Garvey snarled. “You are leaving. Now. Go.”

There was no way he was leaving Charlotte in the room with a madwoman. He pointed to the tea tray. “I see you have tea. I could use some myself. Why don’t we discuss this calmly?”

Miss Garvey didn’t move. “You know, I thought for a while that Talbot would snare Anne from me. I had my eye on him. Then you came along, and the sniveling idiot started asking me questions. Why is it men cause so many problems?” She turned to Charlotte. “It was so much better when it was just you and me.”

She seemed to lose focus for a minute, but when Elliot shifted, she snapped her eyes at him. “Don’t move.” She looked back at Charlotte. “How did you like my last present?”

“Was that Talbot’s hand?” Elliot moved a bit closer to Charlotte as he spoke.

“Yes. Wasn’t that clever?”

“How did you get Charlotte’s glove?” Now was the time to find out if one of her staff had betrayed her.

Miss Garvey’s eyes narrowed. “She is Anne. Anne. Say it! Anne.”

“My apologies. How did you get Anne’s glove?”

She waved her hand. “Easy. One time when I was here for tea, I asked to use the facilities and wandered into her bedchamber. Her room even smelled like Anne. I just had to have one of her things to sleep with at night, until I could have her back alongside me.”
“And the bracelet, and spiders? That was very clever. It certainly had us guessing.”
Miss Garvey smiled, apparently enjoying the credit as her due.
“I asked Talbot to buy that bracelet for me. Nosy shopkeepers ask too many questions. And the spiders? Ah, yes. Wasn’t that ingenious? Anne loves spiders, so I knew if I took a couple of those from Talbot’s house, it would remind Anne that even though I had to kill her, I still love her.”
She turned to Charlotte, her features softening. “I still love you, Anne. I will always love you. It broke my heart when I had to kill you.” Two tears tracked down her cheeks, almost making Elliot feel sorry for the disturbed woman.
Abruptly, Miss Garvey’s eyes darted around the room, and her legs began to shift, as if she were growing restless. He didn’t know what the demented woman’s intentions were. Was she here to force Charlotte to go with her? Or to kill her?
If he didn’t get the knife off Miss Garvey, she was liable to rush forward and plunge it into Charlotte before he could react. The strain was showing on Charlotte’s face, and she looked as though she might collapse at any moment. It was time to draw this entire matter to an end.
“Miss Garvey, I understand your distress. Truly I do. However, holding Anne hostage with a knife will not win you her favor. I suggest you put the knife down.”
“No! I have to kill her again!” She turned from Elliot and lunged in Charlotte’s direction, the knife raised above her head. Charlotte screamed and threw her arms up, then scrambled away, huddling in the corner of the settee.
Elliot whipped the gun from his pocket and pulled the trigger. Miss Garvey swung her head around, her eyes growing wide. She dropped the knife and grabbed her middle where blood oozed from between her fingers.
She stumbled toward Charlotte and with her hands extended toward her, collapsed at her feet.
Her hands covering her mouth, Charlotte stared at the still form of Miss Garvey.

“Charlotte?” Elliot returned the gun to his pocket and walked slowly toward her. He placed his arm around her shoulders. “Sweetheart, it’s all over.”

She didn’t move, just kept staring at Miss Garvey. “Come.” He moved her forward. She stumbled as if in a dream.

“She was going to kill me.”

Elliot opened the door and walked her through. “Thomas, send for Scotland Yard. Don’t let anyone into the drawing room until they arrive.”

Wide-eyed, Thomas nodded. “Yes, sir.”

“Also, have Bridget meet Mrs. Pennyworth up in her bedchamber.” He wrapped his arm around Charlotte’s waist and helped her upstairs. She was obviously in shock, and he was trying to decide if he should send for a physician. They entered her room, and he walked her over to the bed, where he eased her down.

She had been through so much in the last few weeks, he worried for her mind. She looked up at him, gripping his hands. “She tried to kill me.”

He sat alongside her and pushed the hair back from her forehead. “You’re safe now.”

Bridget entered the room. “Oh my, Mr. Baker. I had no idea what was going on in the drawing room. How terrible.”

“Yes, Bridget. It was terrible, but now I need you to take care of Mrs. Pennyworth. She needs to be helped out of her clothes, and into nightclothes.” He had thought of having a tisane made up but decided a good shot of brandy would be better.

He left the two women in the bedchamber with instructions for Bridget to summon him when they finished. He then went to the library, poured two healthy doses of brandy, and left the room to speak with Thomas and await Bridget’s summons.

“Sir, Scotland Yard has been notified, and someone will arrive within the next couple of hours.” Thomas looked a bit ghastly as he imparted the information.

“Thank you. I suggest you and the rest of the staff finish up your duties and retire for the day. I will see to Mrs. Pennyworth. Just ask Cook to leave something cold that Mrs. Pennyworth and I can eat later.”

“Yes, sir.” He bowed slightly and left the room.

Elliot took a sip of the much-needed brandy and stared out the entrance hall window at the beckoning dusk. Who would have thought it had been a woman all this time? He shook his head and took another swallow, watching the sun set, taking with it memories of the very strange day.

Later that evening, after Scotland Yard had retrieved the body, and took their statements, Elliot crawled into bed beside Charlotte—to hell with propriety!

He made love to her slowly, and with a gentleness that showed her how very much he loved her. With his arms wrapped around her, her back snug against his chest, they fell into a deep slumber.

…

A week later, Charlotte opened her eyes to a room with bright sunlight peeking through the slit in the pulled curtains. Her spirits were even higher.
Her wedding day. With all the issues surrounding the shooting of Miss Garvey, their wedding had been moved back, but today she would once again become a wife. Of the man she dearly loved.

Men from Scotland Yard had visited Miss Garvey’s rooms and found numerous items that had incriminated her. They’d obtained the name of the man she’d hired to beat and shoot Elliot, and then kill Mr. Talbot before removing his hand. Charlotte shuddered at the type of person who would consent to do such a thing. Whoever he was, he now called Newgate his home.

From reading Miss Garvey’s journal, it was obvious she had been a sick woman, who had thought Charlotte was the reincarnation of a woman named Anne with whom she’d had a sexual relationship two years prior. A woman she’d killed to thwart her lover’s plans to run off with a man. Among her belongings, the detectives had found a tintype photograph of Anne, and they all agreed Charlotte resembled her.

“Good morning, Mrs. Pennyworth.” Bridget bounded into her room, her enthusiasm almost as high as Charlotte’s. “Oh my, this is the last time I will address you as such.” She covered her mouth with her hands and giggled. “After today you will be Mrs. Baker.”

Beaming at her young maid, Charlotte whipped the quilt off and stepped onto the chilly floor. “Yes, that is true.” She moved to the window and drew the curtain aside. “Is it not a glorious day, Bridget?”

“Yes, ma’am. It is a glorious day, indeed.” The maid opened the door to Charlotte’s wardrobe and removed the pink silk gown she’d pressed the night before. Even the fact that Mr. Spencer would be conducting the ceremony in his church did not dampen her spirit.

She enjoyed a leisurely bath, followed by a breakfast tray of toast and tea before dressing in her lovely gown. Bridget fixed her hair in a chignon, surrounded by tiny roses, sent by Elliot that morning.

He was to meet them at the church for the ten o’clock service. Charlotte glanced at the small china clock on her dresser. “We must hurry, Bridget. I don’t want to arrive at the church all flustered and in disarray. Can you please check to make sure the carriage has been brought around?”

The girl hurried from the room, and Charlotte took one last glance at herself. A woman in love stared back at her. She’d lost the frightened look, and had put on a few of her lost pounds.

A slight scratch at her bedchamber door drew her attention. “Yes?”

Thomas stood at the door. He looked somber, and not at all like himself.

“What is it?” For some inexplicable reason, her heart began to thud. Had something happened to Elliot? *God, please not another package.*

“There are two men downstairs asking for you.”

“Two men? Did they say where they were from?”

“Yes, ma’am. They are from Scotland Yard.”

She let out a sigh of relief. *Botheration,* was she to be plagued by the Garvey situation even on her wedding day? “All right, Thomas, I will be there in a moment.”

He left, and she moved to her dressing table and dabbed a bit of cologne on her neck and wrists. Then, taking a final look in the mirror, she left the room.

Two men stood in the hall entrance. One of them she recognized as the man who had come to her house the day Miss Garvey had been killed.

“How may I help you, gentlemen?” She tugged on her pink silk gloves.

“Good morning, ma’am. I am Inspector Longforth. I am sure you remember me from our investigation a week ago.” She gave him a curt nod, and then he gestured to the man alongside him. “This is Inspector Osbourne.” He took out a piece of paper from his inner pocket. “You are Mrs. Charlotte Pennyworth?”

She didn’t care for the tone of the man’s voice, and all of a sudden, she wished Elliot were with
"Yes, I am, as you well know from our prior meetings." Her voice had turned to ice from the fear that was creeping up her spine.

He ignored her sarcasm and continued. "You are formerly Miss Charlotte Reading, who once resided at the home of Lady Barton of Melbourne Station and worked as her companion?"

"Yes." She breathed out the word, her mouth suddenly dry.

"I’m sorry, ma’am, but we have a warrant for your arrest." He held out the paper. She studied it with wide eyes but refused to take from his hand.

A loud buzzing began in her ears, but she fought that, along with the churning in her stomach. "You are mistaken. I never took the jewelry. Lord Barton only claimed I did."

"Ma’am, we are not here to adjudicate the matter, we are acting on an outstanding warrant. I’m afraid you will have to come with us to Scotland Yard and await transportation back to Melbourne Station to stand on these charges."

*Oh dear God.* It was bad enough her past had caught up with her, but on her wedding day? Couldn’t God shine his light on her just this once? "I am about to be married. In fact, we are on our way to the church. Can this not wait?"

"No, ma’am, this warrant is almost two years old. I’m afraid we must take you in." Inspector Longforth regarded her with sympathy, but she was afraid that little bit of compassion was not going to save her.

With shaky hands she gripped Thomas’s forearm. "Please go to the church, and ask Mr. Baker to come immediately." She took a deep breath as Thomas left the house. "I assume we can at least wait until my fiancé arrives? It will only be about fifteen minutes."

The detectives looked at one another, and Osbourne shrugged. "I guess another fifteen minutes won’t matter."

If she didn’t sit soon, she would surely collapse. Her mind was in a whirl, and all she could think about was Elliot’s arrival. He would get this all straightened out, and her day would go as planned. "Let us retire to the drawing room."

She led them there on shaky legs.

Elliot checked his timepiece again and slid it into his vest pocket. Charlotte should arrive any moment. He was excited and ready for this marriage. Charlotte was everything he ever wanted in a wife and mother for his future children. She possessed a loving spirit and a caring nature. Images of her body swollen with their child, and nursing the babe at her breast, brought a smile to his face as he tapped his foot, anxious for her arrival.

He loved her deeply and truly and wanted to take care of her for the rest of her life. They were well-suited, liking and disliking the same things. Without a doubt, his desire for her was beyond anything he’d ever felt for a woman.

All the nonsense with the gruesome packages was finally cleared up, her nemesis was dead, and they had a life together to which he looked forward.

Ten o’clock on the dot the door to the church opened, and Thomas rushed in. "Mr. Baker. You must come quickly. Mrs. Pennyworth needs you."

Elliot stepped down from the platform where he and Mr. Spencer awaited the bride. The few guests who had gathered, along with their two witnesses, Lord and Lady Monroe, turned as Thomas strode down the aisle.

"Is everything all right? Is Mrs. Pennyworth ill?" He reached Thomas at the first pew.
The footman glanced around and lowered his voice. “Just come quickly. Please.” He turned and hurried from the church, Elliot on his heels.

They climbed into Charlotte’s carriage, but no amount of cajoling on Elliot’s part satisfied his curiosity, except for the fact that Thomas assured him Charlotte was not ill. Had she changed her mind? Did she decide she did not want to marry him and wanted to relay that information privately rather than leave him standing at the altar?

All sorts of horrible thoughts raced through his mind as they made their way to her townhouse. With knots in his stomach, he jumped from the carriage before it even came to a complete stop and hastened up the steps. He burst into the entrance hall. Bridget stood there, wringing her hands. “Oh, thank goodness you are here, Mr. Baker. They are in the drawing room.”

They?

He walked into the room. Inspector Longworth, and another man whose name he did not know, both rose from the chairs they sat in across from Charlotte. She sat on the settee, white as new snow, her hands in her lap. He walked to where she was seated and settled next to her, taking her ice-cold hands in his warm ones. “Gentlemen. Please have a seat and tell me what is so important that you must detain my bride on her wedding day.”

“I’m sorry to tell you there will be no wedding today.” Longworth withdrew a paper from his pocket. “I have here a warrant for Mrs. Pennyworth’s arrest.”

“Her arrest? Surely there must be some mistake.” He turned to Charlotte. “Do you know what this is about?”

She raised her eyes to him, tears standing in the lids, her mouth working as she tried to form words. “Yes. I do.” Her answer was barely above a whisper.

Fear of what she would say gripped him. “What is it about, sweetheart?”

When her eyes swung to Inspector Longworth, he turned in his direction. “Longworth?”

The detective held the paper out to Elliot. “Mrs. Pennyworth is wanted in Melbourne Station to answer charges of jewel theft.”

Elliot reared back as if he’d been slapped. “Jewel theft?” Memories of Annabelle washed over him, almost bringing him to his knees. Would fate be so cruel as to once again repeat the agony of falling in love with a thief? He almost laughed at the irony of it.

He withdrew his hands from hers and walked to the window, staring out at the beautiful, sunny day that was supposed to be his wedding day. “Charlotte, would you care to explain? Or is there no other explanation than what that warrant says?”

The rustle of skirts caught his attention, and then Charlotte stood next to him. She drew herself up and looked him in the eye. “Yes, there is an explanation, but will you listen to it, and give it credence, or have you already made up your mind?”

She was twisting a handkerchief in her fingers, her eyes were red and swollen, and she looked scared to death. But he had been through this before. Women had a way of twisting a man until he believed just about anything they said. He had always guessed Charlotte was hiding something. This was one time in his life he did not relish being right.

He tried hard to keep the bitterness out of his voice, but wasn’t sure if he succeeded. “Try me.”

“Very well.” She glanced over at the two inspectors and leaned in closer to him, and lowered her voice. “Two years ago, I was employed as a companion to Lady Barton in Melbourne Station. She has a son, Lord Barton, who became enamored of me.” She stopped and licked her lips.

“Go on.”

“He wanted me to... you know.”
He raised his eyebrows. “No, my dear, I don’t know. You must tell me exactly what happened.”

“All right. He wanted me to become his mistress. I refused. He planted a very expensive necklace in my room. One of the maids found it. He told me if I did not agree to warm his bed, he would have me arrested for theft.” She was breathless by the time she finished.

“That’s it? That’s the explanation?”

She frowned. “Yes. That is what happened.”

He rubbed his eyes. Women were always ready with an explanation that turned out to be false. Was he a fool again? What must Longforth think, since he was aware of his history with Annabelle? He must think Elliot the greatest ninnyhammer in all of London.

He regarded her as she stared at him with hope in her eyes. Just like Annabelle had when she’d given him her bogus story. “If that is the case, why did you not tell me before now? Haven’t I asked you if there was something you were hiding from me?”

“Don’t you understand, Elliot? You see everything in black and white. Once a criminal, always a criminal. You would not have believed me. I was afraid to tell you.”

“Perhaps I don’t believe you now, either.”

She sucked in a breath and raised her chin. “You don’t believe me?” Her voice shook.

He studied her for a few moments, his heart crumbling into pieces. He wanted to howl out his frustration and pain, like an animal with its foot caught in a trap. He had so many dreams wrapped up in Charlotte. He loved her. But he did not trust her. There could be no marriage without trust.

Suddenly, he could not breathe. He had to leave this room, this house. He had to get as far away from her pleading eyes as he could. Craving distance between them, he stepped back, needing space. From her, from the shock in her eyes.

“No. I’m afraid I do not believe you.”

Charlotte gasped and covered her mouth with her hands. “You don’t believe me? I thought you loved me.”

“Ah, yes. I love you, but do I know you? I think not.” He turned from the window and walked toward the drawing room door.

She stared at his retreating back, frozen where she stood. Her world tilted, and her heart broke. No pain she had ever suffered, not Lord Barton’s betrayal, not Gabriel’s death, not even Miss Garvey’s torture, could compare to the soul-shattering destruction at his departure.

He was actually walking out on her. Abandoning her, after all they’d been through, after all the words of love and caring he’d spoken to her.

“Wait.” On unsteady legs, she crossed the room, tugging on the diamond ring he’d placed on her finger three weeks before. She held it out to him. “Take this. I have no need for it.” She backed up and turned to the two detectives. “I am ready to go now.”

As she climbed into the carriage the detectives escorted her to, her last glimpse before they closed the door was of Elliot walking briskly away from the house, his back straight, his steps determined.

They took her to Scotland Yard where they asked her a number of questions, filled out numerous forms, and told her since there was still another train to Melbourne Station that day, she would not be sent to Newgate, but instead be returned there.

She nodded when they told her. She should be happy she wasn’t going to Newgate, but truth be known, she didn’t really care. She was numb. The man who’d said he loved her, and wanted to make a life with her, believed she was a jewel thief. After all they’d been to each other, and everything
they’d been through together, he didn’t trust her.

After two hours of watching the activity in Scotland Yard, she was approached by a slender man in his mid-forties. He had a full beard that he tugged on as he spoke to her. “Good afternoon, Mrs. Pennyworth. I am Officer Kline, and I will accompany you to Melbourne Station.”

She nodded.

“Have you had luncheon?”

Charlotte shook her head. “No. But I’m not hungry.”

He viewed her with sympathy, his eyes running over her expensive gown, the small roses in her hair, and the misery on her face. “Well, then, we should probably head over to the train station. I prefer not to handcuff you if you promise not to run away.” He grinned.

“I’ve nowhere to go.” She stood and allowed him to grasp her elbow and head out of the building. Almost as if to mirror her change in mood, the day was no longer sunny, and low hanging clouds had moved in. She shivered and rubbed her hands up and down her arms.

“Did you have a coat with you?” the police officer wanted to know.

“No.” She began to laugh, trying hard not to become hysterical. “This is my wedding gown.” She held out the sides of the garment. “It is lovely, is it not?”

Officer Kline viewed her with furrowed brows, probably thinking she was losing her mind. Ah, if only she could lose her mind. Then maybe her heart wouldn’t hurt so very much.

Two days passed as Charlotte sat in a cell in the Melbourne Station jail. No one had spoken to her, or told her what was happening. She’d been sent two meals each day and had turned back more than half.

Most of the time she’d spent curled up on the small cot. The cell reeked of smells she did not wish to identify. It was cold and damp, and she had to share the space with a family of mice. Since she did not even have the energy to cry, tears leaked from her eyes, dropping like a steady rain on her beautiful silk wedding gown.

She never should have allowed Elliot to get close to her. Hadn’t she learned from Lord Barton that men could not be trusted, and from Gabriel’s foolish and needless death that men could not be counted on? When would she learn to only rely on herself?

“Mrs. Pennyworth.” The man who brought her meals stood at the front of her cell. “You have a visitor.”

For a moment her heart lifted and she thought it was Elliot, coming after her. She wiped her cheeks and sat up. “Who is the visitor?”

“Lord Barton wishes to speak with you.”

“Lord Barton?” If only she had enough moisture in her mouth she would spit out his name. “I do not wish to speak with him.”

The jailer inserted a key in the cell. “I’m afraid you have no choice, Mrs. Pennyworth. Since he is the one who has charged you with the theft, he can request an audience with you.”

“And I have no right to deny him?”

The door creaked open. “No.”

She sat on the cot and crossed her arms. “I refuse to leave.”

The man sighed. “Please, Mrs. Pennyworth. Lord Barton has a great deal of influence, and if he wishes to speak with you, he will not be deterred.”

Didn’t she know that? His great deal of influence had gotten her into this situation to begin with.
The man practically owned Melbourne Station. There were very few residents who did not owe him for one reason or another.

She would hear what he had to say, and then she would turn her back on him and demand to be brought back to her cell. She uncrossed her arms and stood. “Fine. I will see him.”

The man looked relieved and smiled. She pulled her skirts close to her body to avoid touching him and swept past him. She turned to him and waved her hand, her head held high like the queen. “Lead the way.”

She followed him down the dank corridor into a room that wasn’t much better than the cell she had just left. Lord Barton sat on a chair, leaning back against the wall. When she entered, he jumped up from his chair, walked toward her and held out his arms. “Charlotte, my dear. How wonderful to see you!”
Small men with very large hammers had taken up residence in Elliot’s head. He moaned as he lifted himself off his bed. Pressing his hand against the wall to stop the dizziness, he glanced down at his wrinkled clothes. He hadn’t even taken them off before he had collapsed into bed in a drunken stupor the night before.

This nonsense had to end. Charlotte had been arrested three days ago, and he needed to get on with his life. He had clients who were expecting results. He took a step forward, fighting the nausea along with the banging headache.

After a bath and a shave, he forced his breakfast down. Amazingly enough, it didn’t come right back up but actually helped him feel a bit better. The first thing he needed to do was stop by Charlotte’s house and make sure the staff was all right with her absence. He preferred to avoid the place altogether, but someone had to look out for her house. How long would she be away? How serious were the charges?

_**I don’t know because, like a coward, I crawled away and left her to her own devices. Well done, Elliot.**_

He hushed the condemning internal voice. He’d already lived through a woman’s deviousness. He’d sworn to himself that he would never, ever allow that to happen again. Yet, he had fallen right back into the trap, as if he enjoyed playing the fool.

He caught the omnibus and walked the final distance to her house, all the time fighting the inner voice that continued to berate him. His excuses grew slim, and he was beginning to feel more than a little uncomfortable.

A very stiff and unwelcoming Thomas opened the front door. “Good morning, sir. How may I help you?” He didn’t back up to allow him to enter.

“Well, then.

“Good morning, Thomas. I stopped by to see how all of you were getting on.”

The footman’s brows rose. “Indeed? And why is that, Mr. Baker?”

Elliot fumbled for a moment. “I thought with Mrs. Pennyworth away, you might need some assistance.”

“I don’t mean to be rude, Mr. Baker, but there is nothing you can do to assist us. Everything you _could_ have done you chose _not_ to do. Now, if you will excuse me, I have duties that need my attention.” He began to close the door, and Elliot shoved his foot into the space, blocking the door. “May I come in and speak with you for a minute?” Based on Thomas’s attitude, Elliot was not sure of the welcome he would receive, but this was something he needed to do.

Thomas opened the door wider and stepped back. Bridget stood at the entrance hall, a scowl on her face, her hands on her hips. “What are you doing here?”

“I’m beginning to wonder myself.” Standing in the entrance hall, with the two servants glaring at him, thoughts flooded his mind that he’d refused to allow before now.

Charlotte had never worn expensive jewelry. Charlotte did not live above her means. Charlotte did not have an extravagant wardrobe or household furnishings. Charlotte spent time working with poor children in the foundling home. Charlotte would give the dress from her body to someone in need.

A woman such as that would not steal an expensive necklace from her employer.

Bloody hell. He ran his fingers through his hair. He’d made a tremendous mistake. His past with
Annabelle had turned him so sour and bitter that he had abandoned the woman he loved when she’d needed him the most.

Yes, the woman he loved. Loved with his entire being. Who had turned to him fully confident of his help. Instead, he’d acted like a complete arse and walked out on her. His knees buckled at the thought of what she was going through. He was indeed every nasty word he could think of.

From the looks he was receiving from her staff—that is exactly what they thought, as well.

“Can we all sit in the drawing room?”

Bridget and Thomas led the way. They were soon joined by Mrs. Blanchard, Cook, and Beatrice. Cook carried a stirring spoon and looked as though she wanted to whack him with it.

They all sat in a row on the settee and the two chairs flanking it. They formed a line of displeasure so intense his stomach knotted. “Thank you all for joining me.”

Silence.

“I think I might have made a terrible mistake.” He shook his head. “No, I must be honest. I know I made a terrible mistake. You see, I love Mrs. Pennyworth—” Cook snorted, but he continued. “Years ago, I had an experience with a woman who was involved in a jewel theft. I left Scotland Yard under a cloud of disgrace.”

Five pairs of eyes continued to glare at him. No sympathy here.

He jumped up and paced. “I realize I never gave Mrs. Pennyworth the opportunity to explain the entire situation.”

Bridget harrumphed.

He turned to them, his hands on his hips. “I came here today to check on all of you, but I’m beginning to understand I really came because I needed to speak to people who also love and respect Mrs. Pennyworth, and I knew your loyalty would be solid.”

“Unlike yours.” Mrs. Blanchard muttered, crossing her arms over her ample bosom.

“This is all very well and good, Mr. Baker, but what do you intend to do about it? If your intention in coming here is to explain your actions to us, looking for forgiveness, you might as well leave now, and let us get back to work. You will find no forgiveness here.” Cook’s eyes had softened somewhat, but she still waved the cooking spoon around.

“Yes. Right.” He knew what had to be done but needed the push from these wonderful servants who considered Mrs. Pennyworth their family. “I’m doing what I should have done days ago.”

He turned on his heels and strode to the door, tossing over his shoulder, “I’m getting Mrs. Pennyworth back.”

“Thank God.”

He thought the remark came from Bridget, but he didn’t stop long enough to be sure. He was a man on a mission.

Charlotte stared at Lord Barton’s outstretched arms. “I beg your pardon, my lord. I believe you are mistaken. I am not your dear, and there is no reason for me to be speaking to you. In fact, you, of all people, know that there is also no reason for me to be in this jail.”

Barton dropped his hands, his smile still firmly in place. “Now, now, Charlotte. Of course you need to be here. There is the little question of the stolen necklace. However, I can clear the nasty little matter up quite easily.”

She crossed her arms and tapped her foot. “Then please do.” The nerve of the man, welcoming her as if she were a long-lost love. Her stomach churned just being in the same room with the cretin.
He waved to the chair in front of her. “Please have a seat. We can certainly discuss this like two adults and come to a reasonable solution.”

She dropped her arms to her side and stared at him, her mouth agape. Dear God, did he still expect her to become his mistress? Two years had passed. Hadn’t he found someone else to torture by now?

“My dear, I still want you. And I intend to have you. Once you agree, I will notify the authorities that this was all a little mix-up and you will be free to go.”

“I hate you. I would rather sit in jail for the rest of my life than have your filthy hands on me.” She turned toward the door back to her cell.

“I wouldn’t be so quick to dismiss my offer.” She continued to keep her back to him while he spoke. “I wanted to be the first man between those lovely legs, but unfortunately, I learned you had married. Such a shame, but nevertheless while that lessens your appeal, it doesn’t stop it. That will merely alter my offering.”

“I would prefer to return to my cell. Please call for the guard.”

“At one time, I would have set you up in a lovely home. I would have showered you with jewelry, servants, trips, and fine gowns. But now that you are no longer pure, I will offer you my protection.”

She turned and sneered at him. “Oh, how very kind of you, seeing that I am no longer pure because I chose to go to bed with my lawful husband.”

“Now, now, my dear, there is no need to be sarcastic.” His voice dripped condescension, and Charlotte had had enough.

She leaned forward, poking him in the chest. “Understand this, my lord. I am not for sale. I will never grace your bed, no matter what consequence that affords me.” She moved back to the door and pounded on it. “Guard, please escort me back. I am finished here.”

The door opened, and the guard glanced between her and Barton. “May I return her, my lord?” Before Barton could answer, Charlotte shoved the man out of the way and hurried down the passage. The guard caught up to her as she reached her cell.

“It doesn’t help to antagonize Lord Barton.” He closed the cell door after she entered. “He generally gets his own way in the end.”

“How this time.” She sat on the cot, the anger brought on by his words crushing her. Her stomach churned, and her heart pounded. Deep inside her a kernel of fear sunk its tendrils into her gut. Lord Barton could make her life miserable.

She flopped back, staring at the ceiling and thinking about Elliot. She hated that she still loved him. That she had pinned all her hopes on him, on them having a wonderful life together. He’d been her strength throughout the Miss Garvey mess. His strong arms had held her, comforted her, protected her. Butterflies still took up space in her middle when she thought about him touching her, making love to her.

How could he turn away from her when they’d meant so much to each other? He’d said he loved her. What kind of love disappeared at the first sign of trouble?

Apparently, the type of love Mr. Elliot Baker offered.

Elliot stepped off the train in Melbourne Station and took note of the town. Modest, respectable, and everything a small English countryside village should be. Except somewhere in this town was a jail cell holding his fiancée. A woman he’d deserted in her hour of need. Guilt nearly crippled him. He was determined to set everything right.
Before he’d left London, he’d spent time with Inspector Longforth, going over the charges in the warrant for Charlotte’s arrest. Longforth seemed genuinely happy to know Elliot was going after her. “That woman does not belong behind bars. I’m a good judge of character, and what I learned of her after we ran across the warrant does not match with a jewel thief.” Then he had looked directly at Elliot. “Baker, I think your unfortunate experience with Miss Walters has turned you sour. If I were you, I’d get my fiancée out of jail, and then do a great deal of groveling. If you’re lucky, she won’t run you down in the street with a carriage.”

Elliot had nodded his agreement and took his leave, anxious to catch the next train out of London for Melbourne Station.

He walked the distance from the railway station to the closest inn, The Lion and the Tiger. The innkeeper, a rotund, cheerful man of middle years, greeted him. “Welcome, sir. How may we serve you?”

“I would like to secure a room. I am not too sure for how long, but at least a day or two. I would also like dinner, as soon as possible.”

The man bowed. “Of course. Please follow me, and I will show you to a room where you can freshen up before we serve dinner.”

The two of them climbed the stairs to the second level where he opened the third door down. “Is this acceptable?”

The room was small but certainly met his needs. And, it was large enough for him and Charlotte once he freed her and begged on bended knee for her forgiveness.

A wooden dresser with a shaving mirror hanging over it sat against one wall with a pitcher and bowl set on top of the dresser. A decent-size bed occupied the center of the room, with a small desk and chair stuck into a corner. The window over the desk allowed in light to what would otherwise be a dark room.

“This is fine. I will be down in about ten minutes for dinner.” Just as the man backed out to leave, Elliot stopped him. “Excuse me. I am looking for someone named Lord Barton? Do you know him, or where I can find him?”

The innkeeper eyed him cautiously. “What business do you have with his lordship?”

Interesting. A combination of fear and reluctance covered the innkeeper’s face. No doubt more than one person had been under the lord’s thumb. “I have legal business in town, and someone mentioned Lord Barton might be the man for me to see.”

“Any business you want to conduct in this town better be brought to Lord Barton’s attention first.”

“He’s quite influential, then?”

The man shrugged. “That’s all I’m saying.” He turned and left the room, closing the door firmly behind him.

He would not mention the reason for his appearance in town. If the man had that much influence, it was better he did not know about Elliot’s objective to clear Charlotte of these false charges.

Elliot dug through his satchel, and removed the notes he’d made when he met with Inspector Longforth. The Inspector had been good enough to contact the Melbourne Station police to uncover more information.

Miss Molly Adams. She was the maid who had testified to the magistrate that she’d found the necklace in Charlotte’s room. Tomorrow he would pay Miss Adams a visit.

After a good night’s sleep and a hearty breakfast, Elliot set out to find Miss Adams. Hopefully, she was not still employed by the Barton household, which would make it difficult to speak with her.
Fortunately, in a small town such as this, most people knew everyone. Working on that assumption, he made his first visit to a local greengrocer.

"Good morning to you, sir." A young woman of no more than twenty years greeted him as he entered the shop. "What can I assist you with? We have some lovely turnips today, just in from the farm."

"Thank you, miss. I will look forward to examining your wares in a bit, but first I seek information."

Her friendly mien vanished, and the same sense of caution as the innkeeper’s crossed the young woman’s face. "Yes?"

"I am looking for a Miss Molly Adams. She was employed by Lady Barton the last time I spoke with her. Before I trouble those up at the manor, I thought to learn if she still worked there."

The girl began to rearrange onions. "I don’t know anything about the employees at Lady Barton’s home. Now, if you will excuse me, I have vegetables to unload. Good day, sir." She abruptly walked away, going through a doorway behind the counter and disappearing.

Shaking his head, he left the shop. His inquiries in four other establishments brought similar results. As he left a snug little bookstore, he was halted by an older man, making his way out of the shop with the use of a cane. "Young man. Did I hear you asking after Molly?"

"Yes, you did. Do you know if she is still working at the Barton Manor?"

"Come sit over here with me." The man pointed to a stone bench in front of a small park not too distant.

They sat side-by-side, only silence between them for a time. Just as Elliot was about to ask the man what information he had, he turned to him. "What is your name, son?"

Elliot held out his hand to the old man. "Mr. Elliot Baker, from London."

The man shook his hand and said, "Molly is my granddaughter. She no longer works for Barton, because she was dismissed."

Ah, at last he’d found someone who might be willing to help him. "Is she no longer in Melbourne Station, then?"

"Oh, yes. She lives with my wife and myself." He thumped his cane on the ground. "Most will tell you our Molly is a fallen woman. That she might be, but Lord Barton played a big part in her downfall."

The man looked out at the distance, pain and sorrow on his wrinkled face. "You see, our Molly worked as a maid for Lady Barton. She foolishly became involved with Lord Barton, thinking his promises of marriage and a life of luxury were true." He stopped and regarded him. "The blackguard got her with child, and instead of taking care of her, turned her out with no references. She’s been taking in sewing from the local seamstress to feed and clothe the child."

Precisely, he was sure, what would have happened to Charlotte had she become involved with him. "Do you think your granddaughter would be willing to speak with me? I am a solicitor representing another woman he has done wrong, and Miss Adams might be the one person who can help."

"As much as she loves her little Betsy, she has nothing good to say about the girl’s father. I’m sure if she can help in any way, she will." He climbed to his feet. "If you want to speak with her now, I’ll take you there. I just came by to browse the bookshelves." He jerked his thumb in the direction of the bookstore. "Can’t afford to buy anything."

They walked the mile and a half from the center of Melbourne Station to Mr. Adams’s house. The older gentleman kept up a constant stream of comments on the town, his granddaughter, and her little Betsy.
They approached a comfortable cottage. A young woman sat out front, holding a baby about a year old in her lap. Both were bundled up for the cold weather in worn coats. “Hi, Grandpa. Did you fetch the potatoes?”

“Yes, I did, Miss Molly.” He held up the sack he’d carried with him and opened the wooden gate. “Molly, this here is Mr. Baker. He is looking for information about Barton.”

Molly’s nose wrinkled as if she suddenly had a whiff of something nasty. “I prefer not to speak of the dreadful man, even if he owns this entire town.”

Mr. Adams moved past the bench where Molly sat. “I’ll leave you two to discuss whatever it is Mr. Baker came all the way from London for.”

Molly smoothed her skirts and adjusted the baby’s cap. “What is it I can help you with, Mr. Baker?”

“Do you remember a woman named Miss Charlotte Reading?”

Molly stiffened, and her lips pursed. “No, sir. I don’t remember her.”

He reached into his jacket pocket and took out a copy of the warrant. “I find that strange because according to this paper, you were the one who made charges against her that you found a very valuable necklace under her mattress.”

The girl turned pale, and her eyes grew wide. “I don’t remember that.”

“Are you sure, Molly? You don’t remember making these charges?”

Her eyes filled with tears, and she shook her head. Elliot decided to use another tactic. “You have a beautiful little girl there. What is her name?”

Molly smiled, her plain face turning quite lovely as she gazed at her baby. “Betsy.”

The child smiled in his direction, two tiny teeth making an appearance. “How old is she?”

“She just turned one year a month ago.” A mother’s pride filled the girl’s face. “I’ll bet her papa is very proud of her.” He knew he might be causing the girl pain, but she’d caused a great deal of pain for Charlotte with her false charges.

As if a cloud moved over the sun, Molly’s expression grew grim as she fussed with the baby’s blanket. “No, sir. Her papa has never seen her.”

He dipped his head to look into her eyes. “Is Lord Barton her papa?”

She sucked in a breath. “Grandpapa told you?”

“Yes, he did. And I assume from what you’ve said that Lord Barton has not supported you in any way?”

Tears filled her eyes. “I was most foolish, Mr. Baker. He promised me all sorts of things, but once I learned Betsy was on the way, he turned me out with no references.”

“Are you sure you want to protect someone like that, Molly?”

She hesitated, and then said, “Lord Barton told me if I didn’t say I found that necklace in Miss Reading’s room that he would turn me out.” She gave a bitter laugh. “He did that, anyway.”

“Would you be willing to speak to the magistrate and explain that you didn’t find that necklace in her room?”

Her eyes grew wide, and she shook her head. “Lord Barton said if I told anyone, I would be arrested for filing a false police report and would go to jail. If I did, what would happen to Betsy? Grandmama and Grandpapa are too old to take care of her.” She dabbed the corner of her eyes with the edge of the worn blanket. “Besides, no police officer or judge in this town would go against Lord Barton. I’m afraid Miss Reading’s case is a lost cause.”

Lord Barton might be somebody important, but Elliot had contacts, too. “If I could have you speak with someone who could guarantee that you would receive no punishment for what you did, would
you be willing to deny the charges you made two years ago?”

She chewed her lip, studying him. “But once I did that, Lord Barton would make sure something terrible happened to me and my grandparents.”

Elliot leaned his forearms on his thighs. “What if I promised you a job in a very pleasant household in London, with a place for your child to be raised with you?”

She chewed her lip. “What about Grandmama and Grandpapa? He would hurt them, I am sure.” He was probably overstepping by offering the girl a job in Charlotte’s house, but if everything went as he planned, it would soon be his house, too. “I will see that your grandparents are taken care of, as well.” Hell, they could all work for him and Charlotte.

He needed to get this mess straightened out and have his fiancée released from jail and into his arms.

For good.
Charlotte paced in her cell. Six days. Six long, boring days of pacing, crying, cursing, and telling Lord Barton at least once a day that she would rather go to the worst jail in all of England than grace his bed.

She dropped to the cot and held her head in her hands. Her beautiful wedding gown was a wrinkled mess. She’d been given cold water once a day to wash. Her food had started off appetizing, but the last two days she’d been given no more than stale bread. He was trying to break her, and with no one to help her, fear grew that Lord Barton would win.

He’d visited her every day, and every day she’d told him to leave her alone. It had reached the point where she was almost afraid of him. He did not like to be crossed, which was why he had the entire town under his thumb. The few people over the years who had tried to stand up to him had met with unfortunate accidents. Nothing that could be proven, of course, but a burned-out barn, a crippled horse, and water supplies diverted from much-needed plots of land had taught intended lessons.

“Mrs. Pennyworth, you have a visitor.”

She continued to hold her head in her hands and shake her head. “Go away. Tell Lord Barton I do not wish to see him. Just leave me alone.”

“I am not Lord Barton.” Her head snapped up at the familiar voice.

Her heart thumped, and she had to grip the sides of the cot to keep from flinging herself into Elliot’s arms. He looked as bad as she felt. He appeared to have suffered many a sleepless night. His hair was a mess, as though he’d endlessly run his fingers through it. His normally perfect tie was askew, and his clothes were as wrinkled as her gown.

He eyed her with caution, almost as if he were holding his breath. She bit her knuckles as she returned his regard. Oh, how she’d missed him.

The cad.

“What are you doing here?” She raised her chin, glorying as he cringed at her icy tone.

Elliot turned to the guard. “Leave us, if you will, please.””

“Since his lordship said it was all right, it’s fine with me.” The man turned and headed down the corridor to the main room. The sound of a door closing told her he’d left them completely alone.

“How did you do that? No one does anything without Barton’s permission.”

Elliot took two steps into the cell and attempted to reach for her. “Charlotte.”

She stood and raised her hand, her palm facing him. “Don’t. Don’t come any closer.”

He stopped, his hands dangling at his sides. “Just let me say, before we talk about us—”

“—there is no us.” She hugged her middle and turned her back on him. “Just go away, Elliot.” But she didn’t want him to go away. Not really, and that was frustrating. She still loved him and had cursed herself over that for days. Damn his hide.

She jumped as he touched her shoulder.

“Before we talk about us—and yes, my love, there is an us—I want you to know that all charges against you have been dropped, and you are free to go.”

Just like that.

She’d spent two years worrying about being found, had been dragged off to jail on her wedding day, sat here for six days while that vile man had attempted to coerce her into his bed, and then Elliot appeared, and the charges were dropped.
She turned to face him. “How?”
He rubbed the back of his neck and stared at his feet. “Once I realized what a bloody arse I was to send you off with the Inspectors, I met with Scotland Yard and got more information about your so-called charges.”

She raised her eyebrows. “So-called?”
“Yes. It was obvious from the start that you were set up.”

A very unladylike snort escaped her. “You certainly didn’t think so when I was dragged away on our wedding day.”

“You certainly didn’t think so when I was dragged away on our wedding day.”

“Are. And I told you I was an arse.” He took her by the shoulders and stared at her, his eyes full of pain. “If you had only told me about this, it could have been cleared up a long time ago.”

“How dare you say that?” She drew back and walked away from him, her hand itching to slap his face. “You didn’t believe me when I summoned you for help. Why should I think you would have believed me if I had told you before then?”

When he didn’t answer, she said, “Then I am free to walk out right now?”

“Yes.”

“Excellent.” She marched forward and swept past him, down the corridor, to the unlocked door.

She opened it, and the guard sitting at the desk ignored her. Expecting Barton to accost her any minute, she hurried out the door into the bright sunlight, raising her hand to block the sun from her eyes. She strode about twenty paces and stopped.

*What am I to do now?*

... 

Stunned by Charlotte’s quick exit, it took Elliot a minute to react and follow her. Where the devil did the woman think she was going? She had no money or way to return to London. The guard was once again sitting at his desk when Elliot entered the front room of the jail. “Where did Mrs. Pennyworth go?”

He waved at the front door. “Out there, somewhere. She’s no longer my problem since Lord Barton said she could leave.”

Elliot tamped down the urge to flatten the man’s nose. “You are a disgrace to law enforcement.”

The man flushed and did not respond, but shrugged and went back to flipping the cards he played.

Charlotte had come to a dead stop halfway up the block. He caught up to her, making sure she saw him so he wouldn’t startle her. “Sweetheart, we can stay overnight at an inn or take the next train to London, which is in about two hours.”

“Pardon, sir, but please do not address me in such a familiar manner.” She glared at him, enough to have him stepping back. “If you would be so kind as to purchase me a train ticket to London, I will see that you are reimbursed.”

“Charlotte, I would suggest we stay at an inn tonight. I don’t wish to disparage your person, but you are not properly dressed for a train ride.”

She glanced down at herself, and her shoulders slumped. “Perhaps you are right. If you would also lend me money for a room, I would greatly appreciate it.”

“Certainly.” He attempted to take her arm, but she pulled away from him and continued on down the street.

He shook his head. “Charlotte, the inn is the other direction.”

She turned and headed the other way, her head raised, as she tugged her dirty, smelly skirts closer so she would not touch him. He almost laughed but knew that would not be the best way to get back...
into her good graces. So, instead, he trudged after her.

Since he had given up the room he’d been using since his arrival in Melbourne Station, anticipating they would make a quick return to London, he led her to an inn closer to the train station. As he had pointed out to her, with the dishevelment of her appearance, she would need to tidy herself up before she was fit to ride the train.

The Great Slaver Inn sat on a corner parcel about two blocks from the train station. Charlotte entered ahead of him and walked straight up to the desk along the wall by the staircase. “I would like a room, please.”

The innkeeper looked her up and down and obviously found her wanting. “That will be three shillings, miss.”

Elliot stepped up. “That is missus, my good man. My wife and I need a room for the both of us.”

Charlotte swung around and opened her mouth to dispute him, but he gave her a quick headshake. The poor woman had no idea how bad she looked. Since he would be the one to pay for the room, anyway, he was sure the innkeeper would toss her out on her ear if he didn’t claim her as his wife.

“Married are ye?” He leered, as he looked Charlotte up and down again.

“Yes.” He kept his clenched fists at his side as he stared the man down, challenging the innkeeper to dispute him. The last thing he wanted Charlotte to witness was a brawl on the inn floor. He withdrew the coins from his pocket and added two more. “We would like a hot meal sent up to the room, and my wife will require a bath, as well.”

The innkeeper nodded and scooped up the coins. He shoved an open book across the desk and handed Elliot a pen. He wrote “Mr. and Mrs. Baker” on the next empty line. The innkeeper dragged the book back, turned, and took a key from a cubby behind the desk. “Room four.”

“Thank you.” Elliot took the key and held out his arm to Charlotte. “My dear?”

For a moment, he thought his charade was about to explode, and he would receive a fist to his eye. Charlotte’s breathing had increased, and he was sure it was anger, and not desire she was feeling. Eventually, she must have realized if she wanted a bath, food, and a decent night’s sleep, she would have to go along with him.

She took his arm and dug her nails into his jacket. “I am not your wife.” She growled, under her breath.

Elliot swallowed his smile. At least he’d gotten her to stay in the same room with him. If he was going to get her back, he needed to do quite a bit of groveling and apologizing. And seducing, although given the stiffness of her body and the look on her face, that was not going to happen anytime soon.

…

Charlotte gritted her teeth as they climbed the stairs and took the few steps down the corridor to the room. Elliot unlocked the door and held it open. She swept in, and the first thing her eyes landed on was the bed. “You’ll sleep on the floor,” she tossed over her shoulder.

Elliot closed the door and, leaning against it, said, “Charlotte.”

She turned, but kept her distance.

“Are you well?”

“Oh, yes, Mr. Baker. I am quite well, thank you. I have just spent six days in jail, harassed by a man who tried to blackmail me into being his mistress. I was cold, scared, hungry, shared my accommodations with a family of mice, and abandoned by the man who claimed to love me. All that after being attacked and almost killed by a crazed woman. Why wouldn’t I be well?”
He winced at her words. “I will spend the rest of my life making it up to you. I promise.”

“Oh, yes, Mr. Baker. I am quite familiar with your promises.”

She turned her back on him, not wanting to see the sorrow and regret on his face. She was filled with curiosity as to how he had gotten her out of jail and the charges dismissed, but she would not ask the bounder. He’d acknowledged that they were fake charges, but not how he’d taken care of them. Despite her curiosity, she had no intention of asking him. They might be thrown together for the night, and the train ride tomorrow, but then she would be done with him.

Yes, why don’t I punish myself further? I’ve already admitted I still love him. Curse his hide.

Truth be known, she was finding it very hard to keep her hands off him. All she’d wanted to do since he walked into her jail cell was to throw herself into his arms and have him hold her, to feel the warmth and security in his embrace. She wanted him to tell her everything would be all right. That he had arranged to have the false charges dropped, and had every intention of taking care of her for the rest of their lives.

Her anger had dimmed—just a bit—because he looked so horrible. This was not a man who had turned his back on her and then gaily resumed his life. Although his initial reaction had been to dismiss her as a liar and a thief, the look in his eyes now told her he was very sorry for what he had done.

But that didn’t mean she could forgive him.

A light tap on the door drew her attention. Elliot opened the door to a well-rounded middle-aged woman. She offered them a gap-tooth smile, none of the suspicion in her husband’s manner evident. “Good evening, I am Mrs. Weston, the innkeeper’s wife. I understand Mrs. Baker would like a bath?”

“Yes, please,” Charlotte answered.

“We have a bathing room, my dear. It’s at the end of the hall. I will set up the bath for you. If you will accompany me, I can show it to you.” The woman turned, and Charlotte followed her down the corridor to the end room, which apparently had been a bedchamber at one time, but was now set up to bathe.

The lovely space had two green-and-white striped upholstered chairs, along with a linen closet, mirrors on the wall, a washbasin, a water closet, and a delightful bathtub. “This is lovely!”

The woman blushed at Charlotte’s praise. “Thank you. We are quite proud of it, if I may say so, myself. I will set up your bath and fetch you from your room when it is ready.” Charlotte turned to leave, and then stopped when the woman spoke. “When will you and your husband like your dinner?”

“Your husband.”

The words jolted her. Had Lord Barton not caught up with her, that is exactly what Elliot would be right now. Instead, she wasn’t exactly sure what he was. She was still too angry at his betrayal to think beyond a bath and dinner. He kept insisting there was an “us” in their future, but she couldn’t dwell on that now.

“I think I would prefer a bath before we eat,” she answered. Then, glancing down at her ruined gown, she cringed. “My pardon, Mrs. Weston, but I am in desperate need of a change of clothing.” She flushed, wondering what the woman thought of her condition.

“There is a shop on the next block. If you tell me what you need, I can send one of my daughters.” There was no condemnation or suspicion in her statement.

“Wonderful. You may get some coins from my husband.” She smiled at the woman. A bath, clean clothes, and a warm meal. Heaven.
Elliot stared out the window at the busy street below. A charming little town, it was too bad Melbourne Station was completely controlled by Lord Barton.

When the local magistrate had refused to release Charlotte based on Molly’s testimony, Elliot had sent a telegram to a client of his, a well-respected, honest judge in London, who had quickly dispatched a return telegram to the magistrate. Within a half hour, he had the discharge papers in hand.

His only regret was not coming face-to-face with Lord Barton, and pummeling him to the ground. Even now, his hands clenched with the urge to seek him out and give him the thrashing he deserved.

He spent the time waiting for Charlotte to return from her bath going over what he would say to her. As soon as she came back, he would notify the innkeeper to send up their meal. He gladly gave Mrs. Weston the money to buy a new outfit for Charlotte. If things went the way he hoped, he would be responsible for her clothing, food, and shelter for the rest of her life.

He’d been a first-class idiot, and if given the chance, he would do whatever it took to make her see how much he loved her, and how sorry he was for abandoning her when she had needed him the most.

He had thought his heart crushed when he learned of the warrant for Charlotte’s arrest, but nothing compared to how he felt when he saw her in that dirty, disgusting jail. Her beautiful wedding gown was a mess, her hair hung down in clumps, and her eyes looked upon him with heartbreaking sadness. But worse had been the look of defeat on her face. His strong Charlotte had given up.

No matter how hard he tried, he could not convince himself that it wasn’t his fault she’d suffered through the humiliation of arrest and being treated like a criminal by the lowly moron at the jail.

As much as he wanted to slam his fist into the jailer’s face, deep in his heart, he knew he was the one who deserved the thrashing. The guilt was crippling.

There was a slight tap at the door. “Mr. Baker?”

He opened the door to find Mrs. Weston holding a bundle of clothing over her arm. “Here are your wife’s things.” She hesitated for a moment, and then said, “I’m thinking you might want to check on her in the bathing room. I knocked to tell her I had her clothes, but she didn’t answer, and I am sure I heard crying.”

The blood drained from his face. With all she’d gone through the last month or so, it was no wonder she was crying. “Thank you, Mrs. Weston. I will check on her.”

She nodded and went on her way. How would Charlotte feel about him barging in on her bath? He’d already seen her unclothed, but since things were so nebulous between them right now, his hesitation was well-founded.

After a few minutes of indecision, he placed the pile of clean clothes on the bed, and headed to the bathing room. He knocked gently. “Charlotte? Is everything all right?”

No response. He leaned his ear against the door. “Charlotte?”

No words, but the muffled sound of sobs spurred him to undo the latch and enter. She sat in the tub with her knees bent, arms wrapped around her legs, her forehead on her knees, sobbing. He moved closer, then hunched down alongside her. Reaching out, he dipped his fingers into the water, then placed his hand on her wet hair, smoothing down the damp curls. “Honey, you’re going to freeze. The water has grown quite cold.”

No answer. She merely continued to cry as if her heart were broken, the sobs wracking her body. He looked around the room and spotted two drying cloths on a chair near the window. He rose, picked one up, and shook it out. “Sweetheart, you have to stand so I can dry you. You’re shivering.”
Her head moved back and forth, rubbing her forehead against her knees. “Yes. You must stand.” He dropped the drying cloth, and reaching under her arms, he drew her up. Once he had her standing, he placed the cloth around her shoulders and took her hand. “Step out.” Like a young child, she did as he said. Since all her clothing was in the room several doors down, he dried her as best he could, then wrapped her in the cloth. Despite whatever scandal it would cause, he scooped her up and carried her from the bathing room, down the corridor, to their room. Jugging her in his arms, he opened the door, strode inside, and placed her gently on the chair.

He riffled through the pile of clothes until he pulled out a white lawn nightgown. “Stand up, love.” Charlotte stood, the drying cloth dropping to her feet. She was not herself, since she didn’t try to cover up. Being the gentleman he wished he weren’t, he slipped the gown over her head, hiding all that glorious skin. He took her by the hand, happy to see she had stopped crying, but she was still unresponsive.

“I’m afraid I have no experience with dressing women’s hair. If I give you a hairbrush, will you fix it whichever way you normally do for bed?” She nodded and took the brush he handed her. With a few swift strokes, she tamed the curls and quickly braided the length into one long rope.

“Is there a ribbon?” The first words she’d spoken since he’d taken her from the bathtub, her voice was thick from crying. He fumbled through the clothing again and came up with a blue ribbon that he handed her.

Once she was finished, he pulled down the cover on the bed, and she climbed in, rolling to her side, facing away from him. It was no wonder she was experiencing such an emotional collapse. His guilt weighed heavily on his mind and heart.

Before he said a word to her, there was a knock on the door. A young man, most likely son to the innkeeper, stood with a tray of food. “Your dinner, sir.” “Thank you.” He waved to a table near the bed. “Just put it there.”

The young man nodded, placed the tray on the table, and left the room. The scent of the food had his stomach rumbling, and even though he was anxious to have his say, he thought it best if they ate before they talked.

“Sweeting, I think you should eat something.” When she didn’t respond for a full minute, he thought perhaps she had fallen asleep. He moved to touch her shoulder just as she rolled to her back. “Yes, I am hungry.” Relief swamped him at her response. He had visions of taking her to a hospital where they routinely locked up women suffering from hysteria.

Charlotte swung her legs over the edge of the bed and eyed the roasted duck, creamed potatoes, bread, cheese, and bowl of vegetables with relish. He would prefer her railing at him, cursing and storming about, rather than this subdued woman.

They ate the meal in silence, and his mind eased as Charlotte ate with gusto. However, he was not fool enough to think that she had forgiven him.

In fact, he had all intentions of doing an immense amount of groveling once their bellies were full.
Charlotte wiped her mouth with the napkin and gave a deep sigh. Between the relief of being out of jail and a warm bath, clean clothes, and a real meal, all she wanted to do was crawl under the covers and sleep for days. But she would not. She had a lot to say, and Mr. Baker would not be happy to hear it.

He placed his coffee cup in the saucer and wiped his mouth. “Uh oh, I don’t care for the look in your eye.”

“Before I start, I want you to know I appreciate you doing whatever it was you did to get the charges dropped and me out of jail.” She crossed her arms over her chest and glared at him. “That is the last nice thing you will hear from me.”

Elliot hopped up and shoved his fingers into his hair, fisting his hand as if attempting to yank himself bald. “There are simply no words to tell you how very sorry I am for what I did, or rather, what I did not do.”

She snorted.

“No matter how many different words of apology run through my mind, nothing can possibly convey the anger, disappointment, or the guilt that I feel for the way I treated you.”

She turned her head, her arms still crossed, her body stiff with anger. Everything she had intended to say once they had left the jail had dissipated with her tears. Although her weeping had been cathartic after weeks of anxiety due to the bizarre packages, the close brush with death at Miss Garvey’s hands, her arrest, Lord Barton, the time in the jail, but mostly, Elliot’s betrayal, there remained one thing she still needed to say. She turned back and looked him straight in the eye.

“You broke my heart.” Her eyes welled up again, and she realized she was simply not ready to go forward with their relationship.

His stricken look brought some satisfaction, but her hurt was too deep, and too raw, to think it would be washed away with an apology and a few humbling words.

“I know I broke your heart.” He shook his head and raised his arms. “If you give me the chance, I will spend the rest of my life proving my love to you.”

“I’m afraid I simply cannot do that.” She stood and walked away from the makeshift table. She needed to put space between them.

Thankfully, he kept his distance. “I will never, ever doubt you again.”

“Until the next time.”

“There will be no next time. I love you, I trust you, and I will defend you until the day I die.”

“I wish I could believe you, but I have found placing my trust—and in the case of marriage, my very life—in a man’s hands does not bode well for me.”

She rubbed her forehead with her thumb and index finger. Relief at her release, and decent food had made her extremely fatigued. “I would like to sleep now.”

He nodded. “As you wish.” He glanced around the room. “I will sleep in the chair.”

“Yes, you will.” She climbed into the bed, rolled toward the wall so she would not have to look at him, and fell into instant slumber.

…

The next morning, Elliot groaned as he awakened stiff as a board. At first, he couldn’t understand why
he was curled up in a chair. Then it all came back to him. Charlotte’s release from jail. Her refusal to accept his apology.

They would take the train back to London today, and he fully intended to take whatever measures he needed to convince Charlotte that his heart and loyalty were true.

He eased up, rotating his neck and working his stiffened shoulders. He was getting too old to be sleeping in chairs. A glance across the room told him Charlotte was still asleep. He studied her for a minute, moving closer to the bed.

All the agony and pain he’d seen on her face the day before had been wiped clean in slumber. She looked about ten years younger, her cheeks a soft red from sleep. Her lengthy eyelashes rested on her cheeks, the furrow in her brow erased. Soft golden curls had escaped from her braid, to surround her face like a halo.

God, he loved her so much. If he couldn’t convince her to allow him back into her life, he would never recover.

As he watched her, her lashes fluttered and then opened. She gave him a warm smile, then scowled. “I’d much rather see that smile again.”

She shifted on the bed, sitting up against the headboard, hugging the blanket to her. “What time will we leave for London?”

“There is a train at ten this morning.”

She nodded, and he took the chance to sit on the bed next to her. He reached out and tucked one of those tempting curls behind her ear. “Did you sleep well?”

“Better than I did at the jail.”

He hung his head and took her hands in his. The thought of her in that jail cut him to the quick. “Charlotte, I am so very, very sorry for what I did. Or, did not do. Believe me when I tell you I love you. I will never betray you again. If it takes the rest of my life, I swear you will one day believe me.”

He raised her hand to kiss her knuckles. “Give me another chance. Please?”

She pulled her hand from his. “I would like breakfast before we leave.”

He dipped his head. “As you wish.” He would not badger her. He understood her need to come to grips with what had happened to her, and how he had let her down.

“I will go downstairs and order breakfast sent up, which will give you time to prepare for the trip back.” He walked to the bowl of water on the dresser and gave himself a quick wash, cleaned his teeth, combed his hair, and left the room.

Charlotte threw the covers off and stepped onto the soft carpet that covered the wooden floor. Her mind had been in a whirl since she’d awakened and found Elliot standing there, staring at her.

Oh, how she wished she no longer loved him. It would be so easy to just deny her feelings, and tell him there would be no more chances. But deep down, she knew letting him go would be the worse decision of her life.

Elliot arrived back at the room at the same time their breakfast was brought in by the innkeeper’s wife. Once everything was placed onto the small table, the woman dipped a slight curtsy and left them alone.

“This looks good.” Elliot walked toward the table and drew back a chair. “Will you join me?”

Avoiding his eyes, she moved to the table and took the chair he held out. “Yes, it does look good.”

She doubted she would ever again take decent food for granted. Suddenly ravenous, she placed eggs, bacon, toast, creamed trout, and a spoonful of eel aspic on her plate. Elliot poured them both
tea, and then he filled his plate. They ate in silence, but there was no awkwardness between them. She glanced occasionally in his direction, but their eyes never met. This could be her life if she found it in her shattered heart to forgive him.

Or she could return to the one she had been quite happy with before she’d entered Elliot’s office and asked for his help. Would she find that existence happy once again?

Not likely. She loved the blasted man and still wanted a future with him.

He wiped his mouth on a napkin and placed it on the table. “We have about two hours before we leave for the train.” He pushed back his chair and stood. “I want to say something.”

Charlotte placed her hands in her lap and watched him. He walked in circles for a few minutes, then turned toward her. “Charlotte…”

He shook his head, and propping his hands on his hips, looked away. When he turned back, she was stunned to see tears in his eyes. “I will do anything, absolutely anything to return us to the way we were before I abandoned you.”

She closed her eyes, her heart pounding. She told herself she should say, “no” and prepare for her return to London, but her mouth was apparently not connected to her brain. “I want to do that as well. But I’m not sure…”

Dropping to his knees, he took her hands and squeezed. “Please give me another chance.”

She looked away, and studied the wall as if a most interesting painting hung there. She took a deep breath, and looked back at him. “Yes, I—I will give you another chance.” The whispered words escaped her lips before she could stop them.

Elliot’s heart stuttered, sure his ears had betrayed him. “Did you say yes?” He held his breath as he waited for her response.

A lone tear tracked down her cheek. “I said yes, which makes me the biggest fool ever.”

He climbed up off his knees and pulled her up, still not sure about taking her into his arms, which is what he wanted to do more than anything. She appeared skittish, and not at all sure she wanted anything to do with him, despite her words.

“No, it doesn’t make you a fool, my love. It makes me even more ashamed of myself, and certain that you are the finest woman in all of England. And I love you.”

Nervous at venturing into unknown territory, he placed his arm on her shoulder, and when she didn’t push him off, he pulled her against his chest. “I will spend the rest of my life making it up to you.”

She looked up, her blue eyes shimmering with tears. The sight almost brought him to his knees, and convinced him how very lucky he was to have found such a perfect woman. “Please don’t cry, sweetheart. It will only get better from here. I promise.”

“I doubt it could get worse.” Her slight smile warmed him, and all the tension eased from his body.

He lowered his head and joined his lips with hers, gently, tenderly, not with lust—although that was certainly there—but showing her how much she meant to him.

“Make love to me, Elliot. I need to feel warm again. I am so cold.” Her murmured request did not need to be repeated.

Elliot pulled her toward the bed, and within minutes, all their clothes sat in a pile on the floor, and they were in bed. He drew in a deep breath as he sat back and admired her. “You are so beautiful.” As if he was touching the finest porcelain glass, he ran his hands over her curves, noticing how lean
she had grown.

He slid them both down until they were lying on their sides, facing each other. The warmth of her body, the floral scent from her skin, and the feel of her flesh under his hands urged him to bring to a hasty conclusion his attempt to love her slowly and tenderly.

Although the ancient male urge to possess his mate, to mark her as his, was strong, he drew back, wanting this experience to be about her pleasure, and make her understand through his touch, how very much she meant to him.

His lips pressed against her temple, his warm breath bathing her skin. “This time is all about you, and your pleasure. I want to make you come apart in my arms, cry out at your release. I want to love you as you’ve never been loved before.”

Charlotte closed her eyes at Elliot’s words, as he began an exploration of her body. His large hands wandered over her dips and curves, kneading her flesh, touching her gently. She needed this desperately. Although she had tried to hang onto her anger and pain, his honest apology, and his work to get her out of jail and the charges dropped proved his belief in her, even though at first, he had turned his back.

She ran her palms over his warm chest, inching up to his solid jaw, where her fingertips scraped against the stubble of his beard. Wrapping her hand around his head, she pulled him down and kissed him with a fervor that told him she was ready for more than just tender touches. She released his mouth and sighed. “I want you, Elliot. I need to feel you inside me.”

“Hush, love. Let me see to your pleasure first.” He moved his hand over her breast, rubbing his thumb over her nipple until she moaned at the exquisite feelings running through her. His hand moved farther down to explore the warmth at her center, circling her moist folds with his fingers. The scent of her arousal filled the air.

Not wishing to just lie there and feel, she grasped his cock, smiling when he groaned. “Yes, sweetheart, just like that.” The tension in his voice made her smile.

She brought her lips to his and spoke into his mouth. “Now, Elliot. Now.”

Not needing any further invitation, he rolled on top of her and spread her legs with his knee. He rested his upper body on his elbows as she framed his hips with her legs. “Love me, Elliot.”

With one thrust he was inside her. She sucked in a breath at the fullness. She’d forgotten how wonderful it felt to be so filled. To be so loved.

He pulled almost all the way out, and she moved her hips up to re-capture him, right before he drove himself back into her. “Yes.”

They began the ancient dance of lovers slowly, until the only sound in the room was their combined panting, and murmurs of love and pleasure. Elliot picked up speed, and Charlotte met him thrust for thrust. The tension in her body spiraled, leaving her grasping for the heavenly place her body was taking her. She called his name as the world came crashing down, and she rode a wave of pleasure like she’d never felt before.

Within seconds, Elliot gave one final thrust and shouted his release.

It took a while for Charlotte to come back into herself. Elliot lay sprawled over her, both of them gasping for air. He picked his head up and kissed her lightly, then rolled off her. With the dampness of their skin, it only took a few minutes for her to feel chilled.

Elliot reached down and pulled the quilt over them, pulling Charlotte against his side. “There is only one more thing to say.”
She turned her head and looked at him. “And what is that, Mr. Baker?”
“Do we have to quit this room to get married, or can we have the preacher come here so we don’t have to leave the bed?”
Charlotte yanked the pillow out from under Elliot’s head and swatted him with it. “You are incorrigible.”
He grinned as he walked his fingers up her body to cup her face. “You have no idea, my love. No idea at all.”
Epilogue

September, 1889, Bath, England

Elliot leaned against the bedchamber doorway, in the spacious house they’d moved to from London, a few months prior. He shook his head as his unhappy wife shifted one way, then the other. A low moan escaped her lips as she moved once more.

The poor woman was seven months pregnant, and looked as though she was carrying an elephant in her belly. Not that he’d had a great deal of experience with pregnant ladies, but it seemed to him there must be more than one child in there. But, each time the doctor had examined her, he’d reiterated that there was only one child, but a large one.

A large one? With the way she looked, this babe would come out walking, talking, and demanding a cigar and brandy. He shook his head as his miserable wife turned onto her side, and opened her eyes. “Good morning.” She offered him a gentle smile, in contrast to the dark circles under her eyes.

“It doesn’t look like such a good morning for you.” He pushed away from the doorway and moved to the bed, to sit alongside her. “You were up for a while again last night.”

“Yes. My back hurt, and I find walking helps.” She moved to sit up, but Elliot grabbed her under her arms and hauled her up against the headboard.

“I’m concerned with all the decorating you’ve been doing. I’m not sure that’s good for you or the babe.”

Charlotte waved her hand. “Nonsense. Beatrice and Bridget did all the hard work. I merely point and say ‘there.’”

All their London staff, along with Molly, her baby, and her grandparents had made the move with them from London to Bath when they decided with a babe on the way, the air here was better than in London.

Molly and her little family had settled into a snug cottage only a few blocks from Charlotte and Elliot’s house. She worked as Cook’s assistant while her grandparents tended to the baby. Bridget had told them Molly had been stepping out with a young man who already adored little Betsy.

Elliot had given up the investigation part of his business once they married and had secured a considerable number of new legal clients both in London and Bath.

Charlotte had been annoyed to learn that with Gabriel’s will, once she re-married, the control of her money went directly from the solicitor, to her new husband. She had threatened to join the women’s rights movement after that little fact had come to light.

To keep her happy, they decided together to donate a good portion of the money to St. Jerome’s, and put the rest away for the benefit of their children.

“Shall I have Bridget fetch you some tea and breakfast?”

Charlotte shook her head. “No. I don’t feel quite the thing this morning, and my back still hurts.”

He eyed her with concern. “Is it not too early for the babe to be thinking of making an appearance?”

“With the way I feel, it could not be soon enough.” She stopped and sucked in a shallow breath, her face pale, and her eyes wide. “Now where did that come from?”

Elliot hopped up. “What? What happened?”

“Nothing, I’m sure.” However, she didn’t look sure, but worried, which only increased his anxiety.

“Maybe we should send for the doctor?”

“No. I’m certain it’s nothing. I just wish my back would stop hurting.” Charlotte moved around a
bit, attempting to adjust her position. “Maybe I will take some tea after all.”

“Yes, right away.” He eyed her cautiously and made for the door. Before he reached it, she let out with a squeak, and he turned. “What?”

She was panting, and a light sheen of sweat covered her face. “I don’t know.” She swung her legs over the side of the bed, then looked down. “I’m wet.”

He strode back to the bed and looked behind her on the mattress. A large stain of some sort with a slight tinge of red covered the area she’d been sitting in. His heart dropped to his stomach at the sight. Not wanting her to see that and become frantic, he wrapped his arm around her and lifted her up. “I’m going to change your nightgown, then settle you on the chair by the window.”

She regarded him with wide eyes. “Is something wrong?”

“No, nothing is wrong, but I am going to have Bridget sit with you. Considering your backache, and the pains you just experienced, I think it’s best to summon the doctor.”

They struggled together to get the wet nightgown off, and a fresh one on her. Once she was as comfortable as possible, given her bulk, he left the room in search of females to take care of his wife, who he believed was getting ready to deliver the elephant-child.

“Bridget!” Attempting to remain calm, but concerned that it was much too early for the babe to make an appearance, he grabbed the startled maid as she entered the drawing room. “You must see to Mrs. Baker. She is having pains, and I believe her waters have broken.”

“Oh, dear.” The young girl looked as scared as he felt.

He gave her a slight push to get her moving. “Go. I will have Thomas fetch the doctor.”

“Yes, sir.” Bridget raced up the stairs, leaving Elliot in search of Thomas, who he found lounging in the kitchen, drinking tea.

“Thomas!”

The footman jumped up from his position, his tea splashing all over the table and himself. “Yes, Mr. Baker.”

“Fetch the doctor. I believe Mrs. Baker is about to deliver the child.”

“Oh, dear me,” Cook cried. “I knew she was much too large to go for another two months. The poor girl.” She lumbered past him and headed up the stairs.

With nothing for him to do except pace and wait for the doctor, he retired to the library and did exactly that.

The sun was making its final descent, turning the sky a misty gray when Elliot heard the cry of a babe. After hours of listening to Charlotte moan and cry out, it was a welcome sound. With no one but Thomas for company, who kept looking as though he wanted to dash from the room any minute, it had been a very long day. Not as long as it had been for his poor wife, however.

Another cry erupted from upstairs, which told him the babe had strong lungs. Even though he’d been warned by Mrs. Blanchard, Cook, and the doctor to remain downstairs, he could not linger in this room. He had to make sure Charlotte was all right.

He bounded up the stairs and headed to his bedchamber. He gave a slight knock and then pushed the door open. Charlotte lay flat on her back, surrounded by the doctor, Cook, Bridget, Beatrice, and Mrs. Blanchard. The doctor bent over Charlotte, murmuring something to her.

She turned her head to look at him and broke into a huge smile. “Elliot, we have twins!”

“Twins?”

“Yes, two girls.” Her voice was raspy, no doubt from all the crying out she’d done. He moved closer to the bed, Mrs. Blanchard frowning at his appearance.
“This is no place for a man, Mr. Baker.”
Ignoring her, he continued on until he grasped Charlotte’s hand. “Twins?” He turned to Beatrice and Bridget, who each held a small little bundle. “Twins.”
The two girls nodded, and Charlotte squeezed his hand. “Yes.” She sounded exhausted, which she probably was.
“I thought you said there was only one babe?” His accusatory tone at the doctor had the two maids giggling.
The doctor began to pack his instruments into the black satchel he always carried with him. “Yes, I did say that.” He stopped and planted his hands on his hips. “It is possible to hear only one heartbeat if one babe is on the top of the other. That was the case with your daughters.”
His daughters. The glow started in his stomach and proceeded to cover his entire body. He was a father! How fortunate could a man be? A beautiful wife, two daughters, and a lifetime to love them all. He bent and kissed Charlotte on the forehead. “Get some rest, my love.”
She nodded and looked as though she was ready for a long nap. Cook had other plans and announced she would bring a strong beef broth for Charlotte to drink after Bridget cleaned her up and got her settled for the night.
Elliot walked to the cradle that had been made ready for the babe. Except two little girls, wrapped in blankets, lay sleeping after their ordeal. He touched each of them on their downy cheeks, and stared for a moment at their perfection.
Once Charlotte had been changed and drunk her broth, he sat alongside her on the bed as she drifted off to sleep. “Good night, my love. And thank you for our daughters.”
The room had grown dark, and all the hustle and bustle of the day had ended. The servants were downstairs enjoying a well-earned dinner, and his wife and daughters were fast asleep. He stared out at the night and saluted Miss Garvey, wherever she was. For as deranged as the woman had been, she’d done him the favor of bringing Charlotte into his life.

*From darkness there is light; from evil there is good; from hate there is love.*

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USA Today bestselling author, Callie Hutton, has penned more than thirty historical romance books, and writes humorous and spicy Regency with “historic elements and sensory details” (The Romance Reviews). Callie lives in Oklahoma with two rescue dogs and her top cheerleader husband of many years. Her family also includes her daughter, son, and daughter-in-law. And her three year old twin grandsons “The Twinadoes.”

Callie loves to hear from readers. Contact her directly at calliehutton11@gmail.com, or find her online at www.calliehutton.com for a printable list of all her books and to sign up for her newsletter. Also visit her on Facebook, Twitter, and Goodreads, and follow her on Amazon and BookBub to receive notice of new releases and pre-orders.

Also by Callie Hutton...

Seducing the Marquess

Marrying the Wrong Earl

Denying the Duke

The Elusive Wife

The Duke’s Quandary

The Lady’s Disgrace

The Baron’s Betrayal

The Highlander’s Choice

The Highlander’s Accidental Marriage

The Earl’s Return
Widow Theodosia Cecil needs a husband to help protect her son. Placing an ad in the newspaper, no one is more surprised than she when her first love, the man she thought dead, reappears. Ewan Fitzwilliam has been at war for six years. Now he’s back but Theo will not consider marrying him. They must overcome bitter lies from the past and Theo must reveal her deepest secret in order to reclaim the love that has long been denied.

MY SCOT, MY SURRENDER
a Lords of Essex novel by Amalie Howard and Angie Morgan

Brandt Montgomery Pierce is a bastard—and proud of it. Despite the mystery surrounding his birth, he has wealth and opportunity, and wants nothing more. Especially not a wife. Lady Sorcha Maclaren is desperate to avoid marriage to a loathsome marquess, even if it means kissing a handsome stranger. But after the kiss turns into a public embrace, Sorcha and Brandt get more than they bargained for—a swift trip to the altar.

A PERILOUS PASSION
a Wanton in Wessex novel by Elizabeth Keysian

Determined to redeem his honor after a humiliating military defeat, the Earl of Beckport is living incognito, hunting a band of smugglers at the center of a French plot to invade England. Beautiful, enigmatic Charlotte Allston instantly becomes a person of interest to the earl…and not just in the smuggling case. Passion flares between the two. But when her attempts to help with his secret mission only endanger it, he must question where her loyalty truly lies.

THE MAIDEN’S DEFENDER
a Ladies of Scotland novel by E. Elizabeth Watson

Madeline Crawford is a daughter of the disgraced Sheriff of Ayr. Fierce Highlander Teàrlach MacGregor was her father’s head guardsman. They dream of a future together. Those dreams come to naught when Madeline is betrothed to the son of her warden. Madeline and Teàrlach’s love is forbidden but Teàrlach vows to fight, even the king, to make her his.