Speak Low

by innie

Summary

This is Jack's story, told through his interactions with and memories of three women: his sister Tabby [made up by me and in my head she's played by a brown-eyed Yvonne Strahovski], Rosie, and Phryne. The Phryne parts are in chronological order and the rest skip around in time as Jack's memories dictate. The first case mentioned is the Rene Dubois case (1x07), and the last is the Sanderson and Fletcher case (2x12). I could not get the timing of the Christmas special (2x13) to work for the story, so I ignored it entirely. This fic uses canon from the show only, not the books as well.

Notes

Notes and allusions at the end, since they were too big to fit here.

For lilacsigil and blithers, who made the complete canon (thus far) available to me, and for blithers (again!) and iemanja for their care in helping me wrangle this story into posting shape.

Even Mum had got him wrong. "Like to make life difficult for yourself, don't you, Jack my lad?" she'd say, stroking his cheek with a bemused fondness. It wasn't that, not really; Mum could bury her nose rapturously in the weekly posy Dad brought home for her, revelling in the love writ large in the gesture, and while Jack could admire the sight, only thinking about what it all meant seemed to unlock all the levels of delight for him – his brain and heart had to work in tandem, it seemed,
though his mind always took the lead.

It was most inconvenient.

Or it had been, until he'd met Rosie. Her keen intelligence made her quick and sharp, her bright eyes sparkling with pleasure when he joustted his wit with hers. He loved the sudden dimples that flashed out around her dazzling grin when she scored a hit (a very palpable hit) and the habit she had of lending him her books as soon as she was done with them and quizzing him on them until between the two of them they'd wrung every drop of meaning from the spent leaves. Rosie understood how words could shake, could rearrange, could charge and change everything, and he spoke his most carefully considered ones on the night he was made a Senior Constable. She needed no words at all to give him her answer; she turned her smiling face up and he closed his lips tenderly over hers.

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They set up housekeeping with more books than cups and plates and sheets combined, but they had a kettle and a bed, and besides, Rosie had style and a way of making things comfortable so that they suited him exactly. He'd married the right girl, and they'd come to each other secure in their love; they'd be married thirty years in the blink of an eye, he was sure, and still be looking at each other fondly over toast and tea.

He'd never been much of a man for the pleasures of the table; a steady diet of ideas was more nourishing sustenance for him, and it bothered him not one whit to have to find his own bread and cheese of an evening when Rosie'd sunk deep into a book instead of cooking a proper roast. They had long, lovely evenings of sitting together, her feet in his lap, his fingers tracing her delicate ankles, his eyes closed as she read to him (much did they travel in the realms of gold). They had long, lovely kisses, like the sweethearts in stories, and his hands gathered her up like she might trickle through more careless fingers.

That his heart lifted at the sight of her was more important than his failure to feel a frenzy at the thought of having her – he'd decided after a fair number of unenthralling and awkward nights that he simply wasn't built for such purposes; how odd a notion it was that the best expression of his love for her, their steady union of hearts and minds, should be made with his ineloquent, gangly body – and she seemed content with lying in his arms, her loosed crown of curls tickling his chin, making him feel like a king.

He was seven when Tabby was born, and he had no notion then that she'd be the one to survive when both of the brothers between them had not and were in the ground, their places marked with bright sprays of flowering bushes. He should have realised much more quickly, as she was a spitfire from the word go.

She had a lot of name to live up to, Mehitabel Robinson, but she only ever responded to the diminutive he'd first given her because she was as cuddly and as clawed as any tabby cat. She attached herself to his hip as soon as she could walk, ending up as the mascot for his footy teams and a permanent fixture on the handlebars of his Malvern Star. He threatened every night to chop off her hair if she couldn't pin it in such a way that the mass of gold wouldn't stream into his face when they'd achieved a respectable velocity, and she'd wind her sleek waves round her finger before plaitting it all up in a shining braid that would start to pull apart immediately.

"You old hen," she said affectionately the one time he'd tried to sort her mane out himself instead of allowing her to pester Mum, who had just one more night to set the house to rights before Grandmother came for a visit. He'd always been neat-handed, perhaps as much because of the
piano lessons – Dad said Mum had grand plans for her children to keep her entertained of an evening – as his determination to keep his bicycle in good nick, but he'd made a terrible mess of the plait. Tabby hugged him anyway, hard enough that she carried the imprint of his button on her cheek. When Mum did her daily sketch of Tabby that night, there was a shadow on her cheek that might have been caused by the loosened waves of her hair, but Jack saw his button's lingering mark, faint but unmistakeable, in the morning.

Grandmother saw it too, and pursed her lips the same way Mum did when she didn't know whether to scold or laugh. She warned Mum that she was raising a hoyden, but nodded approvingly at the way Tabby nestled confidingly against him, making his wondrously uncomfortable starched shirt scrape against his skin, and ate half of everything on his plate, even the bun with lemon curd, which she knew very well was his favourite.

When he closed his eyes that night, he saw Miss Fisher's eyes, red from weeping. He could hear her ragged breaths again, and once again his heartbeat mimicked that irregular rhythm, leaving him gasping in his bed.

She'd had no words for what that despicable man had done to her. She was usually so unabashedly voluble that her silence on this point had rocked him back on his heels. All of her words had been for her tormentor, Dubois – "I am not afraid of you," she'd sworn while her voice shook as if it were a lie, though her voice usually rose when she stretched the truth – and Jack had been sprawled on the floor, wondering when he had lost control of the situation, if indeed he'd ever had it.

He hadn't wanted to open the door to further improprieties of the kind she revelled in by kissing her, particularly not with the taste of snail in his mouth, but he'd been frantic to drag her staring, opaque eyes away from the doorway, and he'd lunged at her with all the finesse of a shark. He knew what would have been a liberty with any other woman would be taken by this one, warm and experienced, merely as a welcomed prelude, but he'd frozen as soon as their mouths met – before he could register what hers felt or tasted like – and his hand on her waist became fearfully tentative and the hand on her face eased back from her cheek as if it needed to be free to wave away her shock.

Shock not just that he kissed her, but for his very evident and clumsy desperation; he knew how Miss Fisher's mind worked by now. Jack knew she suspected, to the point of near certainty, that the transformation of fear into intimacy he'd wrought in that French café was an echo of some strange alchemy he'd last known on the battlefield – that he might have kissed a comrade so, some soldier-boy he'd saved from being cut down in the flower of his youth – or did she think he'd been the boy, his cheek pressed with maddening desire to some officer's epaulet? For Phryne, who lived her life by her desires, such a wartime love would go a long way to explaining why Rosie had left, Rosie, whom she thought had no experience of war's horrors.

Jack lay in his narrow bed (come, poor Jackself), muscles tensed and tendons pulled taut around brittle, crumbling iron bones, and willed himself to regulate his quiet breaths, forget Miss Fisher, and push all memories of the battlefield (by day his limbs, by night his mind) away.

He woke to his own hoarse shouts. It had not been love he'd found on the battlefield.

He was glad, when the call to arms came, that his fumblings hadn't left Rosie saddled with a child. Jack didn't think he'd have had the strength to leave both of them; the flesh was willing, but his mind would have been weak.

It didn't seem to matter that they'd never been blessed, that he'd never smelt the milky sweetness of
his own babe's breaths or felt the dense weight of his child's downy head in the palm of his hand, because he became Dad to the lads in his unit without being consulted in the slightest. Too big for dandling, they were, but frighteningly fragile nonetheless, these boys who'd never had thoughts beyond their farms, their games, and their sweethearts, being handed weapons and told to stare down Death with a smile. Even those his own age seemed so young.

The stripe he wore on each shoulder – he wondered if he'd been made lance-jack as much for his name as his temperament – seemed to his men to confer upon him a wisdom he knew to be entirely unearned, a fatalistic calm that had no relation to the way his innards knotted up, his body as treacherous as always. He mustered enough artificial tranquillity to nod approvingly at the lads when they got through all of the field exercises under the hot Cairo sun, playing his part as best he could.

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The lads liked him, said he was easy enough to jog along with, and teased him for his lean build, pretending to marvel that "Jack Spratt" could shoulder the packs of equipment and rations, could hold the stiff length of a fixed bayonet without tipping over. Their jokes were just a way of staving off the darkness and nothing personal to him, really; they'd given their lives into his keeping, as per commanding officers' orders, and he'd had nothing to do with that. He sat apart, trying to give them a little unsupervised space, and ran his fingers over the soft plait of Rosie's hair that he'd pinned inside his uniform shirt.

It was easy to forget, sometimes, out here under the blistering sun, that he had a sweetheart-turned-wife waiting for him too; he could still hear the words she quoted but couldn't recall the precise depth of the dimples that popped up when he caught her allusions and returned them in kind. He had to turn his tunic inside out to remind himself how ruddy her autumn-leaf hair really was, kissing the little plait with lips gone numb from fear and grief.

The butcherbirds that sang outside his window woke him with their melodies. Their songs always reminded him of Tabby, who sang like they'd hatched her themselves, and he was pleased they liked to hop around his yard, small and unadorned (the autumn trees but bare ruined choirs) as it was. He stretched, glad of the release to the tautness of his limbs, and arose, whistling a variation of the melody as he walked to the bathroom. The butcherbirds must have followed him and settled in the spouting, he gathered as he drew scented lather across his cheeks with his shaving brush; they'd taken up his variation and run wild with it, delighted by their own creativity and sounding close enough to touch from his window.

Time was, he wouldn't have been in the mood to whistle of a bright, crisp morning. Time was, he wouldn't have been able to shave his own face without danger.

Then again, time was, he'd had his sister to sing so sweetly of a morning she could charm the sun to spill its honey only on her (like gold to airy thinness beat). Jack owed her a telephone call before too many more cases went by, but while he waited for a more hospitable hour, he sat at his upright piano, running a caressing hand first over the warm gloss of the wood and then over the yellowing keys. He could carry a tune – if he had a bucket handy – but far preferred to play than sing; he'd counted himself lucky that the spells Tabby wove with her voice extended far enough to make her faithful accompanist feel as if he'd been part of the magic too.

He sat in the sunlight, considering. The chime of the piano would break the harmony of the morning. He drew the cover closed, shut his eyes, and tilted his face up to the bright warmth before entering the butcherbirds' game again, whistling a new variation on their playful theme.
It would be the work of a moment to fall in love with this Phryne Fisher. Not the vixen who'd drawn an alluring finger down her cheek within one minute of meeting him; not the master strategist who'd unveiled her nude portrait, waiting for his blushing confusion, ready to tighten her net around him – and surprising that Phryne by leaving her and her painted naked glory was one of the only pleasures he'd got from that damnable case; just this Phryne, who acknowledged a kinship with him. It had been a long time since he'd felt anyone standing at his shoulder, equally as ready to protect as be cherished, and he felt his heart crumble in her careless, covetous grip.

"You never listen to me anyway," he said, the truest thing he could muster, with her looking wide-eyed and achingly vulnerable in front of him (to hear with eyes belongs to love's fine wit).

He couldn't have said so much had she still knelt at his feet, playing the beggar-maid she might once have been, though he was no eloquent King Cophetua. When had she told him of her sister, of what Janey meant to her? When had she expected him to understand how fierce a current was her sister's pull? He'd never mentioned Tabby to her, never spoken of his family other than Rosie, and yet she had perfect faith that her sister's name would be understood by him as a talisman, the key to her deepest self, which lay lambent, waiting, under the shards and facets of what she chose to display in the light (extreme and scattering bright) as if the world itself were a jewel-case fashioned to show her off.

"You know what to do," he surprised himself by saying, belatedly recognising its truth. Phryne would know, had proved she already did by laying her temptation in front of him and trusting in his sternness to check her. He did not want to be her foil, her disapproving dullard, but such was the role he'd evidently carved out for himself in her life. She had a steady stream of lovers, and he'd lose all his effectiveness if he joined their ranks, swelling their numbers; better to be singular, that his voice might be heard.

He had to be much sterner with himself than he ever was with her, to govern his heart. He prayed she never knew.

Rosie's hand trembled and her fingertips lingered on his lips. It had been years since he'd seen her well-loved face, and now he couldn't bring himself to meet her eyes; let damnation come, and welcome, before he opened up the hellish abyss within himself to her trusting gaze. He couldn't shake off her touch, and he read wonder on her face, wonder that her husband had come home to her, whole and hers.

Already he could feel his failure overtaking him, overtaxing his meagre strength. He would never be able to keep from her keen eyes his weaknesses, his knowledge of the men who had died so that he could live. Of the men he had killed. Worst of all, of the men he had doomed to death with his witless leadership.

Rosie kissed him then, her mouth searingly sweet, and he felt like a broken-down automaton, knowing precisely how he ought to respond but unable to complete even a fraction of the motions. All around them were the noises of life – cheers from the crowd, sobs from the tender-hearted, rowdy shouts from children discovering their fathers – and Jack closed his eyes and let go of anything anchoring him to this moment; with his wife's mouth on his, her tears on his cheek, her body under his hands, he simply drifted away. Death lay on his tongue.

"Gargoyle face, Jack," Mum said, and he obligingly pulled as hideous a face as he could muster. Tabby, who was humming to herself as she idly flipped the pages of his chemistry text, took one look and laughed. Her giggling was too rollicking not to light other flames; Jack could not hold his pose and Mum couldn't scold, not when she was quivering with laughter herself.
Dad grumped that he was the only one in the whole bally house with a lick of sense, then disproved it when he got close enough to Mum that she could draw a hasty stripe down his nose with her charcoal. Tabby laughed so hard she choked, going beet-red, and Jack found himself holding her quivering form, tucked up like a baby in his arms, and shushing her as best he could when he had his own fit of mirth to get past. She quieted, her nose pressed against his jaw, and he realised anew how very young she was, his small sister with the big unafraid eyes.

"Come on," he said into the shining tangles of her hair, getting up from his crouch. Shameless as a monkey, she let him lift her and then scrambled onto his back. He carried her into the kitchen and then loosed her still-chubby arms from round his neck, whistling as he filled the kettle and set it on the hob.

Tabby busied herself getting cups and the tray, fetching the sugar bowl and spoons. He took the poppy-painted cup from her and filled it more than halfway with milk; what she liked was mostly milk and sugar and could be called tea only by courtesy. His own cup was the chipped one with the blue stripe, and he pulled it toward himself. "What've you done with the sugar-tongs, monkey?" he asked. She was like a magpie with shiny, pretty things, picking them up and incorporating them into her fantasy life, and those tongs were chased with silver and very elegantly carved besides; they'd been a wedding present from Dad's boss.

Her brown eyes grew huge. "I don't remember," she confessed, her voice wobbling. "Don't tell?"

Not even another round of his gargoyle face would erase her anxiety. "You'll have to serve, then," he said, and she lost a little of her fear in her curiosity to see what would happen next; her nose twitched with her inquisitiveness. He took her hand as if it were the lost sugar-tongs and pinched her plump fingers around the topmost cube from the small heap in the bowl, then let the cube drop with a faint tap into his cup. She giggled, her worry allayed.

"I need sugar too!" she said, so he repeated the gesture with her cup, the sugar splashing into the milk, while the kettle whistled sharply behind them.

Phryne's grief was agonising to watch, and worse to listen to – those hoarse sobs racked her frame mercilessly. All he could do was reach out a hand when she stretched hers blindly back.

It was not precisely admiration he felt for her when she shook off the memories of her sister and stood to brighten her own birthday party, but he esteemed her élan, her absolute gallantry, in putting on a brave face for the sake of those who loved her. He wondered what Janey would make of her now.

Would Phryne have been as blithely dismissive of society's expectations of her, had she had a younger sister following in her footsteps? He could picture her as just as much of a renegade, assuring herself her parents still had one good girl upon whom they could impose their discipline; he could just as readily imagine her taking to heart the notion that her sins would be revisited upon her innocent sister, and toeing the line for Janey's sake. She might have got married, settled into a domesticity that could have been stifling or satisfying, even borne apple-cheeked children to plague her with their beseeching eyes. He felt his throat catch at the thought and swallowed hard.

Perhaps it did not matter what might have been. Phryne had been shaped (got by chance, kept by art) by sorrow upon sorrow into who she was now, the woman who hid her frowning lips in a champagne glass and danced alone, the woman whom he toasted with a raised glass and the beginnings of a smile.
It was Mum who'd taught him how to look, all without trying. Only when he'd seen the delicate
movements of her hand, skilfully manipulating her pencil to complete the day's sketch of Tabby,
posed as a caryatid, had he realised that the lines of his sister's eyebrows had the same grace as a
bird's strong wings as it soared home. The shading of indigo into violet in a petal, the delicate
tracery of a bee's wing that made it look like a stained-glass framework, the small carved details of
the pilasters in an edifice Dad was building – all of them he saw first in Mum's drawings.

The carved lines that ran from the corners of his mouth toward his jaw had deepened as he aged; he
saw as much in the successive sketches she'd made of him. They were the only things he
recognised from his latest furtive glances at the glass. Leafing through the great sheaves that bore
his youthful face, he couldn't connect that bright-eyed boy to whatever he was now. He felt hollow,
his atoms too widely spaced to be coherent, as if he were a light bulb and that slender filament
could produce only feeble flickers. Whatever was carving those lines could keep going, and cut
him into tatters.

He could hardly blame Dad for sobbing at the sight of him, standing only because of Rosie's firm
arm around his waist as she brought him home. Mum's eyes were suspiciously glossy, but her
mouth was tucked up in a determined line, and her voice was steady when she stopped his flipping
through her home portfolio. "I've forgotten," she said, putting her hand on his back and then
clutching at Rosie's elbow, locked around his hip – all of these bodily sensations were exquisitely
calibrated and unbearably agonising, but he could not protest when he had nothing to offer in their
stead – "how you and Tabby used to eat these."

The sketch she drew out of the pile was of him and his sister, grinning at each other across the
kitchen table, its wood and their faces smeared with fruit pulp. Jack felt his throat clutch, as if he
were once again swallowing that thick sweetness, crunching the seeds with staccato pops. "We ate
our guavas with salt," he said, surprised to find his voice actually working, his mouth producing
the words in a coherent sentence; all too often, his brain had pushed different words off his tongue
than he'd intended, and Rosie would grow pale and still. Indistinct, even, as if there were a cloudy
glass door suddenly slammed shut between them.

Love had always been there, easily read like a sonnet known by heart, but it was Mum's lessons in
looking that taught him to read the despair in his wife's eyes.

He was inching close to love, that much he understood. There seemed little point in not
acknowledging the great gallop his heart gave whenever Phryne was near, now that he and Rosie
had formally severed their paper bonds before kissing each other once for luck in the shadows of
the courthouse (go gladder than you came). He had a feeling that Rosie would like Phryne, and he
wanted desperately to see that slow dawning of approval on her face as she met the redoubtable
Miss Fisher.

He wanted even more to know what Tabby would make of Phryne, and he wished for that small
sister who had perched on his handlebars as straight and proud as a ship's figurehead, ready to hear
whatever secrets he might whisper into her ear as he pedalled through North Richmond. Tabby had
always been his best confidante – first to know he was planning to join the constabulary rather than
university, first to tease him about how much of his time was devoted to Rosie Sanderson, first to
meet his eyes when he spoke of enlisting. Her own were like a queen's amber, and he'd had the
notion then, before he shipped out, that it was only in her eyes that any memories of himself were
preserved.

Jack shook himself out of the dismal past, feeling Hugh's puzzled eyes on him as he smiled at the
report on his desk, handed in by the rawest of the Probationary Constables, solving the rash of
bicycle thefts. Hunter was sharper than he looked.

The seats were very good, which he supposed was only to be expected, since Tabby had set them aside for him and Rosie. The theatre had not gone in for garlands welcoming the local heroes home – or if they had, those tributes had since faded – and was retaining the chill of a notably wet autumn. Or perhaps he just could not get warm again, since the everlasting mud and muck of France, and would need to huddle under Rosie's heavy wrap to keep from shaking apart.

Rosie sparkled like the living ocean in the glittering green-blue folds of her new gown, which precisely matched the colour of her eyes. After the weeks he'd spent, at her suggestion, disciplining his trembling hands by tying his neckties into elaborate knots of perfect symmetry – the Windsor, the Eldredge, the Trinity – a bowtie posed no real challenge, and Rosie had insisted that a plain white waistcoat and black dinner jacket would suit him better than the new midnight-blue formalwear. "My handsome Jack," she'd said, smiling tremulously into his eyes, and he'd been moved to kiss his beautiful wife, who deserved better than a husband who spoke as if he were newly learning the language and shouted himself awake three nights of every five, his tears and sweat drenching their sheets. Rosie had clung to him and he'd thought blindly that for as long as the kiss lasted, they would be well. When they'd broken the kiss, he'd watched, fists and throat knotted, as she powdered away the traces of tears, and wished he could find some words to set her free of him.

No words would come; no words had come for years, uncounted aeons, when it had not mattered that he was loved and longed for, that he had lived a clean life, because the only way the world had found of moving forward was to tell its youth to turn on each other. The assurances of love Rosie had whispered against his cheek were pleasant sounds that flayed him anew. He had wanted to love her, to let words bubble up and spill forth as they once had, to sing in praise of not just her beauty but her heart too (a brightness unobscured). She had turned away, eyes overly bright, and fastened her necklace, knowing better than to ask for his assistance as she once would have; he'd recalled, with piercing clarity, the crown of cherry blossoms he'd made her while they were courting each other, how the coronet, far too large, had slipped and looped around her throat, setting them both alight with laughter.

As the theatre grew dark, her hand found his. When Tabby appeared on stage as Viola, shipwrecked and quite tatterdemalion, something akin to an electric shock ran through him. The dead space in his head, that large void ringed by forbidding doors, was abruptly filled with muffled murmurs like a Roman arena, graduating to comprehensible voices, and the words of the play – he'd rehearsed Twelfth Night with Tabby dozens of times, played Orsino and Antonio and Malvolio and Feste – came clear in his head, as if unfurling on a banner snapping in a brisk, living wind.

He watched his sister mourn her brother, squeezing his wife's hand all the while.

He was awake again.

Jack had known he would have trouble with George Sanderson – that very consciously righteous man – when the possibility of a strike was first bruited about; he'd already got an earful for signing Brooks's petition. Credit where credit was due, George had never indicated that he was less than pleased about Rosie's choice of husband, but they had never found a truly easy footing. Jack suspected that in his haste to climb the administrative ladder at Russell Street, George had forgotten the realities of a constable's lot, the very real dangers of the job, and the vagaries of working shifts.

Still, Rosie loved them both, and so Jack braced himself for their weekly dinner without protest.
He'd never got used to the formality George insisted upon, but it was the man's right to translate his salary into whatever comforts he most enjoyed, even if the furnishings were so rich that Jack felt like an interloper in a museum.

Having Rosie by his side, gowned in silk and smelling sweetly of perfume, did help, at least through the carefully ordered courses of the dinner. They could not speak of books – George's library was an imposing collection of massive leather-bound tomes, meant for display rather than pleasure – and George seemed to feel that having an actress in the family was a disgrace, so the theatre was an equally taboo topic. Work – even without the looming strike – was an inconceivable subject for discussion in mixed company in George's mind, and so, for less lofty reasons, was football. The weather was always a ready conversational topic, and often the only one left, and Rosie broached it with alacrity. Jack mustered his enthusiasm and chimed in.

When her father nodded portentously at her, Rosie murmured something about going to speak with the housekeeper, and Jack followed George to the library, where the inevitable port awaited. He'd never developed a palate for it, despite all of the years he'd followed George to the same cut-glass decanter and tumblers, but at least it gave him something to do with his hands while George stood in front of the fire and declaimed about the short-sightedness of men determined to strike.

"I happen to agree with them, George; you know that," Jack said, trying not to bristle at the phrase *arrant stupidity*. George was a good copper – look at the way he was trying to rid the city of its favourite vices – but he'd not walked a beat in years, possibly decades, and his pension was assured. How could he possibly grudge younger men their right to earn a pension in such a risky job?

"Don't you do it, Jack, don't strike. You'll be tossed out on your ear, and what then? A man has to be responsible for his own wife. I took care of Rosie while you were off playing soldier, but I'll not do it when it's only your own stubbornness that means you won't be drawing a salary." George's tone was hectoring, paternalistic in a way seemingly calculated to get under his skin, and Jack's fingers tightened around his glass. He'd never had dreams of *playing soldier*, and the realities of lice and rats would have put paid to any fantasies in short order. He could not tell George that Rosie had written to say that she'd requested that he receive the full amount listed in his pay-books instead of having most of it sent home to her, because she knew very well how much she needed, and how capable her father was of supplying that reduced amount without a second thought. "What kind of husband are you, to jeopardise your career?"

"The kind who makes up his own mind about what's right." He stood, setting his untouched tumbler down with a sharp click. Rosie's hand was warm in his when they left George's house, reassuring him that he still had her trust; he brought her hand to his lips for a long moment before starting the car and heading home.

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Days later, when the city was abuzz with excitement for the Spring Racing Carnival, Jack stood with a few dozen constables and refused duty. Somewhat at a loss, he went home and found Rosie in a soft Indian-print cotton frock he particularly liked, making his favourite sandwiches. Rosie had never made much of her looks, but the sight of her lifting her face from a book was one that always gladdened his heart; just knowing she was on his side was equally compelling. He undid all of his gleaming buttons and sat at the table in his shirtsleeves, soothed by the quiet domesticity of tea and sandwiches and Rosie's bare feet.

"Good?" she asked, dimples just flickering into being. She stole a sandwich from his plate.

He hadn't thought he was particularly hungry, so there was no excuse for the graceless way he'd
bolted down her offerings. He raised a hand to cup her cheek, smiling at the way her eyes sparkled at him. It must have hurt her to turn her back on her father, and even if she would never reproach him for that pain, he could at least show her his honest appreciation. "Very good. But you are still my hunger's rarest food."

She hooked a finger around his braces. "Were you not lovely I would leave you now," she goaded, and he rose and kissed her in one swift motion. She drew him out of the kitchen and into their bedroom, where they had lain night after night in trust and silence, and he paused, holding her face in his hands.

"Do you want a baby, Rosie?" he asked, watching as her eyes darkened and a pretty flush rose along her cheeks.

"I want you, Jack. I want my husband." He should never have left her untouched for so long, and he penitently let her push his braces down, undressing him before stripping herself. She seemed to have learnt the way of it and was bolder and surer than he'd remembered, tumbling them both down. He matched her actions, kiss for kiss, feeling that dangerous sense of his mind untethering from his body that he'd first known on charging with an unloaded rifle, bayonet fixed, at Gallipoli. He did not know what he was doing, only that Rosie was crying out – pleasure? pain? – and he wanted to stop, bury his face in her hair, and have her arms around him. But Rosie deserved this, deserved a child too, and he pressed his face against her throat and spent inside her.

She was quiet, after, one finger contemplatively drawing gentle lines along the sharp angles of his face. Her eyes were drowsy and her air of exaltation was sweet. Long moments slid by until she spoke, and he realised with a guilty start that she'd needed him to say something first. "Bodies unclothed must be / To taste whole joys," she quoted softly, her voice not quite steady, rising as if to question the poet, and Jack cursed himself for allowing his uncertainty to infect her as well. Just because he did not translate his love for her into sex did not mean that she was forbidden from doing so; she had given her happiness into his keeping, even when he had been hollow with despair and dumb from grief, and had never turned away from him.

"O sweet, O heavy-lidded, O my love," he said, letting her hear how much he meant the words, kissing her diminishing smile and spreading his hand against her, just where their child would grow.

"You're always suitably dressed, Jack, so we needn't worry about that," Phryne said, apropos of nothing, perching on the edge of his desk. "Tea tomorrow afternoon, for Jane's farewell party. She asked specifically for you."

It was kind of the girl to extend an invitation to him, given their rocky start. Were all children so resilient and forgiving, or was Jane something special? "Should I bring something?" he asked, watching a satisfied smile curl Phryne's lips.

"Her trunks are packed to the brim, so if you choose to bring a keepsake, for mercy's sake make it a small one." Phryne flitted off in a cloud of pine-coloured silk before he could ask how she had known that neither he nor Collins had a shift tomorrow afternoon, though he had a fairly good idea and he was willing to let her keep up the appearance of omniscience she revelled in.

So much for a leisurely bicycle ride after his morning shift. He would need to think tonight of what to get a precocious child to take with her to a posh boarding-school in France, and buy it tomorrow once his shift was over. From their time trapped together by Murdoch Foyle's mad whims, he recalled that Jane had an interest in history and medical practices; from the time she had spent worrying about her foster-mother, it was clear she adored Phryne. A text, either medical or
historical, would be too dry and cause difficulties for Mr. Butler or Miss Williams, whoever was responsible for packing her trunks. Perhaps a small magnifying lens, a link between her and Miss Fisher, would suit Jane best?

He took the chance and bought a pocket-sized lens in a velvet pouch for the child the next day. The purchase made him late, and when he arrived at Miss Fisher's residence, the others were already partaking of the bounty laid out in the sun-drenched back garden. Phryne's bowl had more cream than strawberries, and Jane's fingertips were rosy from picking the fattest berries from her own bowl to dip gingerly in rich cream. He studiously kept his gaze from his constable tangling his fingers with his sweetheart's as they ate out of one bowl of dew-decked berries.

"Jack!" he heard Phryne's pleased voice ring out. "Mr. B., strawberries and cream for the Detective Inspector, please!"

"No cream, thank you, Mr. Butler," Jack said. He stood before Jane and offered her his handkerchief to wipe her hands clean before proffering his gift. "You needn't open it now," he said, suddenly shy, and she seemed to catch that bashfulness from him, nodding dumbly as her cheeks grew pink.

"Will you sit?" Jane asked abruptly. "I'll – I'll go keep this safe inside." She stood, and Jack took her seat. Mr. Butler returned, bearing a bowl of strawberries so lusciously ripe as to look unreal and a glass of champagne. The small silver spoon would only bear one berry at a time, and he savoured them, the lemon juice and sugar drawing out their natural sweetness. He was surprised by an arm wrapping around his shoulders and a "thank you" breathed in his ear before Jane ran off again to welcome the red-raggers to her party.

It was surely against their egalitarian principles, but the cabbies treated Jane like a princess, and Jack had no intention of investigating that particular hypocrisy.

He ran the bar of soap over his shorn head and down over his body, eyes closed against the weak spray of water and the sting of the carbolic. He had yearned for this shower for nearly a month, more than he desired chocolate or hot food or even word from Rosie, and he would live on the memory of these fleeting moments for the next month or more.

He looked down at his wet limbs, at the mud sloughing off his skin in great dark drips. He scrubbed harder with the soap, desperate to kill the vermin living on him and to feel himself at least close to clean. He couldn't use too much – that bar had to serve the entire decimated Company – and he handed it off to Martin, next in line.

"D'you need another go?" Martin teased, his ebullience rising to the fore now that they were on divisional reserve. Martin's grimy finger pointed at Jack's shoulders, where the last of his childhood freckles evidently lingered. At least he hadn't had them on his nose and cheeks, as Tabby had, though she'd never seemed bothered by them, and on her they'd been drops of pale gold.

He desperately wanted another go under the water, this time with the comfort of a clear cake of Pears, back in Melbourne, where he could put out a hand to find a fresh towel waiting for him. There was no telling when this damned war would end.

Jack wrapped himself in his filthy overcoat and hastened out, nodding at Nannup, next in line after Martin, and went to fetch the cleanest clothes he could find. There was a letter from Rosie waiting after all, a pair of lumpy knitted socks in the package as well, made by Tabby if he could trust his memory of Grandmother trying – without notable patience or success – to teach Tabby the art. Rosie wrote of his parents and his sister, but little of herself. The rites for which I love you are
bereft me, writ large, was the only crossed line, as if its meaning should stain the rest of her letter with its significance.

The green envelope was at last his, and he fished for the words that were swirling in his head, like the adulterous lovers of The Inferno, unable to stop and touch. He could not write the simplest of lines – I love you was more coherence than he could manage – and then suddenly his hand was moving in a frenzied rush across the page, spilling out words, confessing that he got dizzy all over again every time he looked up at the night sky over France, because the Southern Cross was nowhere to be seen. The constellations were uncanny, wrong in the same way that any poet of England, writing about the heat of July, was wrong; he had to adjust his reading, and that he could not do, not with the pall of death hanging over the world, and it mattered to no one but him that Cassiopeia was overhead and that July should be the coldest month of the year, the time when his skin grew dry and cracked.

His eyes were wet when he finished, feeling utterly wrung out. He flipped the page over, intending to write to his sister, at least to thank her for the socks, or to tell her he'd heard some of the French songs she used to sing here in the trenches as he huddled under the parapet, but all he managed was her name and his regular admonition: be good. Just before he stuffed the evidence of his state – cowardice? madness? what was proper when the world was drowning in death? – into the green envelope, he inked I love you crosswise, cutting through his ramblings, making it dark enough that it would jump to greet Rosie's eyes, dark enough to bleed through the other side for his sister's sake.

He had played the Major-General in The Pirates of Penzance for Tabby's sake. Billy Glaisher was a foolhardy daredevil who fully deserved his broken leg, but Tabby had been crestfallen because he had no understudy. While he'd never had a burning desire to go on stage, Jack had not put up much of a protest; he knew it was true that Tabby had him wrapped around her little finger, but what else were big brothers for, than to make sure their little sisters were happy? Tabby had brooked no excuses when it came to rehearsals, and he'd been heartily sick of the smell of greasepaint within a day and known the entire book before the week had lapsed.

Knowing it hadn't translated into performing it, at least not for him, and he hadn't been able to grasp what it was he was missing; he could see that Tabby shone in her role, though she had no more in common with Edith than he had with her father. It was not worth getting frustrated over, and yet he did.

Tabby had said, definitively, the role didn't suit him, that he simply could not comprehend how to play someone so fundamentally idiotic. That was a new light on the matter, he supposed, and rather a flattering one.

* * *

He remembered his sister's words at a most inopportune time: watching Phryne Fisher, by turns concealing and displaying her body – for an audience larger than just those who'd paid their fee – with the aid of some ridiculous pink-feathered fans. It seemed he knew quite well how to behave like a half-wit, that he needed a notion to literally dance half-naked in front of him before he understood its truth; Phryne did what she liked, what she felt was best, and had no intention of deferring to anyone else's judgement on the matter. If she deemed the quickest course to justice for a dead prostitute was to mimic one herself, she would do so, and she would enjoy herself in the process. She'd taken no husband or steady partner, and she'd long since abjured her father. No man had any right to dictate to her what was proper.

He had no rights in the matter, except to repudiate her or enjoy the ride. His only claim on her was
one of friendship. Any aesthetic appreciation – a private matter that certainly would not be included in his final report for the Chief Commissioner's eyes – that he knew was regrettably evident from his flushed face was entirely beside the point.

He knew he could lose his lance-corporal's stripe for failing to report his men's contraband, but he was not about to confiscate the only thing that had boosted morale for weeks; it would do more good in hands other than his, in any case. It had even warmed him, a bit, to know that his men considered him one of their own, a bloke as much in need of cheering as they, and that they had not discerned how far off the mark they were with the form of that comfort.

Pornography was not going to harm anyone whose life hung in the balance. Asher proffered the photograph with an air of pride. A woman, not far out of girlhood, slender in a way that seemed unreal, posed completely naked with her eyes modestly down. Her fair hair was mostly straight, the end of one fine lock curled as if to cup her breast, and one hand, weighed down with rings, was laid flat on her belly. She looked like nothing and no one he'd ever known, and it was hard to equate this pretty sylph with any of the motions the lads made as the picture made the rounds of the trenches. They didn't want her face-down in the mud – they wanted her clean, in some featherbed – but they'd take what they could get. Jack did not wish, precisely, that he were of their mind, but rather that any of this were intelligible to him, capable of stirring him in the slightest.

"Not your speed, Spratt?" Lincoln asked. "Try this, then." The next photograph was weathered, edges curling – a cheaply made postcard, though it had probably cost Lincoln or some dead man dearly when they'd been posted in Cairo for training manoeuvres – but remarkably clear. A sloe-eyed Egyptian girl, dark hair tumbling to her naked hips, was staring defiantly at the camera. Her gaze was arresting enough that Jack kept returning to it, between glances at her breasts, her cunt, her open and empty hands. He'd never seen such a scorching look before, not even from the prostitutes he'd surprised with their clients, his first year on the beat. "You can hold onto that, mate," Lincoln offered, but he shook his head and handed the photograph back.

He'd heard these men speak of their sweethearts, had had to censor their tender letters home to wives and daughters. They were making do as best they could, even if they were all – himself included – complicit in behaving as though these photographs were merely a wartime anomaly, something that would be unnecessary when the world reset back to normal.

He'd seen firsthand how Miss Williams had come to be part of Phryne's cortège, and he had some notion of how the red-raggers had found themselves under Phryne's spell, but he would give a week's pay to know how she had come across Mr. Butler. The man appeared to be the ideal servant – discreet, resourceful, and capable. He was also, Jack had discovered, damn near impossible to scandalise, try though Phryne might.

Even when they'd arrived at the McNaster home at the first flush of dawn, Mr. Butler's reaction had been more concern that they should not catch cold than disapproval for their condition. Jack had not once been pressed to explain why on earth he had followed Phryne in dropping into the icy Queenscliff water; Mr. Butler, Jack felt, was a firm ally. He'd undertaken to launder Jack's dripping garments himself, and they'd been restored to near-new condition, even the tear in the flame-coloured lining of his overcoat neatly mended – though perhaps that was Dot's doing.

Neither of them indicated, by word or gesture, that his clothes, besides showing signs of wear, had never approached their mistress's standard. He dressed respectably, not fashionably, while Phryne showed up at the boxing ring positively dripping with finery from her jewel-bedecked head to the beading of her gown, the rich texture nearly lost in the folds of her furs.
The suitors she encouraged were, as far as he could see, more concerned with the cut and colour of their clothes than he could afford to be, even if he had been that way inclined. They must look odd together, she in her gorgeous plumage and he in his sober drab. And yet – and yet, he told himself, late at night when sleep would not come, she took his arm like nothing could be more natural and told him she knew how very deep his heart ran.

The Strombos horn sounded from at least three miles away, and in the seconds of scrambling to put on his mask, he could see the yellow-green cloud poisoning the air. Between the frantic cursing of the men and the harsh rattle redundantly warning of a gas attack, he could hear nothing, not even his heartbeat; he wondered if he were already dead, still standing and moving and keeping his men in line by means of some clockwork heart.

He did not want to, but found himself doing it anyway, counting down the minutes before the mask would prove ineffective. It took a long time for the shouts to penetrate, shouts from the sentries that the wind had wafted the poison gas away from their trench, that they could remove the masks that made all of them into ungainly, lumbering beasts in a hellish landscape. Wanting a deep breath of clean, cold air, he ripped his mask off, tearing open the long bayonet gouge in his forehead that had just been starting to knit itself back together. He jammed his steel helmet back on and mopped up the blood as best he could, staining his cuff on top of the discolouration it had already suffered from yesterday's charge, when his bayonet had got stuck in the leather of an enemy's pack, leaving him open to that enemy's weapons.

The Germans were coming even now, trying to snatch some victory from the jaws of defeat. He shouted orders to his men, eyes front on the advancing grey wall, but knew only those closest would have even heard him or been able to distinguish his words. He held his weapon at the ready, and was surprised when he felt a hard, sharp blow like he'd been struck by an incendiary brick; there was blood in his mouth, thick and hot, and the last thing he saw was the men around him, faces contorted in fear and rage and bloodlust, all of them tinted strangely blue, the same soft colour as ink that had been dotted by his mother's tears.

It was one thing to acknowledge himself honestly in love, as if his love were an Alexandrian sword of virtue, ready to slice any Gordian knot. But love, when its object was Phryne Fisher, was no enviable state. His hands had shook, when he had fished her soiled and ragged little garter from his exhaust pipe, with frustration and anger; for her to pay lip-service to the notion of collaboration whilst pursuing, with blithe determination, her own agenda was a slap in the face from which he was still reeling. That she had thought it better to trick him into "a small delay" than to speak honestly with him about her concerns, when he had always listened before, was more than a slap – it was a maiming blow.

It was hardly fair to compare the women he loved – for he did love Phryne still, for her bravery and joy and readiness to take on the world – but he could not help himself. Rosie had been shatteringly honest throughout their marriage, even at the point of ending it, granting him her respect as well as love.

They had waited, hoping that there would be a child to crown the winter of 1924, but Rosie's belly had stayed flat and unoccupied. "Jack," she'd said, reaching for his hands, "I don't think we're meant to be married." He had been startled into squeezing her hands, ridiculously reassured that she'd squeezed back. "We're meant to be friends, the best of friends."

"What is the difference?" he'd asked, honestly wanting to know. He had thought himself undeservedly blessed to have loved her as both friend and wife.
"Desire," she had answered, the word well-chosen, for he could have protested "romance" with no dearth of evidence (he'd written his adoration in huge cloudy symbols of a high romance). "We're no good to each other in that respect, Jack."

"I don't think . . . I don't think I'm good to anyone, Rosie," he'd said finally. If she gave him a chance, he would try to use his body to express what his heart felt so strongly.

"I know," she said. "Don't think I believe you've mistreated me. You've always been my faithful Jack." She'd held his face in her hands. "But there's no spark between us; I could be Tabby for all the use you make of my body." It had been an unsettling thought but an undeniable charge, a weapon she would never have used had he not pushed her past the point of endurance.

"What do we do?" he'd asked, wondering when he would wake from this nightmare.

"Divorce. The laws keep changing, and I have no intention of accusing you of anything, so desertion is our best course. I'll go live with Iris."

That detail had been an unbearably sharp barb; that she'd rather live with her vapid sister than with him had smote him. She'd caught his eye and smiled. "I know what I'm letting myself in for, but you've never been a coward, and I won't be one either."

Truth for truth. "I'll miss you."

"You're stronger than you know," she'd said. When she'd packed for her move, it was only her clothing that she took; her books had remained mingled with his, the amity on the shelves they'd shared unbroken.

The next time he took down the Complete Shakespeare she'd bought him (his book, laden with her own love) back in the days when he'd made her crowns of flowers and wondered if he'd have the courage to kiss her at the end of the night, he found it fell open to a certain page. He read Beatrice's declaration, I love you with so much of my heart that none is left to protest, remembered that he had once written her I do love nothing in the world so well as you, and realised belatedly, as his finger ran over a scrap of greying blue ribbon, that she'd taken all of his love-letters with her. He could not help but smile even as he hugged the hurt to himself. Such a strange desertion.

By rights, it should have been hurtful, but Jack found himself laughing it off in private, when he was safely alone in his little house. His faithful constable asking him for romantic advice, when he was probably the only divorced person Hugh even knew, had to be prompted by a measure of fraternal feeling – perhaps, realistically, more avuncular – that Hugh sensed in him. The boy's bright shining face deserved to wear a smile permanently, as long as that smile could be awoken by Dorothy Williams, sweet and true, simply being herself.

For all of her dismissive protestations against the state of matrimony, Phryne seemed awfully eager to match her companion with his constable. He wondered if she'd given a thought to the days after the wedding, that Dot would live out, and would most likely bear children who'd take over the lion's share of her time and attention. Come to think of it, had Phryne ever lived with anyone on an equal footing?

Those idle musings were sharply interrupted by Dot herself, who'd been clear-eyed even in the face of Hugh's gallant romance, and had returned the boy's ring. Being told that his love, however sincere, was not a foundation for a proper, lasting marriage – now that was something with which he had experience, and he might have counselled Hugh had anything been able to penetrate the fog of the lad's misery.
When Dot decided to wear the ring again, that she and Hugh would make the time to solve their problems together, Jack was thankful that his reaction was one of unrelieved gladness; he hadn't wanted to grudge the sweethearts the happiness he'd let slip through his fingers, and the thought of Rosie was still a happy one, with just enough regret to make the sweetness all the brighter.

Jack opened the door of his office to find Phryne standing behind his desk, a piece of paper in her hand and an expression that took him a long moment to identify. So that was what honest surprise looked like on her. "Miss Fisher," he began cautiously before remembering that it was his private office and that she must have been snooping to find whatever it was that had startled her. "May I ask what you are doing here?"

She gaped for a second before marshalling herself for an offensive; he could see her square her shoulders and allow a hint of a smile to blossom on her face. "I realise that Bel Robins is a very beautiful woman, and it is of course the prerogative of a single man to pay court to the idol of his choosing, but, really, Jack, I would never have suspected you of harbouring a tendresse for an actress."

That had not been unalloyed surprise, then; there had been a pinch of jealousy there, perhaps uncertainty about whether he was truly available to her whenever she chose to reach out her hand. He was, of course, as the exhilaration of being with her was so heady as to drown out any concerns he might have had about his reputation, and there was no denying they made for a very effective investigative team. Still, there was no reason he could not give her the truth in the way that best suited him.

"She is very talented," he offered mildly.

"Indeed," she agreed with equal courtesy. "I saw her perform in New York. Lovely to look at as well."

He smiled to think of Tabby being counted as one of the beauties of the age, and saw he'd discomfited Phryne further with his refusal to rise to her provocations. Time for him to turn the tables.

"Why were you going through my desk?"

"Oh!" She stalled with a brilliant smile. "I was looking for a pen to invite you to dinner." He could tell, by the way her smile grew fixed, that she'd belatedly recalled that he had two pens on top of his desk at all times, ready to be snatched up from their brass holders.

"You usually telephone with a summons," he teased, waiting for her frown. "I must confess, I'm still not clear as to how you came to be holding a piece of paper – that piece of paper – if you were looking for a pen."

"Oh, come off it, Jack," she said, grinning frankly at him. "You should be impressed that I was able to locate the one personal document in all the paperwork you're hoarding in your desk, and that too in one minute flat."

"Had I set you such a task as a test, no doubt I would, as invigilator, been most impressed. As I did not –" he left it to her to fill in the blank and gently slid the florist's bill from her grasp: paper daisies – Tabby had pinned the snow-white flowers in her hair every winter as long as they were in bloom – their crisp geometric petals a lavish background for one crowning tiger lily, a play on his pet name for her. The bouquet should have been delivered to her at the theatre by now, which meant her response ought to arrive imminently. "In any case, no matter the sincerity of your invitation, I shall have to decline. I will be attending the opening of Othello tonight."
"You did say you were a Shakespeare man," Phryne murmured, sounding dissatisfied, as she retreated.

* 

The box opposite his appeared empty until the house lights went down, when he spied a very familiar silhouette in the dimness. Phryne had not been able to resist dressing to the nines as usual, and the diamante clip in her hair seemed to find every last beam of light. Knowing she would have her opera-glasses up from the moment the curtain rose, he struck an attitude of fixed attention whilst Iago and Roderigo cozened Brabantio, ready to assume an air of rapture when Tabby appeared as Desdemona, but he stopped acting when he saw the actor playing Othello; the man seemed utterly familiar to him, and Jack scrambled to think when they might have met. At long last, he had his answer: the actor closely resembled one of the American "men of bronze" he'd met during the war, when a gas attack had driven his men, the French, and the Americans into a single length of trench. The man serving beside him in France had had scars littering his dusky skin, and a voice more lilting, but otherwise the resemblance was strong.

He expelled a quiet, calming breath. The connection, it seemed, was not sufficient to hurl his mind back into the war, and he was grateful that at long last he seemed to be moving past what he had endured. When Tabby came on stage, one scene later, he smiled to see her, utterly convincing as a woman not blinded but strengthened by her love. She was magnificent.

The familiar words of the play unspooled without a hitch, and all too soon he was transported back from the Venice of several centuries previous. He stood and made his way backstage, where he was met by Tabby's dresser. "Mrs. Fanshawe," he greeted her, and she aimed an insouciant curtsey his way.

"Detective Inspector," she said with a cheeky mock-formality, as if to intimate that she'd known him since he was, as she liked to say, knee-high to a grasshopper, though they'd only met after he'd earned his Constable's stripes. He'd seen, even then, that she looked after Tabby like a second mother, and he decided on impulse to make her an ally.

"Mrs. Fanshawe," he said, "should a lady of title" – he had no doubt Phryne would conveniently remember that she was the Honourable, as she was apt to do whenever it would open doors – "attempt to enter the dressing-room, kindly foil her."

Amused, she dropped him a wink and nodded. "There's Bel's dressing-room, love, last door on the left." She departed, presumably to guard the backstage entrance like a particularly ferocious lion, and Jack could already hear Tabby singing sweetly as he knocked on her door.

* 

"You beast," Phryne said, when he said something about fraternal pride as she brandished the glowing reviews printed in *The Argus* and *The Age* and *The Herald*, but she was smiling and her eyes shone. "Why didn't you introduce me to your little sister?"

Rosie's sobs were heart-rending, and Jack mourned that her bravery had been so cruelly used. He had never thought much of Sidney Fletcher – perhaps that was natural, as no man cherished his replacement – but there was no denying that Rosie had seemed as effervescent as fine champagne at Fletcher's side, lit up in a way he'd never managed. That her heart had been battered mercilessly was evident from the way she flinched when he moved to fold her in his arms. How could he speak words of pity to her, when she had been a pillar of strength for him, or words of sympathy, when his love had never been betrayed?
All he could do was hold her while he raged with a blazing hatred for Sidney Fletcher and George Sanderson and was guiltily conscious that his shirtfront, to which her face was pressed, was still redolent of the water into which he'd shot her fiancé.

She was going into shock, he registered when her choked moans dropped into an unsettling silence, thankful that the upheaval of her world had not pushed her into a temporary madness. He carried her into his office and plied her gently with brandy to warm her cold form. "For what?" she kept murmuring brokenly.

"I don't know," he finally said. He could not fathom damning children to misery for the sake of a profit.

Her bloodshot eyes pierced him through. "You wouldn't."

He cupped her face in his hand, and she turned her frozen cheek into his rough palm. "You haven't," he swore. "You haven't turned a blind eye or knowingly profited from their crimes." She shook her head, denying his defence, but he refused to let her hurt herself further. "I know. Trust yourself, sweetheart."

"Right now, I only trust you," she said.

He wasn't about to take her to her father's mansion, built on a rotten foundation, or her sister's house, where she would be poked and prodded and never let alone to rest. His own small house wouldn't be safe for more than a few hours, if Fletcher's minions came looking for vengeance in the morning when the news broke. A hotel would be too impersonal.

His mind made up, he wrapped his arm around her and let her lean heavily against him; she hardly had the energy to lift her feet from the ground and shuffled unhappily along. Fresh air seemed to help her slightly, but when she sank into sleep in the passenger seat of his car, she slept like she'd been drugged.

She was still fast asleep when he stopped the car, and he alighted and knocked quietly but relentlessly at the master-bedroom window. A few words' whispered conference, and Mum had his old bedroom ready for Rosie.

He carried her, still slumbering, from the car to the bedroom, setting her down in the bed in which he'd lain years before, dreaming of her pretty mouth forming words of love shaped just for him and of giving her his name.

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The whole night seemed like a fever dream, or several lifetimes collapsed into the blink of an eye, but his wristwatch showed the inexorable march of the darkness toward dawn. He stopped the car outside of Phryne's house, burningly aware that it was her bedroom in which the light still shone, wondering which Phryne would greet him if he dared to knock at her front door, shrouded by the night. Would it be the unflinching detective who had explained to one child the murder of another; the avenging angel who'd made it her mission to show George the way to hell; or the woman whose voice grew a touch huskier, her eyes a shade softer, when she was indulging in a large tumbler of her very good whisky?

Did it matter? They all answered to the name _Phryne_, and it was she whom he sought.

Rosie's pain was not his to discuss, even with Phryne, and he fumbled his words when she asked about her, going still when he heard her response, that he always did the right thing, the noble
thing. The only right thing to do at that moment, never mind its nobility, was to surrender to that spark that had turned into a conflagration and devoured his heart.

At last he knew what Rosie had set them both free to seek, and he'd found it in Phryne. He stepped forward, intending to catch her mouth with his, but was foiled by Mrs. Stanley, who eyed him with what he could admit was, given the hour, a justified disdain.

There would be other moments. He'd seen Phryne's lips part to welcome his kiss.

Jack slept heavily for the few hours allotted him and rose with the sense of taking up an accustomed burden. He tied his tie and combed his hair in darkness, the movements automatic and not requiring vision. Dawn was lightening the sky as he packed a bag with a few days' necessities.

It was a pleasant surprise to see Collins at the thinly staffed station – the boy had the makings of a top investigator in addition to being finely sympathetic.

Collins looked better than Jack had expected, visibly exhausted but holding his head at a jaunter angle than he had since realising the girl he'd fished out of the river had been maliciously drowned. Miss Williams had evidently talked some sense into him, then, or perhaps just shown him her pretty face, blooming like a rose and brightening at the sight of him.

They worked steadily for hours, holed up in Jack's office, writing reports for which they did not yet know the audience. Taking down both the Chief Commissioner – the second in a matter of hours – and one of the wealthiest men in the city meant that everything had to be done by the book. Still, there were limits, and he left it to some other Detective Inspector to manage the lot trickling in for the morning shift.

He drove Collins home and said a few words to the formidable Mrs. Collins, already clucking disapprovingly at her son, to give her some sense of what Hugh had accomplished. He could tell the lad barely heard him, swaying on his feet like he'd been struck by a knockout punch and hadn't yet understood his part was to fall, but Mrs. Collins's face softened a bit, and Jack drove off, certain that she'd have Hugh's favourite breakfast ready when he woke.

* *

Mum and Dad had never got round to having a telephone installed in their house, which was just as well, because Rosie needed as much peace as she could get. He fished the key out of his bag and let himself into the kitchen. He found his father in the parlour with a newspaper, which, Jack was relieved to see, had yet to trumpet the only news he cared about. "Your mother's upstairs," Dad said without lifting his eyes, so Jack kept moving, trudging up the stairs and feeling his weariness grow with each step.

He found Mum with her sketchpad and pressed a kiss to her weathered cheek. She nodded toward his bedroom, the door of which was closed. "I thought I heard her up and about early, but nothing for hours now," Mum said in an undertone. "What happened to her, Jack?" She interrupted herself before he could gather his thoughts. "No, see how she's doing first."

He knocked gently, knuckles just brushing against the door, and turned the knob to see Rosie sitting on the bed, tucked into a small ball and wearing his spare pyjamas. She lifted her wet-eyed face from her knees and smiled at him, and his heart clutched tightly at her courage. "Was it very awful?" she asked.

He dropped his bag and sat at the foot of the bed. "Collins was the only one there," he said, "so no.
"You?" He could see the rings like bruises around her eyes and knew she'd slept no longer than he had.

"It just doesn't seem possible that it was Sidney doing all of this." Was she speaking only of Fletcher because even that devastating hurt was better than thinking of her father, or because she had not yet processed George's part in all of it? "It doesn't matter, does it, that I can't reconcile how he was with me with what he did to those girls? How many girls? It doesn't matter that I can tell myself he could never have loved me if he could do what he did, because, Jack, I haven't got over loving him."

The worst of it was that he understood. There must have been so many tender glances, so many thoughtful gifts, all the unthinking affection of a settled love; her heart had been set at war with her mind, and though the outcome was assured, the battles would be long and bloody. "What do you need?" he asked. "You know you could stay." Mum and Rosie had never had a cross word between them, and Dad had liked her well enough. "I'm staying too."

It looked like her throat was knotted, tearing open to sob out a laugh. "Only you, Jack." She reached for his hand. "I need to be alone." She turned his hand over, tracing the lines on his palm. He raised it to her cheek, blotting her tears with his thumb.

He took her at her word and nodded, trying to memorise her face (one autumnal face) before letting her go. "I can arrange that," he said, thinking of how they'd revelled in the utter solitude they'd found in Lorne in the off-season. He'd trust Cec and Bert to drive her there without harassment; they'd shown as much with their part in stopping the racket, their ungentle proddings of Sanderson and Fletcher once the girls had been rescued. "Let me do that much for you."

A few thugs had been rounded up as they lurked near his little house, Jack learned when he arrived at City South. Youngsters desperate to make their name, convinced that Fletcher would be sprung soon and that he'd reward their initiative in bumping off or at least damaging the nosy copper who'd arrested him in the first place. Hugh brought the report with a sunny smile and a "sorry, sir," and Jack groaned to think of the expense of hiring a good glazier on top of providing funds for Rosie's stay at Lorne. Several of the windows had been smashed, but there was not much additional damage.

The drive to his parents' house was not so taxing that he needed to devise an alternative arrangement, so he pushed the question of his living arrangements to the back of his mind and settled down to work on the reports waiting for his signature: burglaries, one kidnapping, and a spate of poisonings.

"Sir," Constable Hunter said, poking his head in like a curious child in a fairy tale, "there's a call for you."

Phryne, most likely, he thought, surprised when he heard a deep voice on the other end. The Acting Chief Commissioner needed to go through the case with him and Collins, and would come to City South, where all the evidence was being held under lock and key.

* 

Leland Richards was an impressive man, Jack thought. He was built along the same massive lines as Dad – those were builder's shoulders – and had a pugnacious chin that looked like it had never done anything but jut belligerently out from his chest. But he'd listened with commendable patience as Jack outlined the case, casting back several months to set the stage with the murder by the Imperial Club's doorman, the frame-up of George Sanderson, and the prize – the box of...
illustrious gentlemen's calling-cards – that had been nowhere in evidence at the end of the case. Richards asked cogent questions, seeking answers sometimes from Jack and sometimes from Collins, nodding as each piece of the puzzle fell into place. "Despicable," Richards enunciated clearly once the recitation was over, and Hugh's sigh of honest relief might as well have come from Jack's lungs; it was good to know they would not have to start the fight again.

"What about O'Shaughnessy?" Jack thought to ask. George had appointed the man not only the lead investigator on the drowning case, but also his Deputy Commissioner. Jack was of the opinion that the man was foolish but not corrupt; George had most likely selected him knowing that O'Shaughnessy would follow blindly along without question wherever he and Fletcher led.

Richards smiled, a sharp, rather nasty smile. "Still a Detective Inspector, but no longer Deputy Commissioner. He wasn't happy about that. He'll be less happy still when I transfer him somewhere his incompetence can cause less mischief." He held a hand out to Collins, then to Jack. "You've made your case most persuasively, gentlemen. Russell Street will put its full weight behind you."

Richards clapped Hugh paternally on the shoulder and waited for the lad to take his leave. Once the door was shut, he turned back to Jack, who squared his shoulders and waited with all the patience he could muster. "The Fletcher situation's actually worse than the mess Sanderson created – you know it as well as I do, Robinson."

"Yes, sir," he agreed. Fletcher had controlled a great deal of the city's wealth, with all of his businesses, and removing him from his web would create a vacuum that countless men of ambition would rush to fill. "We'll be waiting."

"Good man, Jack."

He slept like the dead, finally, waking with early-afternoon sunlight, thick like honey, dragging across his face. He padded downstairs to the kitchen, needing a cup of tea before he could begin to think of facing the day, surprised to see Dad sitting at the kitchen table next to Mum, the two of them polishing all the silver in the house, which didn't amount to very much. Jack felt like a child again, his striped pyjamas, still faintly fragrant with Rosie's perfume, not adding to his confidence.

"Tea?" he asked, heading for the kettle. He filled it and set it to boil.

Mum was holding the sugar-tongs up to the light, as if examining them for any dull spots she might have missed, and Dad cleared his throat and said, "I thought you might want to come to the Town Hall, see what we've been doing there."

Muzzy-headed as he was, he wasn't slow-witted; the newspapers must have got onto the case, and Dad was worried about him. "That sounds good," he said, seeing Mum drop him a wink behind Dad's back.

The Richmond Town Hall was as impressive to him now as it had been when he'd been a child on his dad's big shoulders, looking up at what his dad was building. The main tower didn't soar the way the grand cathedrals he'd seen in France did, but it was imposing and solid and beautifully worked. This, he felt, letting the pleasing lines of the structure steady him, was a worthy legacy, surely enough to satisfy a man who'd been disappointed his only son had not followed in his footsteps.
He and Dad walked around the building and Jack thought amusedly of men circling a horse to assess its flesh. "The paper said that you arrested George Sanderson. Is that true?"

So he'd been identified by name by some enterprising reporter. Well, things could hardly worsen. "It is," he confirmed. "He was standing aside and letting his godson perpetrate all manner of crime."

"The godson Rosie was set to marry?"

"Yes," he acknowledged, this time with a note of warning in his voice. Dad had never said anything against Rosie, but he'd also never quite forgiven her for being George's daughter; George had done very little to endear himself to Jack's family, to whom he was always striving to assert his superiority.

Dad evidently heeded the warning. "Poor girl. She could have stayed with us. Your mum would've been glad of the company."

"So I told her."

"Sanderson, that ruddy little runt, trying to look down his nose at us – and now you've got him locked up. Didn't I tell you he was no good?" As far as Dad was concerned, George's outright dismissal of Tabby was enough to have him jailed for life. Every hard man of Richmond knew enough to respect Big John Robinson's sunny-faced girl, but George Sanderson had made no secret of his disdain for a girl who supported herself, and that too on the stage.

"You did," Jack said, feeling years of emotions in his father's hand clapping him exuberantly on the back.

They had murmured some nonsense about seeing each other at his next murder investigation, but Jack knew that Phryne lacked the patience to wait. He wasn't expecting the summons to come from Mr. Butler.

"Is everything alright?" he asked. There had been no mention of Miss Fisher or her team of vigilantes in the newspaper articles, but that did not mean that some of the brighter sparks among the city's criminal element had not figured out her involvement; George had to have been ranting about Phryne for quite some time, judging by Rosie's diminishing warmth toward her, and at the reminder, Jack found his anger flaring up again. Let anyone have tried anything against Phryne on George's or Fletcher's say-so, and Jack would personally lock him up and perhaps forget where he'd put the key.

"Yes, Inspector." Mr. Butler put a plate with a variety of homemade biscuits – almond, coconut, and ginger; he and Miss Williams had been busy – in front of him along with a cup of strong tea, then sat down across from him. Jack couldn't remember seeing Mr. Butler with his hands idle before, and felt anxiety dance down his spine. "I'd like to consult you on a personal matter."

"You live under the roof of a consulting detective," he pointed out, smiling to deflect his worry. "She's even got the house number right." He remembered how annoyed he'd been by the B she'd added to the gleaming 221 near her front door when he'd first seen it, when he thought she'd taken Jane home with her just to put a spoke in his wheel and keep him from arresting the grubby girl she called a "poor child."

"This is not a matter for Miss Phryne's attention," Mr. Butler said firmly, though he smiled too. "She pays me a salary I can't possibly spend, and I have no dependents to support. Mrs. Butler's
relatives disapproved of our union, and I cannot say that I have forgotten some of the words that were spoken in anger. I don't plan to die any time soon, Inspector, but recent events have reminded me that danger is a frequent guest in our circle, and I would like to ensure that my money goes to Dot and Constable Collins."

"What do you need me to do?" he asked, because he knew exactly how much a constable made, and Collins, who was supporting his family, could do with some security in his future.

"I just wanted to make sure I wasn't stepping on any toes; you know young Hugh best of all of us, save Dot."

"It's a kind thought, Mr. Butler –" was as far as he got before Phryne burst into the room, Miss Williams in her wake.

"Jack!" she exclaimed, and oh, how he loved hearing his name in such pleased tones. "Have you – has everything been . . . alright?"

"Yes," he said, swallowing the last of the ginger biscuits.

"And you'll stay for dinner?" she pressed.

"As you wish, Miss Fisher," he said, not missing the small, secret smile that passed between Phryne and Dot at his acquiescence.

*

Phryne was never shy, at least not with him, about her intelligence. It was a quality he appreciated, not only because it made her quick and sharp, but also disinclined her to draw artificial lines in their relationship; she did not banish shop talk from her dinner table, and he put away Mr. Butler's sumptuous repast whilst laying out the specific charges to be laid against Sanderson and Fletcher.

He kept his voice level in speaking of the lost girls, the untold numbers that had been transported away before anyone had caught wind of the conspiracy, and the work to be done to find them, and she closed her hand over his. The candlelight made her eyes soft and dark as shadows in her gracious face. She led him by the hand to the parlour when the meal was over, pouring out generous measures of whisky unasked.

"To the found girls," she said, lifting her tumbler in a toast, "and to their champions."

"To us all," he agreed, and with that she kissed him.

He'd expected the smoky taste of her whisky, and the tang of bitter chocolate on her tongue surprised him. He managed to set his glass down on the mantelpiece and frame her face in his hands, tilting it up so he could kiss her again. "Phryne," he said against her smiling mouth (this woman with a ripe and smiling lip).

"Come," she said, turning away and giving him a sultry look over her shoulder. "We can have our nightcap upstairs."

She frowned when he didn't follow. "Not tonight," he said slowly. She stared disbelievingly at him. "We're shorthanded just now, and no less busy than ever." It was true, and he refused to consider how much of it was an excuse to delay his inevitable failure to measure up.

"Go, then," she said, sounding on the cusp of anger, pouring his drink into her glass as she ascended the stairs. He caught a glimpse of himself in the hallway mirror next to which his hat was
hanging, and took a moment to scrub her lipstick off his mouth with his handkerchief. He saw her reflection, stilled on the steps, and turned back to her, glad that her expression had shifted from upset to wry. "You're such a Victorian, Jack," she said almost wonderingly.

"By geography or by temperament?" he asked, letting one corner of his mouth tick up into a smile.

She laughed and blew him a kiss.

His nightmares were fragments of twisted knowledge cobbled together – nothing so straightforward as the war, nothing so comprehensible as Fletcher staring down the barrel of a gun levelled at Phryne. What he saw was worse, Fletcher and Sanderson holding Tabby between them, dragging her frightened and weeping up to the boat to throw her in with the other stolen girls. Even in the dreams Jack recognised that it was impossible, but he could see her, nearly touch her, the golden, laughing child she'd been transfigured to this shaking girl with a voice raw from screaming.

He woke with the sheets twisted into a rope pinning him to his bed. His throat was clenched as tightly as his fists, keeping him from crying out.

He rose, unsteady on his feet, pacing just so he wouldn't feel caged. He fetched himself a glass of water and sank into the chair in his study, elbows on the polished wood of the desk. The smell of lemon oil gradually woke him and the last remnants of the nightmare vanished.

Whatever sleep he might snatch was not worth climbing back into sweat-soaked sheets. He did a brisk reconnaissance of his house instead, verifying that all of the repaired windows were still whole, before bathing and dressing for the day. His neighbours were used to his unusual hours, but it had been some time since he had surprised the milkman in the middle of his early deliveries.

Acting Commissioner Richards had asked him to turn the responsibility for the lost girls over to men from his home station of Melbourne East, men Jack did not know; George and Fletcher should not be able to argue that there was any kind of conspiracy behind their imprisonment. He had more than enough to be getting on with, as all sorts of toughs were trying to make their mark on City South's patch, but the lost girls, all with Tabby's face, kept crowding into his mind.

A cup of station-house coffee, nearly as wretched as the acorn coffee that had burnt its way down his throat in France, brought him back to his actual responsibilities. The topmost file on his desk was a case of murder, something that could, he thought when he read the dead man's name, escalate with very little provocation into a full-fledged gang war.

It wouldn't have been a hard decision, even if it had been his to make. "No, sir," he said to Chief Commissioner Richards, newly appointed. "I would decline."

Richards thumped an emphatic fist on Jack's desk. "Which was why I wanted you. That corrupt bastard Sanderson had the sense not to recruit you, which makes you my type. There should be a good man, and a good cop, in the Deputy Commissioner's chair, the delicacy of a particular case be damned."

"Yes, sir," he said. There was nothing to disagree with there, and he appreciated that Richards did not stay behind his desk at Russell Street but spent every third morning at one of the city's stations, working with the Senior Detectives; he hadn't given up being a cop to become a bureaucrat. "Who will you appoint?"

"Jack!" he heard, as the door to his office flew open, and there stood Phryne in a scarlet coat that
would have been visible from several miles away and a close-fitting hat of the same colour with beads marking a hypnotic swirling pattern. "Oh, good morning," she said, apparently not in the least bothered by having interrupted his private meeting with the most important officer in Victoria. "Phryne Fisher," she continued, extending her hand.

Richards shook it once. "Leland Richards, the pleasure's mine." He betrayed no particular interest in meeting the woman whose name had recurred in the biggest scandal to hit the department in years, and Jack saw Phryne's eyes sharpen. "Detective Inspector Robinson and I are nearly done – could I trouble you to wait outside?"

"Of course," she murmured politely, turning on one delicate heel. Richards was canny enough to wait for her silhouette to vanish from the frosted glass before picking up the conversation.

* 

Trust Phryne to be the cynosure of any environment, even when the new Chief Commissioner was walking out just as a particularly hirsute and large suspect was being brought in by two Constables and a Detective Sergeant, simply by standing near the gate to the offices. Jack beckoned her forward, keenly aware of all of the eyes that followed her into his office.

She settled herself with great aplomb, the tails of her coat fanning out so perfectly that he knew she'd practised the gesture. Lovesick fool that he was, he found the thought charming. "Who is Leland Richards?" she demanded.

It had not escaped his attention that both she and Richards had elided their titles in their introductions. "Someone with whom I had an appointment this morning," he answered. "Now, what brings you here today, Miss Fisher?"

"A case," she said, "with a most intriguing client. I was hoping to take a look at your files." He shook his head. "Closed cases only?"

"The answer must still be no," he said.

She sighed gustily. "I suspected as much," she said, rising.

He considered her for a moment, aware that she was being far too cheerful for having been denied. "No cozening any of my constables into fetching files for you," he stipulated. "Not even the youngest, most impressionable of the lot, and especially not Collins."

She pulled a face and then swooped forward to kiss him swiftly. "We'll talk tonight, then, at dinner," she said, rubbing his lips with her ungloved thumb. "Do you know, this shade rather suits you."

* 

"Jack!" he heard as soon as Mr. Butler opened the door and he stepped inside; Phryne flew at him and launched herself into his arms so that Jack was tilted back into one long diagonal line, braced for her emphatic kiss.

"Good evening, Inspector," a dry voice drawled, and Jack squirmed inwardly at the thought of so many witnesses to such a private matter. He set Phryne back on her feet and turned to smile at Dr. MacMillan, who was sipping demurely from a tumbler of whisky.

"Good evening, Doctor," he said. "Have you come for the consultation on Miss Fisher's latest case as well?"
"My only consultation tonight is with Phryne's whisky," the doctor responded, leading the way into the parlour.

Phryne nodded graciously. "You both ought to know by now that you have standing invitations. At least Mac has learnt her lesson."

"I haven't as thick a skull as some," Mac said, indicating him by the tilt of her head.

It was pleasant, to be teased and accepted, and Jack felt happiness rising like a soap bubble inside him. "Not that long ago, Dr. MacMillan, you called me brilliant. Perhaps you recall?" It had shocked him at the time, as he'd never considered fathering anyone's children but Rosie's, but he'd understood the compliment nevertheless.

Phryne whooped with laughter, evidently catching his oblique allusion without difficulty, and Mac, her cheeks gone a fetching pink, raised her glass in silent toast to him.

* 

"Jane's latest letter arrived this afternoon," Phryne said. "She sends her love."

"Convey my regards in return," he said, finding his accustomed place by the mantelpiece. "What is the case? With the intriguing client?"

"Oh, that," she said, with a dismissive wave of her hand, her painted lips curving into a smile. "Uncle Edward – Aunt Prudence's husband – had a half-brother considerably younger and better looking. Oliver Stanley. He came to me with a rather delicate problem."

"Which was?"

"Utterly boring, Jack. As was Oliver himself, though a treat to look at."

"I see." He could hardly complain that he'd been lured to her house under false pretences – he'd got a crack at another of Mr. Butler's superb meals – but he had looked forward to working with her again.

"Can you not rouse yourself to display some jealousy?" Phryne asked, her hands stealing up to his lapels.

"Have I missed my cue?" he asked, smiling down at her bright eyes. He wasn't going to push too far or let her urge him into any rash action. But kissing her – that he could do, with a right good will. He bent his head and found her mouth, half-open and heated. Her hair spilled like cool silk over his fingers (he kissed and kissed her with a hungry mouth) but her face was warm.

Her bare arms were snug around his neck when she drew back long enough to whisper, "Your stage awaits." This was the question she'd meant to ask him, and he knew his answer. He nodded and followed her up the stairs to her bedroom, soothed despite himself by the swishing of her hips, as steady as a metronome.

"Phryne," he said, catching her hands in his when she turned to him and tried to divest him of his jacket and waistcoat. "I –"

"I know it's been some time for you, Jack," she said, though he could see the curiosity in her gaze as to how long precisely it had been.

That was part of it. "Yes," he confirmed, trying to find the words to express himself. How could he
tell her that his yearnings had already been fulfilled by holding her and knowing his kisses were welcomed, when her desires were yet unslaked?

A lifetime of being out of step with other men – the lack that had, he thought in his secret soul, cost him his wife – could not be resolved in one night, that much he knew, and his traitorous tongue still could not find the words.

"Please, Jack," she said, "kiss me." Their hands still fisted together between them, their kisses spun out for what seemed like hours. She had him in his shirtsleeves and on the bed by the time he realised her hands had slipped free of his. She'd stripped herself as well, perhaps in the name of equality, and he considered trying for her, even if that was all she ever wanted from him, wanting to express his love in the way she liked best. That spark – strange still, despite his recognition that he had long thought her beautiful – had relit inside him, urging him on.

Her skin was creamy, luscious, and he bent his head to kiss her small shoulders, her soft stomach. The hands playing in his hair tightened convulsively when he nudged the underside of one small but heavy breast with his nose, seeking a new home for his mouth. "Jack," she gasped, her legs coming up to circle his waist, her toes getting tangled in his dangling braces.

Small, breathless sounds escaped her lips, and there was a rush of moisture against his belly, permeating his layers of clothing to hit his skin; his cock stirred unwontedly at the sensation. She tried to roll them then, but he pinned her arms to the bed and kept kissing her radiant skin, the fragrance of her fluids sharply sweet in his nose. His hands were large enough that the sweep of his thumbs caught her breasts with each pass. She rocked urgently against him, mewled, and subsided, her legs splaying freely on either side of him.

"I didn't give you enough credit for your iron control, Inspector," she said, looking up at him through her lashes, her eyes dreamily unfocused even as she reached out for his trouser fastenings. "You deserve a reward."

He disengaged himself gently, feeling his cock had subsided, and stood to strip off his braces, shirt, and singlet. She didn't bother to cover up her nudity when he rose, and he poured a sparkling arc of water from ewer to basin to clean himself up. The man in the mirror had dishevelled locks and tension in the set of his shoulders. He turned his back on his reflection and stepped out of his trousers but kept his shorts on. Phryne was waiting for him, though she seemed about to topple over into sleep. When he got into the bed, she rolled closer, throwing her arm around his waist and laying her head on his chest; she said not a word about his body or his performance, and he let his eyes close, grateful for the reprieve. This (to bear her body's weight upon his breast) was all the reward he required.

Collins was doing his best not to betray his nerves, but the effort was a vain one. Mindful of the fact that the lad would be taking the examination for promotion to Senior Constable within one year, Jack refrained from drawing his conclusions about the dead body before them out loud.

"What do you think, Constable?" he asked briskly.

"Sir?" Hugh said. Of course, he hadn't been on the beat long enough to know all of the troublemakers by sight, and Roy Nicklaus was nearly unrecognisable in any case, his lips and protruding tongue a ghastly blue in sharp contrast to the red ring around his throat.

"First thoughts, Collins." He'd heard that Roy was one of the suitors of the barmaid at the Mermaid, but it was more likely that being a member of the gang running roughshod over Acland
Street was what had painted a target on Roy's back.

Hugh took a deep breath to settle himself and turned his back on the crowd of onlookers, kept from surging forward by more junior constables. "Strangled, sir, with some sort of instrument. Something very thin, but strong."

"Fishing line, most likely. The waxed line leaves smooth edges to the wound."

"Yes, sir." Hugh dutifully made a note of it, then continued his assessment. "Victim is young, no more than twenty. Dressed for manual labour."

It was a fair description, even if Roy Nicklaus had never done an honest day's work; he wore the collarless shirt, loose trousers, and heavy boots that seemed to be the uniform for the gangs. Jack looked up when he heard the noise of the crowd rising, waving over the workers ready to bear the body to the City South Morgue. "I'll head to the Mermaid," he said. "You take statements from anyone who seems particularly eager to be helpful, and make note of anybody trying to slip off unnoticed."

"Yes, sir," Collins repeated.

*

The Mermaid was a diggers' pub, fairly clean and well-furnished; Roy and his gang were several notches below the usual clientele. The barmaid, industriously cleaning pint glasses, was remarkably pretty, with reddish-blonde hair and china-blue eyes, a fair lure for any likely lad. Jack felt a stab of recognition but could not put his finger on it, other than her vague resemblance to Rosie's sister Iris, who had batted her eyes at him whenever he'd come round, for no reason other than to keep her hand in.

She smiled a welcome at him but kept working. "We're not serving yet, sir," she said, trailing off when she saw his identification. "Let me – let me get Father."

He followed her instead of waiting, and while she shot him a surprised look over her shoulder, she didn't change course. "Dad," she called, directing her shout down the cellar steps. A tall, well-built man came up, a heavy crate in his hands.

"Jack Spratt!" the man said, and Jack knew where he'd seen the girl's eyes before.

"Jeremy Watson," he said in return. He'd hardly ever seen Watson either clean or without his helmet, and hadn't remembered that the man had a shock of red hair, but those eyes were certainly memorable, especially since they'd belonged to a St. Kilda boy.

"Sorry, sir, I've forgotten your proper name, it was 'Spratt' for so long," Watson said. "My daughter, Matilda."

"It's Robinson. Detective Inspector Jack Robinson," Jack said, nodding at the girl, pleased that neither betrayed any uneasiness upon hearing his profession.

"Tillie, fetch the man a drink –"

"No, thank you. All I need is information."

"For you, Spratt, anything," Watson said, and Jack wondered how in the world he'd earned this man's ready devotion when all he could remember of Watson was that the man had a hell of a poker face and had stood tall beside him when the enemy charged in a wall of walking fire.
He was lost in the contemplation of the smoky amber liquid in his glass when Phryne sat on his lap. He was too surprised to react when she leaned in to kiss him, and she pulled back after a moment.

"I hadn't realised I would need to win you anew each night, Jack, but I am up for the challenge." She set his glass aside and moved to straddle him.

"It's not you," he assured her.

"Talking out your puzzles usually helps," she said, but he shook his head, aware that his thoughts were too inchoate to put into words, and his dread of a gang war had no real evidence to support it. "Very well, how about a different kind of puzzle?"

"What do you mean?" he asked. "A jigsaw?" He had never been particularly good at those. "Let me guess – you were the Collingwood jigsaw champion back when you still pulled your hair into pigtails and were inveigling innocent footballers to debilitating drunkenness."

She leaned sharply back to study his face, and his hands shot out to steady her. "I haven't worn pigtails since I was seven," she said. "My father had enough of what he was pleased to term my smart mouth, and he pinned me between his knees one night and took a knife to my hair." Jack made his hands on her body as gentle as he could, trying to swallow down his disquietude at the thought of a drunkard's knife anywhere near the tender nape of her neck. "He liked the punishment enough to repeat it at regular intervals."

Was everything about her a weapon honed to perfection? That sleek, geometrical bob she wore like a crown (Euclid alone has looked on Beauty bare) was her sophisticated reclamation of a childhood punishment. How had such a woman come to be in his arms?

"Phryne," he said, suddenly aware he'd never told her in the simplest, truest words what he felt.

"Yes, Jack?" she asked. One of her cool fingers had found the hollow at the nape of his neck, and he shivered.

"I love you."

She stilled just for a moment, dropping her eyes so all he could see was black lashes (black is the colour of my true love's hair) pointing down to her ruby mouth. "Come with me, Inspector Robinson," she said, slithering off his lap and leading him up to her bedroom.

*  

There would be no evasions, not anymore; she'd taken his declaration of love as a request to bed her, and he could no more persuade her that his love led to no such outcome than she could convince him that any carnal act could bring pleasure in the absence of love. For he was clear-eyed even in this, and he knew she did not feel as he did. He might be her friend, her partner, her challenger, and one of the people she'd adopted into her little makeshift family, but ultimately he gave her nothing she could not find elsewhere, probably within the hour.

"I want to see you," she said with a seductive smile, reaching up to unknot his tie. She hummed approvingly as she smoothed his braces down his arms, tugged his shirt off, and pulled his singlet over his head. She stood back to appraise him teasingly, and he saw the moment her smile vanished. "Jack!" she said, gaze boring in on his right side, where the bullet had grazed him and spun him, before switching to his left, where he'd been stabbed at least twice. "And yet you weren't invalided home," she said, her voice throbbing with outrage.
He stood still under her caresses, the kisses she dropped on his scars. "Phryne," he said, at last raising his hands to cup her face.

Her eyes were kind. "Were there other wounds?" So she was still trying to make sense of his demurral during their last encounter.

He shook his head. "I've not . . . been accustomed –"

She mistook him, of course, because he couldn't find the words that would make everything clear. "Let me give you pleasure," she said, her eyes still so damnably kind, unbuttoning his trousers and his shorts and pressing her mouth to him without hesitation or shame. His cock rose in her silken mouth, and he felt it like his body had been flooded with electricity. He had thought this a world where he would never set foot; he had thought his love to be a matter of the head and heart alone; and then . . . he could not find a single thought at all.

"This isn't much of an office, Robinson," Richards said, frankly assessing the small room. The paint was peeling, the wood floor needed waxing, and there was a water-stain in one corner of the ceiling that had only grown since the office had become his. The electric fan did little but move hot air around in waves.

"You'll hear no arguments from me," Jack said. The whole station needed a bit of spit and polish.

"And yet I find myself here week after week, month after month, in surely the most uncomfortable chair ever devised." Richards sat back, as if determined to win a battle with the inanimate object in question; Jack mentally wished him luck. "Good work on that garrotting case, could have been a messy business."

"Constable Collins had worked with the gangs before, sir, and so we were well-placed to hear that this was a private matter made to look like a declaration of turf war, which would have been nasty in this heat wave."

"Indeed." Richards kept close counsel, but Jack knew he'd made note of Hugh's name. "Incidentally, I received a telephone call from the SA Police, who thought I might want to know that a Rose Robinson has been living a quiet, law-abiding life in Adelaide."

"Yes, sir." Rosie's cousin Delia had thrown open her home once she heard what had happened, and he'd put Rosie on The Overland himself. "She has family there."

"And the friends to get her there, I see." Richards stood, giving the chair one last evil look, and gave the stack of files an approving pat. "You run a tight ship, Robinson."

"Wrong branch, sir. I was an army man."

Richards laughed. "Still had to sail home, didn't you?" He thrust his chest out as if recalling the weight of medals hung there. "You have the navy to thank for that."

"Jack?" Rosie's voice came through the line slightly muffled. "I didn't know when to call – you must be so busy –"

"How are you, Rosie?"

"Ah," she said, striving for lightness, "busy. Happy. Finally free."
She'd never lied to him, and he felt the tautness of his shoulders give a little at her words. "Good." He weighed how much to tell her, recalling the bittersweet relief that had flooded through him when she'd said, with a look half-apologetic and half-promising, that she'd found love very different the second time around. This was not the moment to tell her he'd seized a second chance himself, that with Phryne he'd discovered the maddening, satisfying force of desire.

Rosie would never stop surprising him with her bravery. "Have you found a new freedom too?" she asked. She laughed at his shocked silence. "Come on, Jack, how long have I known you? I could see it on your face the day you saw me off."

"I –" What he wouldn't give to have this conversation in person, in private, instead of on a line with some bored operator possibly listening in. He had not realised until that moment how much he still wanted Phryne to say what Rosie had said so often, that she loved him; desire alone was not enough, no matter how he tried to make do with what she could give.

"What, my Benedick unable to string together eight or nine wise words?" Rosie teased, then fell silent, evidently fearing she'd offended him. "Jack, I wish you all the best, just please don't –"

"No," he broke in, before she could let the syllables slip, denying her retreat; he could not bear the thought of her adopting a formality or distance in order to speak to him, as if they ought to be no more than strangers. "I don't. How could I ever regret you?"

DI Linnell laughed at his woebegone face when he came back up from escorting Elsie Tizard down to the cells. She'd known the way, and she'd asked for the cell closest to the stairs, claiming the most comfortable one ought to be given over for the especial use of ladies. She'd waited for something then, and it was only when he was trudging up the stairs, gingerly rotating his wrenched arm in its socket and ruefully noting that his uniform had torn, that he realised she'd been expecting him to sneer at her that she was no lady; she was still primed for a fight, even after scattering three Constables until only Jack had been left hanging on to this dervish.

DI Linnell, who cared nothing for what was between the covers of a book but who had a magnificent deadpan that Jack thought he would do well to cultivate in his turn, gave him a none-too-gentle slap on the arm. "So you survived your first encounter with the Lizard. Frightful besom, isn't she? Got a tongue that could blister paint when she's in her cups."

Jack ached all over, not least from the shame of putting hard hands on a woman old enough to be his mother, quelling her with brute strength. He shook his head when Linnell raised his eyebrows, a silent invitation to join some of the men at the club rooms. "I've got to write up my arrest report, sir," he said, and Linnell tipped his hat to him and went out.

Jack put his pen to paper and then reconsidered and rested his face on the log instead. He just needed to close his eyes for a moment, but peace eluded him. He sighed and rummaged until he found an old blanket, the wool scratchy but thick, and headed back down to the cells. Mrs. Tizard was asleep when he laid the cloth over her recumbent form, one fist closed around the locket with her boy's picture inside, her face lined but gentle rather than fierce. "No Sycorax sleeps here," he said quietly, taking refuge in language not his own; he'd seen the lengths she'd gone to in order to keep the locket in her own possession and hadn't wanted to wonder what Mum would have done under similar threat.

She opened her eyes, dim in the poor light, startling him considerably, but he settled when she smiled, apparently holding no grudge for the arrest. "But I can't do without the wicked dew," she said, snuggling under the blanket like a child. He rocked back on his heels to hear Shakespeare dropping from those lips, and laughed at himself as he sat down to write his report.
By the time he got home, he was stiff and sore, and not inclined to laughter. Tabby found him first, and drew him a blissfully hot bath. When he emerged from his soaking, his sister stood by with liniment, already wrinkling her nose in anticipation of the smell, and he fell asleep under her strong hands.

The complex flavour of pomegranate filled his mouth, overwhelming even the scent of the bath Phryne had drawn. There was foam enough to keep her body hidden, all but her shining, soapy knees and the deft fingers that plucked the seeds from the heavy fruit that lay in his cupped hand. He trailed the fingers of his free hand through the foam, thinking of Aphrodite, born in a swirl of froth, insubstantial and beautiful. Phryne's mind was apparently on other deities.

"This is how to eat a pomegranate, Jack; it's a pity Persephone never told Hades so," she said, reclining lazily and letting him feed her a seed. "In a bath, the clean-up couldn't be simpler, no tell-tale stains." Her contented words were sheer bravado – she had people to clean up for her now, and before that, she couldn't have afforded the time to peel and savour this queer fruit even if she could have found the money – and he understood she was trying again to draw him into the tub with her. "She might not have had to stay in the underworld."

He only realised he was frowning when Phryne snaked a wet arm out of the water to draw his hand closer to her and unfurl his fingers from around the fruit. "Perhaps she wanted to stay," he argued. Was she making a point about the undesirability of an ongoing commitment, Persephone's annual descent and her mother's reckless mourning? Lying in Phryne Fisher's arms had not eased his life or settled anything inside him, not when he knew very well that he had become, after all, one of her dalliances, and her knowledge that she possessed his heart would make not a blind bit of difference to the length of time she chose to keep him.

Learning the pleasures of which his body was capable had been as fraught as any other educational experience (impossible to unperplex bliss from its neighbour pain), though he supposed even Phryne would call him an apt pupil.

"Why should she wish to remain in darkness?" she asked, drawing him even closer with a soapy hand on his shoulder blade. "Unless," she said, eyes dancing with wicked mischief, "she considered Hades a man – sorry, a god – of honour?" Her mouth was as sweetly tart as the ruby fruit, and he followed along in her kiss as best he could.

"He was faithful," he said, once his mouth was his own again. It wasn't as if he could impress her so much that she'd make a permanent space for him in her life, but perhaps he could at least make her laugh. "Unlike that bounder Zeus. You never hear of Hades with any other women." And when the grim king had taken aim at last, he'd aimed high – the goddess of spring, all light and sweetness and beauty; the parallels to himself were not lost on Jack.

"Yes," she said, dismissing the claim of fidelity with a wave of her hand, standing in her bath and waiting for him to wrap her in the bath sheet. He was no king after all, just her plaything, the clumsy knave who left his fingerprints on her pristine skin in scarlet juice.

Jack crested the hill, pedalling hard. There was frost in the pearly grey air, making him glad he'd dug his old jumpers out of the wardrobe. He resolved to concentrate not on Phryne's charms but on industrious Miss Williams the next time he was at the house, in the hopes that one of the jumpers she was constantly knitting would be earmarked for him. Hugh had three already, and Bert and Cec one apiece, and he swore Bert had a propensity to strut around in front of him in his.

He laughed, then, coasting along a flat stretch of road, at what Phryne would make of his apparent
desertion if he knelt at Miss Williams's feet. He decided she could say whatever she liked – she could even call him *Archie* with that mocking lilt in her voice – and it would not dissuade him from his course.

But when he was admitted to Phryne's house, the parlour stood empty, and he climbed the stairs, quiet and dallying, delaying his delight for the pleasure of anticipation, until it was at her feet that he knelt, tracing the bared lines of her body with hands that felt shamefully rough against her tender skin.

The knock at his door came just when he'd settled by the fire with a thick volume of John Donne's poems. Phryne stood on his front step, her white fur wrap settled around her like a barbaric collar, glowing from crown to sparkling shoes like a beam of moonlight. "Bert and Cec dropped me off, after rescuing me from the most *interminable* soirée. Dinner – if you can call it that – and what was supposed to be dancing. What smells divine?" She pushed past him, taking in the hallway with wide eyes, and he realised she'd never been to his house before.

Tabby had posted a tin of cardamom biscuits from Sydney, and he'd already had three. "*My actual* secret stash," he said, recalling the depredations he'd seen in the tin he kept in the office once he'd returned from his undercover posting. "Only for those who've been extra good."

She pouted. "Surely in my case not being actively naughty counts for something."

"Working from a deficit of virtue?" he asked, watching her prowl around the house, following her nose to his small parlour and helping herself to a biscuit from the open tin.

"You'll make it up for me, I'm sure," she said pertly, contriving to make it sound rather insulting. She groaned in delight at the taste of the biscuit, flipping the india-paper pages of his book as she chewed. He wondered if she knew Donne; he'd never heard her quote the poet. He wondered too if she'd posed deliberately in front of the fire, knowing the orange light only increased her splendour in her clinging dress. "No," she said decisively, shutting the book and laying it on the mantelpiece, "no Donne. I can't abide the man since I read that nasty little couplet."

"You were not the Phryne under discussion, I assure you," he said, ridiculously amused. She must have caught a glimpse of his smile out of the corner of her eye; he could hear her answering smile in her voice. "Come and pick something else for tonight's entertainment," she called over her shoulder, gesturing at his bookshelves.

He came up behind her, not bothering to read the titles as he knew each volume by its place on the shelves, and she pivoted sharply, looking up at him with triumphant eyes and looping her long strand of pearls around his neck, yoking them together. "I came all this way and still haven't got a kiss," she said insinuatingly.

He lowered his head until his mouth was very near hers. "I hadn't decided on that as tonight's entertainment," he murmured, but his resolve crumbled temporarily at the sensation of her breath on his lips. He stole one quick kiss and ducked out of the loop of her necklace. "If you close up my books, you'll have to give me your words instead," he said, expecting a fire to rise in her eyes at the challenge.

She gave him instead one long, level look, dropped her fur at their feet, and turned to find his bedroom. Her movements unhurried, she stepped out of her sparkling shoes and the long loop of pearls, leaving them behind; he shed his clothes recklessly, adding to the trail. Once in his room she unclipped her stockings while he watched, transfixed by a paroxysm of lust. She raised her
arms and he stepped forward to lift her dress off. Her voice, lower than usual, was the only thing that betrayed her own escalating desire. "I've dreamt of your hands," she said, and he was startled into looking at them, still holding warm silk, seeing as always the livid mark of the deep burn he'd sustained from his red-hot rifle barrel on a night of death in France.

"Just there, on my knees," she continued, guiding his emptied hands down the softness of her camiknickers to drag them off. She lay bare on his bed, offering a thousand resting places for his hands, but the orders were hers, and he settled them on her knees, kneeling at the foot of the bed. "Pushing them apart," she clarified, and he suited his action to her words. Her face turned to the side with the same sweeping arc as her knee, an action that seemed wanton and demure at once. Her eyes fluttered shut and her breath quickened as he moved, slow as honey, to press his mouth to her cunt once before sitting back on his heels.

"I've dreamt of your shoulders," she continued, relentless, sounding hypnotised though her eyes were electrified, pulling his body over hers, "those freckled shoulders" – she licked at the spots like she could lap them up – "keeping my thighs apart for your mouth." She pushed at his head with both hands and he moved willingly, letting his hands drag over her breasts as he went. She was wet, dripping with arousal, and he would be drunk on her yet. She said something while his head was between her legs – he could feel the vibrations of her speech and laughed against her flesh, just to make her cry out, her hair haloing against the pillow as she thrashed helplessly.

"Now," she gasped – that must have been what she'd said – "now, Jack," and her hips rose up to meet each of his forceful thrusts, working against him in a rhythm that matched his pounding pulse, and he was lost in her, spending endlessly, endlessly, dimly aware that her hoarse voice was still shaping words next to his ear.

"Phryne," he said when he could lift his head from her flushed breast, and she blushed anew from cheeks to toes, shyly radiant. He could not hear what she was saying, could not understand the fervent hum that might have been a prayer. "Phryne?" he asked, uncertain, trying to shift his weight off of her before she stilled him with the clutch of her hands.

Her mouth was still moving. He could not hear, the murmur too deep for intelligible sound, but he could read her lips. She quoted the Bard, then gave up talking, pressing her mouth to his, and as he kissed her, rolling them over and letting her sweet weight press him to the bed, he lingered on the words he'd read: *Speak low, if you speak love.*

NOTES

- *a very palpable hit:* William Shakespeare, *Hamlet* V, ii
- *much did they travel in the realms of gold:* John Keats, "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer" (the actual line is "Much have I travell'd in the realms of gold")
- *come, poor Jackself:* Gerard Manley Hopkins, "My own heart let me have more have pity on"
- *by day his limbs, by night his mind:* William Shakespeare, Sonnet XXVII (the actual line is "by day my limbs, by night my mind")
- *lance-jack:* In the S1 DVD extras (I think), Nathan Page mentions that Jack was a lance-corporal. The Wikipedia page for the term lance corporal mentions that "lance-jack" is an Australian nickname for the rank. I found a letter online written by a lance-corporal who referred to his insignia as his "stripe" and discussed his responsibilities.
- *field exercises under the hot Cairo sun:* According to this website, Australian troops who originally fought at Gallipoli were then sent on to France, and so that's the path Jack takes in this fic.
- *Jack Spratt:* From the nursery rhyme (Jack Sprat could eat no fat. / His wife could eat no lean. /
And so between them both, you see, / They licked the platter clean.), the nickname plays on Jack's very lean physique.
- *the autumn trees but bare ruined choirs*: William Shakespeare, Sonnet LXXIII (the actual line is "Bare ruined choirs, where late the sweet birds sang")
- *like gold to airy thinness beat*: John Donne, "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning"
- *to hear with eyes belongs to love's fine wit*: William Shakespeare, Sonnet XXIII
- *King Cophetua*: The legend of the king who married the beggar-maid includes, according to Wikipedia, the detail that the king was not sexually attracted to women until he fell in love with the beggar-maid.
- *extreme and scattering bright*: John Donne, "Air and Angels"
- *He took her hand as if it were the lost sugar-tongs*: In Chapter 10 of Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South*, John Thornton sees Mr. Hale playfully use his daughter Margaret's fingers as his sugar-tongs: *She handed him his cup of tea with the proud air of an unwilling slave; but her eye caught the moment when he was ready for another cup; and he almost longed to ask her to do for him what he saw her compelled to do for her father, who took her little finger and thumb in his masculine hand, and made them serve as sugar-tongs. Mr. Thornton saw her beautiful eyes lifted to her father, full of light, half-laughter and half-love, as this bit of pantomime went on between the two, unobserved, as they fancied, by any.*
- *got by chance, kept by art*: John Donne, "Elegy XVI: The Expostulation" (the actual line is "For though 'tis got by chance, 'tis kept by art")
- *go gladder than you came*: John Donne, "Epithalamion Made at Lincoln's Inn"
- *a brightness unobscured*: Edna St. Vincent Millay, *Second April VII*
- *signing Brooks's petition*: According to Wikipedia, a Constable William Thomas Brooks sent around a petition two years before the strike actually happened.
- *you are still my hunger's rarest food*: Edna St. Vincent Millay, *Four Sonnets III* (the actual line is "Were you not still my hunger's rarest food")
- *Were you not lovely I would leave you now*: Edna St. Vincent Millay, *Four Sonnets III*
- *Bodies unclothed must be / To taste whole joys*: John Donne, "Elegy XIX: To His Mistress Going to Bed"
- *O sweet, O heavy-lidded, O my love*: Edna St. Vincent Millay, "When we are old and these rejoicing veins"
- *He had yearned for this shower for nearly a month . . . desperate to kill the vermin living on him*: I took my information from the Imperial War Museum in London, which right now has some exhaustive exhibits on WWI and this website.
- *The rites for which I love you are bereft me*: William Shakespeare, *Othello* I, iii (the actual line is "The rites for which I love him are bereft me")
- *The green envelope was at last his*: According to the IWM exhibit, British soldiers might get a green envelope; I extrapolated that to other Empire soldiers: *Occasionally soldiers were given a green envelope in which they could seal letters expressing more personal intimate thoughts. These would only be read and censored at base by officers who did not know the writer.*
- *like the adulterous lovers of The Inferno, unable to stop and touch*: Dante's *Inferno*, specifically Francesca and Paolo, the adulterous lovers punished in the second circle of hell for lust.
- *Southern Cross . . . Cassiopeia*: Wikipedia says that the Southern Cross or Crux "is exactly opposite to Cassiopeia on the celestial sphere, and therefore it cannot appear in the sky with the latter at the same time," so Cassiopeia seemed like a fitting symbol of Jack's confusion.
- *The Strombos horn sounded from at least three miles away . . . he could see the yellow-green cloud poisoning the air . . . the harsh rattle warning of a gas attack*: The IWM exhibit said that the British Strombos horn, which warned of major gas attacks, could be heard nine miles away, and by May 1916 Strombos horns were positioned every quarter of a mile along the front line. The British also used a gas rattle to warn about gas attacks (the Germans used a gas gong).
- *he felt a hard, sharp blow like he'd been struck by an incendiary brick . . . all of them tinted strangely blue*: I borrowed this description from a first-hand account made by a British Captain,
who wrote of getting shot and seeing the world tinted blue.
- *an Alexandrian sword of virtue, ready to slice any Gordian knot* No one could untie the Gordian knot, so Alexander the Great sliced it with his sword, which is either cheating or thinking outside the box.
- *he'd written his adoration in huge cloudy symbols of a high romance* John Keats, *When I Have Fears*
- Divorce. *The laws keep changing, and I have no intention of accusing you of anything, so desertion is our best course.* Some information on divorce in Australia.
- *his book, laden with her own love* Alan Seeger, *With a Copy of Shakespeare's Sonnets on Leaving College* (the actual line is "his book, laden with mine own love")
- *I love you with so much of my heart that none is left to protest* William Shakespeare, *Much Ado About Nothing IV*, i
- *I do love nothing in the world so well as you* William Shakespeare, *Much Ado About Nothing IV*, i
- *one of the American "men of bronze"* There was an African-American unit on the front lines in France, known as the Harlem Hellfighters. Their French allies called them the "men of bronze." See *The Harlem Hellfighters* by Max Brooks & Canaan White.
- *one autumnal face* John Donne, "Elegy IX: The Autumnal"
- *Richmond Town Hall*: Richmond Town Hall was built in the 1890s and remodeled between the wars.
- *He remembered how annoyed he'd been by the B she'd added to the gleaming 221 near her front door* The most famous consulting detective is, of course, Sherlock Holmes, who lived with John Watson at 221B Baker Street in London.
- *this woman with a ripe and smiling lip* Augusta Webster, "A Castaway" (the actual line is "a woman with a ripe and smiling lip")
- *he kissed and kissed her with a hungry mouth* Christina Rossetti, "Goblin Market" (the actual line is "She kiss'd and kiss'd her with a hungry mouth")
- *to bear her body's weight upon his breast* Edna St. Vincent Millay, "Sonnet XLII: I, being born a woman and distressed" (the actual line is "To bear your body’s weight upon my breast")
- *Euclid alone has looked on Beauty bare* Edna St. Vincent Millay, "Euclid alone has looked on Beauty bare"
- *black is the colour of my true love's hair* A traditional folk-song, most likely originating in Scotland.
- *he'd put Rosie on The Overland himself* The Overland is a passenger train running between Adelaide and Melbourne, in service since 1887.
- *my Benedick unable to string together eight or nine wise words* William Shakespeare, *Much Ado About Nothing III*, ii (the actual line is "I have studied eight or nine wise words to speak to you")
- *No Sycorax sleeps here . . . But I can't do without the wicked dew* Sycorax is, in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, Caliban's mother. She's described as a witch, and Elsie turns the phrase "wicked dew" (used in the play as something Sycorax wields) to mean alcohol.
- *impossible to unperplex bliss from its neighbour pain* John Keats, "Lamia"
- *that nasty little couplet* John Donne's poem, in its entirety, reads "Thy flattering picture, Phryne, is like thee, / Only in this, that you both painted be."
- *Speak low, if you speak love* William Shakespeare, *Much Ado About Nothing II*, i

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