Marked

by Fire_Sign

Summary

England was supposed to be a romantic overture, not a trip to face old demons.

Notes

I'm not entirely sure what this is going to be, aside from an exercise in blending romantic overtures and the reality of canonically three month long boat journeys. It was originally meant to be a series of self-contained one shots following the series finale, then a case demanding more coherency began to poke at me. But casefics and coherency are rarely a viable option for me. So perhaps somewhere in the middle? I don't know. I'm marking this as complete for now, since I think the first chapter can stand by itself while I poke and prod the rest of it into place.
Chapter 1

Three weeks. Phryne Fisher had been in London for three long weeks and she was very close to burning the entire city to the ground for a mild diversion. The adventure had so far been days upon days of being confined in a small space with her father, then listening to her mother's rather absurd loyalty to her husband justifying all manner of transgressions simply because he had managed to be in the correct country at the designated time. Even her suggestion for Jack to follow her- which had seemed so romantic at the time- had lost it's shine; if she wasn't certain he would come, she could have left England immediately after arriving and been home and finally unbuttoning those suits of his before the next boat from Australia landed in Southampton. But no, she was stuck with London in October and even her usual delightful diversions of attractive young men in smoky dance halls were good for no more than a dance or two before the melancholy of wanting something else more swelled in her breast and she left.

Worse still, she was headed home from a rather productive trip to the best milliner in town when she came across a murder scene and she had no way to investigate. She stood in front of the building with heavy police guard- she'd seen them take the body out beneath a sheet ten minutes earlier- and considered her remaining options. Flirting with the nearest constable had gotten her nowhere; she should have been annoyed, but it had been a shoddy effort. There were no obvious interested parties to offer her services to. Her father's police connections were not the exploitable type, but perhaps her mother had a friend-

"Miss Fisher, it is somewhat reassuring to know that you do not allow little things like new continents get in the way of beating me to my crime scenes."

"Jack!"

With her usual complete disregard for propriety, she turned and enveloped him in a hug before she had time to think.

"Hello Phryne," he said quietly. And really, it was completely unfair that two words and the feel of his breath ghosting across her ear was enough to make her weak in the knees. She didn't allow it to distract her long.

"Your crime scene? You are a little out of your jurisdiction, are you not?"

Jack sighed, then motioned to a tall, dark-haired man beside him.

"Miss Fisher, meet Detective Inspector Theodore Carter from Scotland Yard. Ted, this is Miss Phryne Fisher. She is a... consultant with the Victoria Police Force."

"And occasional special constable," Phryne added, giving DI Carter a charming grin. She wasn't certain what was transpiring, but she had always found it to her benefit to bowl over strangers until she had a read on the situation. She went to open her bag. "I even have a badge!"

Carter looked suitably confounded and Jack was regarding her with fond amusement, so she left the battered tin badge (which was, in fact, in her bag and had been carried with her since the incident during the Fisher Invitational) and fixed them both with a a raised eyebrow.

"I was planning a long overdue trip to England when Russell Street received a telegram. I've been asked to consult with Scotland Yard," explained Jack.

"That seems..."
She wants to say serendipitous, as if the universe was determined to make up for all the other mistiming. What actually comes to mind is ominous.

"Unprecedented?" he suggested, and she noticed how tired he looked. "That's because it is. I've only just landed- we were on our way to the hotel when we were redirected here."

His tie was slightly askew and there was at least two days worth of stubble on his cheeks.

"Well, they've already moved the body," said Phryne breezily. "There is nothing at that crime scene that can't wait for an hour for you to have a hot bath and something to eat. There is also no question of you staying at a hotel- we have guest rooms with much better facilities. No Mr. B of course, but needs must! Abbott makes a *terrific* trifle, at least."

Jack opened and closed his mouth several times then shook his head, a reaction Phryne had long learnt to interpret as resignation.

"Excellent!" she said, linking arms with him in what she hoped passed for friendly affection to the spectators. Truth was, while he was quite good at hiding it he looked like a stiff breeze might blow him over; the added benefit of getting to brush against him after weeks apart was merely happy coincidence. "DI Carter, can you retrieve the bags please? My vehicle is just around the corner."

She didn't wait for an actual response, merely propelled Jack along the pavement and assumed his companion would follow. He complied, fetching two cases and hurrying to catch up. Phryne indicated the motorcar, placing her own hat box in the back and climbing into the driver's seat.

"Thank you, Inspector Carter."

The man tipped his hat and turned back to the scene, and Phryne decided that she liked him. Compliant and quick was always desirable to work with, and Jack seemed to know and trust him. Speaking of Jack, she turned her attentions back to him and smiled.

Over the past few weeks, Phryne had amused herself during her mother's more loquacious monologues of her father's many virtues by trying to guess how the reunion would go. Hesitant and reserved or forthright and passionate. Whether they would negotiate every boundary before beginning, or put their lips to better use and let the details work themselves out. Perhaps- and this was a personal favourite- he would do something foolish like compare her to a telescope again and she would be forced to kiss him, to save them both the embarrassment. She had not imagined him quietly slipping into her passenger seat, eyes closed and a heavy weight on his shoulders.

"I'm glad you're here, Phryne."

She reached for his hand, feeling an arc of electricity between her and her Atlas. And wasn't *that* a possessive thought?

"Where else would I be?"
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

I think I've cracked this as a sort of fic with a background case rather than casefic. Real life has delayed this chapter, but I'm hoping that future updates will be 2-3 times a week.

Jack Robinson stared at his reflection in the mirror. The bags beneath his eyes still betrayed his exhaustion, but with a fresh shave and some pomade he was presentable at least. He fastened his trousers before leaving the en suite to continue dressing.

He was not surprised to see Phryne perched on the bed, feet tucked beneath her and an expectant smile on her face. She raised an eyebrow at his half-dressed state but said nothing. Grabbing his shirt clean shirt from his open suitcase, he turned his back to her and began to dress. A sound he could only describe as a squeak came from behind him; he looked over his shoulder.

"Just... admiring the view," Phryne said innocently. Her wicked grin suggested admiration was not the only thing on her mind. He raised an eyebrow of his own.

"So, will you tell me why you are here?" she asked. "The whole story, I mean, because 'consulting with Scotland Yard' conjures all sorts of unfavourable possibilities."

"The specifics would take hours. The files are in my larger case, if you wish to peruse them," he said, adopting a casual tone. The assumption of her aid was not one he was willing to make; in Melbourne there would be no doubt, but in England she had other commitments. The traitorous voice in the back of his head reminded him that he could have been one of those commitments, in a fashion- come after me, Jack Robinson- if he were there for another purpose.

"The essentials are these- from November 1925 to July 1926 there were a series of murders in Melbourne. Very... distinctive murders. I wasn't the lead investigator- that was Howard Dressel, brought in from Russell Street to coordinate the investigations- but most of the victims were found in our territory."

He didn't have the words to explain it right then; the horror, the shame, the loss of a dear friend. Coming home for the first time in days for a change of clothes to find that Rosie had left for her sister's and feeling nothing but relief. The might-have-beens had been pounding in his head for weeks, since that first telegram. Phryne, God bless her, didn't ask.

"Ted- the man from the scene- was one of our officers at the time, but moved back to England with his wife and daughter a year later. Six weeks ago there was a murder that shared some similarities to Melbourne's deaths and Ted recognised it. As a result, Scotland Yard requested our assistance and I was dispatched by a rather absurd series of flights by the air forces of both countries." He didn't add that he called in every favour he had and a few he didn't to be the one sent to London, and would have even without her siren's song imploring him to follow her to the isle. "So I am afraid, Miss Fisher, that the romantic overture will have precious little time for execution."

"Nonsense, Jack," she said, giving him a light hearted grin. "What could be more apt for us than a murder investigation?"

He felt himself smile on reflex, for just a moment, before the weight of the situation fell back onto his shoulders.
"Jack," her voice was soft now, and she slipped off the bed to close the distance between them. Wrapped her arms around him. "Jack, you had to do this. I understand. Truly. If you didn't you wouldn't be my dear, noble, very handsome Jack."

Her kiss was light and gentle.

"Is this...?"

He was unsure what he meant to ask, precisely; was this what they were now, intimacy and promises and demonstrated affection, slipped so easily into what they were before? It seemed fantastical to even contemplate. Is this acceptable, perhaps? But "acceptable" was hardly in Phryne Fisher's vocabulary, and greatly undervalued his own sentiments on the matter.

"It is," she said firmly, kissing him again. He doubted either of them knew what the question was.

"I have been granted six months leave once the investigation is finished, at least. Given the great distance and inconvenience."

"All the more incentive to resolve things quickly," she laughed, stepping back so he could finish dressing. "I know the most darling place to go dancing on a Saturday night. So here is what we will do- I will take you back to the crime scene, and when you are done we will return here for dinner. Then you will go to bed and I will read the files, and you can fill in the gaps in the morning."

"Are you sure?" he asked, fumbling with the last buttons on his suit. He didn't doubt her, not really, but the last few weeks have been chaotic and unpleasant and he was still tired.

"Of course! We are partners, after all."

A fact which, strictly speaking, was not actually true. Partner implied a more formal arrangement than their nebulous pairing. Then she reached up and fixed his tie.

"Once more unto the breach, dear Jack," she said gently, and it sounded like a promise.

He grinned. For the first time in weeks, he felt the sort of buoyant optimism that Phryne has perfected.

"Miss Fisher, the goal is to avoid filling walls with English dead."

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Phryne Fisher strode towards the crime scene, coat billowing behind her. Jack was pretty certain the wet behind the ears constable she was approaching was literally quaking.

"Miss, I've already said-"

Phryne cut off his objections with a smile. "We are here with Detective Inspector Carter. If you could just fetch him that would be- Never mind, there he is! Ted, over here!"

She waved at the police officer emerging from the building with the dignity of a queen. Jack smirked. Ted Carter was a very good cop, but utterly baffled by forthright women in any other context. Watching him handle The Honourable Phryne Fisher was going to be an endless source of entertainment.
"Ah, Ted, so good to see you again," Phryne said, making to kiss his cheek. It was far friendlier than her usual greetings, and Jack suspected that she had realised that Ted was particularly susceptible to charming freight trains. "Is it just in here? Shall I...? Oh good, I'll just get started then while you catch up with Jack."

And then she was gone in a cloud of perfume and velvet without waiting for a response. Ted looked at him.

"What exactly just happened?"

"You've met Miss Fisher. You'll adjust."

"Does she always do that?"

"Generally."

"And you allow it?"

"There's really no 'allowing' Miss Fisher to do anything. It's best to just grit your teeth and try to keep up."

"Have you tried arresting her?" Ted was beginning to sound slightly hysterical.

"There are not enough hours in the day to complete the paperwork."

Phryne reappeared at the door.

"Inspector, if you expect me to wait for you then have the courtesy to move at a speed slightly faster than a glacier."

Deciding he had had enough fun, he motioned her ahead and turned back to Ted.

"Honestly, she's one of the finest investigators I've ever known. We are incredibly lucky to have her assistance. And believe me, now that she's gotten wind of it we will have her assistance come Hell or high water."

Ted nodded, far more accepting of the outsider than Jack himself had been in the beginning.

"One more thing..."

Jack sighed. Ted had been a friend for many years and he suspected what was on his mind.

"No, she is not the reason Rosie and I divorced. My ex-wife was living with her sister long before Miss Fisher was even in the country."

He chose not to add that her particular joie de vivre had helped make it clear that Rosie was right, that their marriage had long ago stopped being good for either of them.

"Actually, I was going to ask if that's Henry Fisher's daughter."

"You've met the Baron?"

"Baron? No, he was a mean drunk from Collingwood. Must be someone else, but her name seemed familiar. Perhaps it was something else... Fiona? Freya? She was a little terror when I was first made a constable, whatever it was."
"No, same family. I wouldn't mention it to Phryne though."

"A sensitive issue?" Ted asked.

"No, you just don't want her remembering," Jack laughed. "She'll find a way to use it against you."
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

Me- "I should be able to update a few times a week!"
Universe- "Shall we just kill your computer spectacularly then? For funsies."
Me- "Is once a week acceptable to you?"
Universe- "Probably not, but we'll let you hold onto your delusions."

Phryne sighed, flexing her right hand as she looked at the case files in front of her. No wonder Jack had been so frazzled yesterday- just going through the information was enough to invoke the urge to drink heavily. It was a difficult case, poorly handled as various stations squabbled over petty details. Jack and Ted Carter's reports were both thorough- it was reassuring to know that DI Carter's attention to detail was not lacking if she was to be working with him- but reading between the lines told her that there had been an absurd amount of territorial posing and poor cooperation in the early days.

Seven murders, with no common thread between the victims or apparent motive. Forensics had been unproductive. A killer who became progressively more daring and vicious, culminating in the death of Sergeant William Oscar of the Victorian police force. Letters with enough information to feasibly be from the killer, but sufficiently vague that an unrelated lunatic was just as likely a source. The only link was a small branding on the back of each victim- the same technique used on livestock, but not a mark used by anyone in Australia. Enquiries had been sent off to other countries with no luck. The investigation had no real leads despite the best efforts of the investigators, and Phryne wasn't sure she had any brilliant ideas herself.

"Good morning, Miss Fisher," came Jack's gravelly voice from the doorway.

She turned to find him leaning against the door jamb, hands in his pockets. Perfectly at ease and perfectly delectable, damn him.
"Sleep well, Jack?"

He nodded slightly, moving towards her.

"Did you get any sleep last night?" he asked, surveying the large pile of papers she had finished with a slight tilt to his head.

She hadn't. She had half a note book filled with information- a running list of names that had come up during the course of the initial investigations, points she needed clarification on, lines of enquiry that were not fully examined, any extraneous observations she had. The first indication of the time had been when weak daylight had made it's way through the study windows; she'd contemplated retiring to bed for an hour or two, but knew Jack would want an early start. They were due at Scotland Yard for half past eight, to get up to date with London's investigation and fill them in Melbourne's. So no, she hadn't slept.

"It's moments like these I truly appreciate Dot's contributions. My hand is aching from taking all these notes," she laughed, determined to keep the atmosphere light.

"Allow me," he said, reaching for her hand with ease.
As he began to massage, Phryne closed her eyes. This was the reason she had hesitated so often when it came to Jack Robinson—desiring him in her boudoir was one thing, a familiar sort of whim. Her long held suspicion that he would be as considerate and desirable in other contexts was a much more daunting prospect. The irony of favouring safety was not lost on her.

"The absence of Mrs. Collins is indeed unfortunate," Jack said after a moment. "And my constable only a little less so."

They shared a small smile.

"How are our dear friends?" she asked.

"Lost to a haze of newlywed bliss," he answered. "They've rented a little bungalow not far from the station."

She was surprised. "I thought they intended to stay at Wardlow."

"From what I can gather, Hugh felt it was taking too much of a liberty and Dot deferred."

"Honestly!" Phryne huffed. "I'll write to them immediately."

He looked at her, thumbs still kneading her palm.

"Phryne, let them have this time together. Let them figure out where Hugh can hang his socks, and who has to get out of bed on cold mornings to put the kettle on, and negotiate how much he tells her about the really bad cases. Let them argue about silly things without witnesses. There's time enough later for a full house."

It was all the mundane sorts of things that had left Phryne with a very cool opinion towards marriage, but Jack made it sound wonderful.

"Is that what it was like for you and Rosie, in the beginning?" she asked quietly. They didn't speak about his former wife often.

His lips give a sardonic twist.

"Three days before our wedding, the man installing the plumbing managed to flood the entire house. We spent the first four months of marriage living with her parents," he admitted. "Sometimes I wonder if we could have weathered everything else if we hadn't."

It unsettled her to realise that he still regarded his marriage as a failure, Rosie's happiness an obligation he did not fulfill. She stroked his cheek with her left hand, reluctant to pull away for even a second.

"You really are the most wonderful man I've ever known," she said. "And I, for one, am incredibly grateful for incompetent workmen."

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Phryne left the station, hurriedly heading towards her vehicle. An hour for lunch would give her enough time to execute her plans, provided she was efficient; speeding was a matter of necessity, really, and Jack would surely understand. She mulled over the morning's events as she drove. Ted Carter had seemed friendly enough, but the other men assigned to the case were more recalcitrant towards her and Jack. She understood the attitude towards her; her class, her sex, and her status as an outsider would make many reluctant. Poor Jack though had done little to earn their ire but exist, and
It was supremely unfair.

It took only a few minutes to arrive in front of a familiar brown building, 'Harrods' writ large above the door. She stepped inside, stopping for just a moment as she always did. The salons and boutiques were the most luxurious aspect of her rise in fortunes, but the small girl from Collingwood was always breathless at the idea of entire department stores full of things she could buy.

"Miss Fisher!" greeted one of the employees. Georgina Dyer, she recalled, a pretty blonde girl who knew a lot about fashion and little about anything else.

"Hello, Georgina," said Phryne. "I have quite a bit to purchase today and little enough of it interesting."

"Of course," Georgina replied, head bobbing. The deference was a little wearing. "Any way I can help, let me know."

She had seen Jack's suitcases the previous afternoon; he had brought the bare minimum- one suit, two shirts, undergarments that had fuelled her imagination nearly as much as the sight of him freshly out of a bath- in order to make room for the case files.

"I have a guest who has lost their luggage," Phryne said. "I'll need Menswear to begin with."

Georgina nodded, making small talk as she led the way. Phryne nodded at the appropriate places, barely listening as she made her plans. Clothes for Jack- nothing excessive, but he'd certainly argue against it when she told him. She doubted he'd have time to purchase anything himself though, so he'd have to accept her generosity. If he was particularly insistent, she thought wryly, there were always a few...unconventional options for repayment.

It did not take her long to select her purchases. Two more suits, one in navy and one in a dark charcoal grey; four shirts, which was probably more than he strictly needed but the crisp whiteness looked so appealing; two casual outfits, which were (she hoped) to his tastes, as she had so rarely saw him dressed that way; several ties, and sufficient undergarments.

She hesitated over a particular tie. It was dark green with delicate gold embroidery and made from a heavy silk. Much finer than the other ties she had selected, and much more likely that Jack would reject it for it's extravagance. But it slid through her fingers in the most delicious way, and would pick up those gold flecks in his eyes perfectly. No, she couldn't leave it.

"Georgina?" she called. "Do you recall that blouse I have been contemplating?"

"The green one?" asked the girl.

"Yes, with gold trim," said Phryne. "Could you collect it for me? I have one more stop to make, so if you could arrange for these to be brought to the front I'd be appreciative."

She placed the tie with the rest of her purchases, letting her hand linger on it for just a second before resolutely heading towards her next goal. The men of Scotland Yard weren't going to be recalcitrant long.
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

In my rush to get chapters posted during rare quiet moments, I realised that I haven't thanked you all properly for reading, reviewing and kudosing this story. So thank you!

Jack sighed, surveying the wall before him. He had spent the lunch hour creating an approximate timeline of Melbourne's cases along one wall - details of each victim, a map, and lines of inquiry that had been exhausted once before, laid out for ease of reference. Ted had done the same on an adjoining wall for London's two victims before leaving to scoff a couple of sandwiches before the rest of the men assigned to the case returned.

"Still here?" asked Ted when he returned to the office. "I had hoped your eating habits had improved slightly since I left Australia, but Annie says they were probably worse. She insists you join us for dinner on Sunday. She's offered to make a lamb roast."

During their Melbourne days the Robinsons and Carters had often eaten together, and Annie Carter's lamb roasts were legendary. Jack had missed them almost as much as the friendship.

"I couldn't impose," he said.

The look Ted gave him brooked no argument.

"It's more than my life is worth to argue with the missus. You are welcome to bring Miss Fisher, if that's your concern."

Was it? Jack wasn't certain. Somehow he could not imagine their fledgling understanding extending to something as domestic as a dinner party, but perhaps it was history colouring his views and she'd think of it as nothing more than an invitation to dine.

"What time shall I arrive?"

"One, if it suits."

"Fine," agreed Jack. "You'll want to invite Miss Fisher yourself, though. I can't imagine she'd appreciate being an auxiliary guest."

"I don't think the woman's been an auxiliary anything in her life," Ted replied. "I'll speak with her this afternoon."

The three other officers on the investigation came into the room together. Jack had not quite settled his mind on them yet - they were by all reports good men with high closure rates and a dedication to the job, but none of them had been particularly welcoming. Understandable when they were interlopers who had failed to close the case three years earlier (or rather, he had failed. Miss Fisher was merely tarred by the same brush because she was his associate), but he liked to trust his men and he didn't trust them. At least he had Phryne, even if her more unorthodox methods would need to be reined in.

"That chit not back yet?" asked one of the men, a little too derisively for Jack's liking.
"Miss Fisher is not being paid, unlike the rest of us. If she uses the entire lunch hour that is her business."

He stole a look at the clock. She had another five minutes, but if she was late there would no doubt be grievances aired. He picked up one of the files and shifted through it, half-reading a report he had memorised years earlier. A commotion came from the corridor, and a moment later the door opened. In streamed Phryne, followed by two constables who had clearly been in the wrong place at the wrong time. One was carrying several boxes, the other a small table.

"I have brought reinforcements! Just there if you please, constable."

She quickly laid out the contents of the boxes- cakes, biscuits, sandwiches, fresh fruit, muffins, a quiche. She had even included china and cutlery.

"Nobody likes to starve, and I thought we might be here for some time. Please gentlemen, help yourselves."

She stepped away from the table with a flourish. Jack smiled; she certainly knew how to bring a theatrical air to proceedings, and the scheme was likely to endear her to the men. She crossed the room towards him, carrying a plate; her attention was drawn to the wall behind him.

"Oh Jack," she whispered as she pulled alongside.

No doubt it reminded her of of the Murdoch Foyle investigation. She studied the papers carefully, all frivolity gone.

"We've got nothing of consequence, as you can see Miss Fisher."

It was an admission of defeat.

"Well, we have food at least!" she said, returning to her usual indomitable self. She passed him the plate. "I thought you might have missed lunch."

"Thank you."

"The way to a man's case files is through his stomach," she quipped.

"I don't think that is quite the expression."

"Well, it worked on you. If I can get Detective Inspector Jack Robinson on my side, the whole of Scotland Yard should be a piece of cake."

And with that, she snagged a biscuit off his plate and popped it into her mouth before taking a seat. The men joined her at the table, all in considerably better spirits. Jack waited until their eyes were on him before speaking.

"As you know, I was one of the investigators on the case in Melbourne. I'll brief you on each murder, then we can examine things more thoroughly. I believe Miss Fisher has brought along a list of name that came up during the initial investigations, whether as suspects or witnesses. Any names duplicated in London's files are more likely to be coincidence than real leads, but it is a beginning."

"Another thing- if you are working on this case, there are two of you on the ground. Do not follow a hunch, do not clarify a witness statement, do not return to a crime scene to check a fact. The only clue we have about Bill Oscar's death is a comment he made in passing to his wife before his disappearance. I will not have you make yourself targets, and I will not lose leads. You may pair off or work more informally, but if you go out alone you are off this case. No negotiations. Miss Fisher,
you're with me."

There were some grumbles at this proclamation.

"Favouritism, sir?" queried one of the men- Baines, he thought. It sounded vaguely mutinous, and
Jack shut down the line of thinking decisively.

"Absolutely not, Sergeant. I am simply familiar enough with her tricks to not fall for them."

"I would be very disappointed if you knew all my tricks, Inspector," Phryne said coyly.

She would be the death of him one day.

"Nonetheless, Miss Fisher, I believe I have a fairer chance of withstanding them than the uninitiated.
Now, shall we get started?"

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It was very late by the time Jack and Phryne returned to the townhouse. They were met at the door by Joseph Abbott, a servant of about seventy that Phryne had fondly declared to be inherited along with the rest of the estate.

"Is Mother home yet?" Phryne asked, and Jack realised that he was so used to Miss Fisher's independence that he had not questioned who else was living at the townhouse.

"Not yes, Miss," said Abbott, taking their hats and coats. "I expect she'll be another hour at least; Lady Clarence's gatherings do tend to run late."

"Of course," said Miss Fisher. "I recall her mentioning it last night. We'll just have a light supper then, thank you. We're quite happy to fend for ourselves if you wish to return to Mrs. Abbot."

"Yes, Miss," nodded Abbott."I've set aside some cold meats and cheese in the larder, or there's a shepherd's pie if you prefer."

With that, the man was gone; disappearing was apparently a skill all good manservants shared. Phryne indicated for Jack to follow her and headed towards the back of the house, presumably where the kitchen was. As they passed various rooms Jack caught glimpses of the decor; far darker and heavier that Miss Fisher's home back in Melbourne, and he wondered how he had ever thought this as a place she had chosen herself. After a moment he voiced his consternation.

"Your mother, Miss Fisher?"

"Well, yes Jack. I did say 'we' had guest rooms."

He vaguely remembered the exchange, but the pronoun had been lost on him at the time. He had been far more occupied by the enormous task ahead of him and the full force of Phryne Fisher showing up at his crime scene.

"Really, Jack, she's an absolute pussy cat!"

"So is a tiger, Miss Fisher."
She shot him an indignant look before laughing, and Jack found himself chuckling too. They reached the kitchen; Phyrne continued towards the door on the far side.

"Cold plate or pie?" she asked, ducking inside the larder.

"Either," replied Jack. "Are there any other inhabitants I should be made aware of? A charging rhinoceros, perhaps?"

"Oh no, Father is still sorting out the legalities of his scheming," Phryne said airily, emerging with both the plate and the pie. "Could you just get...?"

She motioned towards a side board. Jack retrieved two plates and utensils, bringing them to the rough wooden table in the middle of the kitchen. Phryne was already perched on a stool and grinning at him. Sometimes, he thought, she was so beautiful that he forgot to breathe.

"My fork, inspector? Or should I use my fingers?" she teased, and the moment passed.

He sat down beside her and passed her a plate. They both eagerly tucked into the meal.

"There's no reason to worry about Mother, you know," said Phryne, her mouth full. A shocking display of poor manners, but neither one of them had eaten anything other than what she'd brought in since lunch. "She's far more worried about losing her position than a bit of scandal, and she'll look the other way for just about anything."

It was a harsh assessment, but from what Jack had gleaned probably not an entirely unfair one. A respectable young woman who had lost her own power by marrying a charmer with criminal streak and a penchant for heavy drinking, and had failed to protect her daughters from his heavy handed punishments. Her husband no doubt held the purse strings when it came to his hereditary position and toeing the line would be a matter of survival. Still, the happiness of her mother had been enough for Phryne to fly halfway around the world, and not many people inspired that level of devotion in Miss Fisher.

"Well, I'll try not to set the entire town into hysterics," Jack said lightly. "Just to be safe."

She gave him a half-smile, the one that was usually reserved for moments of particular vulnerability. He didn't see it often, but he had carefully catalogued it along with all the other expressions that made up Phryne Fisher.

The rest of their meal was far more pleasant. They steadfastly avoided discussing the case; fifteen hours at Scotland Yard as well as Phryne's all-nighter had been enough. Instead they talked about Melbourne and the people they had left behind. Phryne filled him in on her activities since arriving in London- renting the townhouse for her and her mother (who had refused to fully reconcile with her husband until he had resolved his latest plot- "Not that it means much," Phryne added. "We all know she'll go back, because she still loves him for some unfathomable reason." Jack was just glad to see that the older Fisher woman had some backbone.), an almost obscene amount of shopping, parties that had turned out to be painfully dull, and a distinct feeling that she had been at loose ends and was quite annoyed with herself for it.

"No Lady Adventuress Club?" teased Jack.

"Can you believe that I've missed our annual bake sale?" Phryne cried in despair.

"I wouldn't think a bake sale was quite your speed."

"You've never had Alice Watson's Victoria Sponge. She only makes one a year, for the sale, and I'm
surprised you’ve not had to investigate a murder afterwards. The competition to win it is fierce— I lost
a sharpshooting contest to Mac last year, though she was kind enough to share the spoils."

Ah, that sounded more like Miss Fisher.

They finished supper and headed upstairs to bed. Miss Fisher's room was across from his, and he
wondered if it had been by design. They paused before the doors, neither one willing to be parted
just yet but knowing sleep beckoned. Phryne reached up to smooth his lapel.

"Why, Jack, you have a bit of pie just here!" she said, grinning impishly at him. "I'm sure you have a
spare, being a meticulous man, and Abbott can launder it tomorrow."

He looked down— it was a barely noticeable spot, easily enough washed away before bed. Especially
as he had not brought a a spare suit, a fact that Miss Fisher had no doubt ascertained the previous
afternoon— the temptation to examine his open case would have been too great for her curious nature.
He expected more subtlety from her, if he was honest.

"Good night, Jack," she said, leaning up to kiss his cheek before withdrawing.

"Good night Phryne," he said and opened the guest room door.

Once inside, he removed his suit jacket and headed for the en suite to rinse away the stain. It only
took a moment to clean and hang his suit, but he brushed his teeth and washed his face before
returning to the bedroom. On his return, he noticed the suspiciously large pile of boxes left on the
bed. He moved closer and read the note:

*I hope these fit.*
-P x

He opened the first box and found a suit. Of course she had. No doubt there was an entire wardrobe
in his size before him, and one easily worth a month's salary. He groaned. It was entirely
inappropriate, and the last woman to buy him clothes was Rosie. His wardrobe had been a source of
some contention at one point, near the end when they no longer cared to argue about anything else.
Phryne couldn't be expected to know that though, and her generosity of spirit towards her friends
was not new information. Accepting such a gift was absolutely out of the question, but it was certain
to be well meant. He'd address it in the morning, after both of them had slept.

There was a knock at the door.

"Nightcap?" Phryne asked when he opened the door, raising two tumblers of whiskey as an offering.

Nodding, he stepped aside to grant her access. Her face was free from make-up and she wore a black
silk robe; it was very much how she looked the night of the Pandarus— intimate and without facade—
an image that had haunted his dreams of thwarted confessions.

"I couldn't sleep," she admitted, walking over to the bed to play with the boxes. Her fingers trailed
across one. "I saw your valise yesterday." 

He wasn't certain if she meant it as an explanation or a justification, but both her voice and touch
were hesitant and he found that he did not have it in him to argue and cajole.

"It's fine. Thank you."

She sat the whiskey on the bedside table and began to unbox the clothes. She hung them neatly and
with care, and Jack was relieved to discover that the items were all simple and tasteful. No cravats, at
least. He joined her in clearing the bed, and when they finished she sat atop the quilt and patted beside her with a sultry grin.

He shook his head, and she pouted.

"I really don't think my pride could handle you falling asleep."

Her laughter was interrupted by a yawn, and she smiled sheepishly.

"I would argue the point, but you are probably right. Walk me home at least?"

"By 'home' you mean the the room across the corridor?"

"Precisely. It's an arduous journey without company."

"I'm sure it's a real hardship," he said, but he gallantly offered his arm to escort her.

"Are you certain that I can't tempt you, just a little?" she asked when they reached her door.

She bit her bottom lip and looked up at him through lowered eyelashes. Flirtatious but not truly seductive, enough to confirm her exhaustion. Not the circumstances she deserved.

"I think I've made my intentions towards you very clear. A good night kiss will suffice for now."

"Are your intentions... honourable, Inspector Robinson?"

She reached up to adjust the collar of his shirt, and he wondered why she seemed fixated on the topic.

"Oh yes, a gentleman always places a lady's needs before his own," he said, lowering his voice and leaning forward to whisper into her ear. "And one day, Miss Fisher, I intend to find out just how loudly I can make you scream."

Her breath hitched and he felt a shiver run through her body as she pressed against him. She was intoxicating and mesmerising, and at least for that moment she desired him. It was enough.

He kissed her, slow and languid and with the full knowledge that they had plenty of time to follow through.

"Good night, Miss Fisher."

"Until tomorrow, Jack. And no longer or I'll find myself quite put out."
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

I really struggled reconciling what we canonically know about Phryne's mother and crafting a sympathetic character from Phryne's point of view. The Margaret/Jack conversation over breakfast will be touched on, eventually; I have plans for a collection of one shots from the point of view of secondary characters throughout the story posted as a separate fic. I want to keep it roughly chronological though, so I have to finish the first one before I post Margaret's and who knows when that will be.

Also, this is probably about as smutty as this story will get. I've yet to write a sex scene that I'm actually satisfied with, so expect a lot of fade-to-blacking and passing references. Sorry.

The second day of investigations was no more productive than the first- it was hours of comparing notes, going over the lab results from the most recent murder, and dividing potential leads amongst investigators. Too much time had been spent on the latter, in Phryne's opinion. The men were more welcoming then they had been the day before, but their presence opened every detail to debate and discussion.

"Too many cooks spoil the broth," Phryne muttered under her breath at one point, and Ted Carter had given her a sympathetic smile.

She found that she quite liked the man, especially after he had invited her to dinner. Lost in grisly details of murder, she had struggled with an appropriately delicate way to decline. He sensed her discomfit and quickly clarified.

"Sunday dinner. With my wife. And children. And Inspector Robinson, if we can tear Jack away from work long enough."

"Oh, sufficiently delicious food would lure Jack just about anywhere," she had laughed. "I once found him in my closet eating a cottage pie with his fingers."

"A gross exaggeration, Miss Fisher," Jack scolded without looking away from the papers in front of him. "It was a stake out, you were also in said closet- indeed, I believe it was your idea, and I didn't actually eat any of the pie because the burglar chose that moment to mount an assault on your emeralds."

"That will be a yes, then?" Ted confirmed.

"We'll look forward to it."

Yes, she liked him very much. A sort of ally in her efforts to bolster Jack; despite their bantering and his newfound (and much appreciated) boldness, she could not quite shake the feeling that these murders were weighing on him. She simply would not allow a man as good as him wallow in the past, especially when the future held so much promise.

The only good to be found in their lack of leads was that they returned to the townhouse in time for
dinner. Unfortunately, Margaret Fisher was also dining at home. It was not her mother's first time meeting Jack—Phryne had come down the breakfast that morning and found them in the midst of some awkward conversation they declined to continue once she joined them—but it was not a meeting that Phryne anticipated with any great relish.

She loved her mother, but she was not blind to the woman's faults. She had chosen love over merit, security over self-respect. She chose to remain ignorant of her husband's many indiscretions, and taken the role of martyr one too many times for there to be any daughterly deference remaining. But she had also done her best to make her daughters' childhoods happy, and had cultivated Phryne’s free spirit even as her husband and the world tried to break it. She had taught Phryne to savour the pleasures of life, to appreciate art and music and beauty in any place she could find it.

The meal was delicious and far easier than Phryne had expected. Her mother held court as she often did, dictating and proclaiming and steering the conversation to matters that were to her interests, but it was pleasant enough. She did not make any scathing remarks on Jack's position, choosing instead to present (heavily sanitised, in Phryne's view) stories of Phryne's childhood and her marriage to the Baron.

When her attention was momentarily distracted by Abbott bringing in dessert, Jack—serious, courteous Jack—caught Phryne's eye and mouthed one word: "Steamroller."

She managed to cover her laughter with a cough. Lady Richmond paid no notice.

After dinner they retired to the library under the pretense of continuing work. Phryne poured them both a drink, then draped herself against the chaise lounge. Jack had taken up residence on the other end. She raised her glass in a toast.

"And now you know my secret, Jack. I am quite a bit like my mother, despite my very best efforts."

"I think you are more like your Aunt Prudence," he said, surprising her.

"That might just be worse!" she laughed.

"Your values are different, I grant you. But you show the same fierce loyalty to those you love and those who need you most. It's one of your most admirable traits, and the first hint I had that you were not a completely frivolous socialite with a flair for the dramatic."

And which do you think you are, Jack Robinson—needed or needing? she thought, watching his hands fiddle with the tumbler he held.

She had spent most of the day resisting the thrill as she remembered the timbre of his voice as he promised to make her scream. It was this damn celibacy; it was completely unnatural. But it had seemed that whatever it was she shared with Jack was so close that she hadn't sought out a lover since Guido Cabone (and Jack had loomed large over those proceedings), then this ridiculous trip with her father. Months. No wonder she felt like a lustful teenager.

"Sorry Miss, but a telegram arrived for you this afternoon," said Abbott from the doorway.

Dear Joseph Abbott had been the first friendly face Phryne had seen when they had moved to England during the war; he was old then and older now, and she knew his leg gave him grief in the evenings. She sprung up and took the proffered envelope.

"It's from Mac!" Phryne exclaimed, settling back on the chaise. "How very unlike her."

She read it quickly.
Mac was the most economical telegram writer Phryne knew; no word was left unconsidered, and vowels were generally considered an indulgence. She might have just as well begun the message with HEED MY WORDS. Phryne laughed.

"It seems Melbourne has gone to Hell without you, Jack," she said, holding the telegram towards him. He shifted closer. "And my best friend is attempting to lure you back."

"Villainy!" he murmured, right beside her now.

His attention was not on the paper in her hand.

"Mmm," Phryne murmured. "Unfortunately for her, I don't give up on things I desire so readily as that."

"And as a man of my word I have far too many things to do here," he agreed.

"I seem to recall a promise to... what was it? Make me scream?"

"An ambition best left for another time," he said huskily, and Phryne briefly considered screaming in frustration. Then his lips were on her neck and her voice in her ear. "With plans that exacting, it's always best to prepare thoroughly and investigate all angles before embarking."

She pulled back just long enough to give him a wicked grin.

"Come on Jack, where is your sense of adventure?"

"I believe I left it in my other suit."

"How very careless," she scolded, running her hand along the inside of his thigh. "But perhaps I could... help you find it?"

He was on the edge of the precipice. A single word or gesture by her and he would tumble, she was certain of it. She stayed still, not even daring to breath. He would fall with her by his own free will.

Jack's hand clamped down on hers.

"Upstairs, Miss Fisher. I'll give you a two minute head start, for decorum's sake."

She went.

Phryne had just enough time to insert her diaphragm and arrange herself alluringly against the pillows before he entered the room. He did not head immediately to her, choosing to examine the room itself. Removed his jacket and tie, placing it on the back of a chair. Picked up a piece of jewelry from her vanity and rolled it between his fingers. Trailed a hand along a shelf, intently studying the books she had been reading.

"Jesus, Jack. I can appreciate a slow burn, but at this rate I might just spontaneously combust."

The smile he gave her was smug. The bastard was enjoying this. She was too, admittedly, but she wouldn't give him the pleasure of confessing it. Instead she reached up, loosening the top button of her blouse.
"At least examine the intriguing evidence over here," she purred. "It would be a real shame to miss a vital clue because you are captivated by shiny trinkets."

"That would never do," agreed Jack.

It took him two strides to reach the bed. He placed a hand—large and strong and honest—on her buttons, but waited for the slight nod of her head before undoing them. The silk blouse slid from her shoulders, replaced by his soft lips against her skin. Exquisite. She closed her eyes and sank against the pillows, reveling in the sensations.

Kisses down her clavicle, slow and methodical like the man who gave them.

Skirt removed without breaking away from his examination of her shoulder, the only acknowledgement that she hadn't redonned her knickers the feel of his lips moving into a smile.

An unexpected nip at her skin over her ribs that makes her squeal and laugh.

The brush of his hair—unbelievably soft—against her torso as he moved lower, ending with some positively sinful ministrations to the curve of her hip.

It was thorough, but too slow. She needed more. Never one to delay her gratitude, she trailed her own fingers up her thigh to her wet folds as she sought relief. There was a disapproving groan from Jack and he removed her hand, holding it with only his thumb and forefinger—enough to make his intentions clear, not enough to truly restrain her. A tender consideration that was almost enough to make her forget herself. She opened her eyes.

"You are hindering my investigation, Miss Fisher."

His words, chiding and amused, rumbled across her skin, and she arched into him.

"I'm not hindering, merely... helping you with your inquiries," she retorted, slightly breathless.

The dark smoulder he gave her said enough. Fine, if that was his game than she'd play it. He'd pay for it later; she had a few interesting games of her own, and oh how she wanted to play all of them. Then his mouth was back on her and she lost all reason.

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The next morning she replied to Mac's telegram.

    MY INSPIR FIRMLY ENSCONCED HERE STOP
    SORRY TO DISAPPOINT STOP
    TRY NOT TO EXACT INTERESTING REVENGES ON USELESS MEN STOP
    WILL COME HOME WHEN ABLE
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

Oh man, this has been... an ordeal. First the chapter was hijacked by a Tumblr post, then it decided to split itself in an odd place and wreak all sorts of havoc, then I realised with a chapter 95% done that the timeline had snagged itself. I'm pretty sure your kind reviews were the only thing stopping me from chucking the dodgy laptop out the window by the end of it. Funnily enough several other topics recently discussed on Tumblr are also present, but those are a complete coincidence.

"Jack?"

He was drowning in her; her voice, her scent, the breathy little moan when he kissed just the right place. The taste of her lips and the feel of her skin, glistening with sweat as she came undone. The way she pulled him closer, as desperate to feel him as he was to feel her. He was drowning, but he never wanted to resurface.

"Jack?" came her voice again, a little more insistent.

He opened his eyes. Blinked twice at the morning sun. She was watching him, as beguiling as ever and still utterly naked. He had fallen asleep in his suit.

"How did we have such a marvelous evening and not get you out of these clothes?" she asked, smirking as she toyed with the button on his shirt. 

_Because I didn't know if you'd be here in the morning and I needed a reason to make you stay._

"Never show your hand on the first round," he answered flippantly.

"I hate card games. Tedious waste of time. I think I'll make an exception for you though; you are a magnificent card player."

She rolled over, straddling his hips. He reached up to steady her.

"Uh-uh," she corrected, moving his hands above his head. "It's my turn to be the dealer."

It was simultaneously the most erotic and the most ridiculous thing ever said to him. She seemed equally torn, and started to laugh.

"That was not a metaphor that stretched well," she admitted.

"It really wasn't," Jack replied, feeling his lips quirk. "I suppose I can forgive you."

"How gracious."

She undressed him as she talked, hands roaming. She found a particularly sensitive spot and he jerked, laughing as he did so.

"Jack, are you _ticklish_?"
The glint in her eyes was terrifying.

"Phryne..." he warned, but it was too late.

"You are! Jack Robinson is ticklish. Oh, the things I can do with this information."

Her hands nimbly sought out the places that elicited the biggest reaction, her gaze utterly ruthless.

"Mercy!" he called out, laughing.

His writhing knocked her off balance, bringing her flush against him. Phryne stopped, her face suddenly serious.

"What is it?"

He tried to quell the niggling unease by brushing a strand of hair from her face.

"I don't think I've ever seen you smile like that before," she said, oddly quiet. "You should."

He kissed her.

It was completely different than the night before. The night had been about proving himself, to her and to himself; if it fell at the first hurdle it would not be through lack of effort. He had made that mistake once before. The morning was a playful meeting of equals, no less pleasurable for it's lack of finesse. To have had both was beyond his imaginings.

Afterwards, they lay tangled in each other. He brushed a kiss against her hair; it was as glossy and soft as he remembered. She traced figures across his torso, intent in her apparent effort to memorise it.

"I love you."

He hadn't meant to say it; he had always been so careful of assuring Rosie, even on the dark days when they both knew he didn't have the love to spare, that his mouth had spewed the words before he could remember that such assurances were unwelcome in these circumstances. Thankfully Phryne was distracted by her continued examination of his body and hadn't seemed to hear.

They stayed there for more than an hour, silent except for Phryne's occasional quiet query. Neither seemed inclined to move and disturb the sanctity of the boudoir.

"We have a dinner to get ready for," Jack eventually reminded her.

She groaned.

"I don't suppose thoroughly ravished and completely exhausted is a reason not to go?"

He had tried so hard not to ask anything of her.

"I'll make your excuses," he said.

She sat up, giving him a look he couldn't identify.

"Jack, I am teasing. While I certainly wouldn't _object_ to spending the entire day in mutual ravishment, I'm quite eager to make the acquaintance of your friends. I'm sure we'll get along swimmingly, and with any luck I'll learn some truly scandalous details."

"Hardly scandalous," he said. "Ted will talk about work, and there will be no surprises there. Annie is sweetly domestic and terrifyingly efficient, but not prone to gossip."
"Well, not with you Jack. The bonds of womanhood do come with certain perks."

"Not prone to gossip," he reiterated. "It used to irritate Rosie to no end. Then they have a daughter who had, the last time I saw her, all the makings of a modern woman. There's also an infant son I've not met but is, I'm certain, much the same as all infants and perfectly charming."

Her nose wrinkled.

"In small doses," he added. "If we don't dress now, we'll never make it in time."

She nibbled his ear.

"Surely we can be a little late?"

It was his turn to groan.

"You will ruin me."

"Is that a yes?"

"That is a no, Miss Fisher. I am aware that you are not used to the word, but do your best."

She gave her most charming pout, the one that he knew often had men scrambling to do her bidding.

"If you gave in, I could do my worst and that's so much more fun for everyone."

She was draped across him. He brushed a hand up the length of her torso.

"I knew you'd see it my way," she purred.

He tickled.

"Jack!" she squealed, jumping from the bed. She attempted a scolding glare, but was largely unsuccessful. "That was uncalled for."

"That was absolutely called for if I wanted to get out of this bed," he countered, standing up. "I am going for a bath. I suggest you do the same."

Exiting quickly, he deliberately did not look back. He heard her huff as she flopped back onto the bed and smirked.

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Forty five minutes later, Jack was bathed and shaved and nearly dressed. The morning had been uncomplicated, despite his mercifully unnoticed blunder and the brief moment it seemed she was looking to bolt. He had braced for the latter, but Phryne had once more slipped past his defenses before he noticed. He caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror, startled at the open grin he saw.

There was a knock on the door.

"Yes?" he called out.

It opened and Phryne slipped inside, impeccably turned out in a green blouse and cream skirt. How she managed it faster than he did was a mystery for the ages. She spotted the tie in his hand, and shook her head.
"Not that one," she said, taking it from his hands and moving towards his chest of drawers. She made a selection. "This one is better. It suits your eyes."

Jack just shook his head. She had purchased both of those ties, and either one was suitable for a Sunday dinner with friends. As she sidled over to place it around his neck, he wrapped his arms round her waist and pulled her close. The rich laughter that came surprised him; he had been doing that a lot recently, after what seemed like years of nothing but stoic silence and wry chuckles.

"What is your fascination with my ties?" he asked.

"It's very simple," she said, pressing even closer. "When it's tied just so-" it was a perfect knot "you are the honourable Inspector Robinson in the pursuit of justice."

The briefest of kisses.

"If I loosen it just a little-" she obligingly did so. "you are Jack Robinson, who plays draughts and quotes Shakespeare."

Her kiss lingered.

"And if I loosen it completely, you are the Jack that has come undone by my hand."

He kissed her this time. After a moment she pulled back, eyes wanton and the tiniest hint of a smile at the edges of her mouth. She allowed the tie to slip from her fingers, laid her palm against his chest. When she spoke, her voice was throaty.

"What a very many men you are, Jack. And all of them delightful."

Well, perhaps they could be a little late.
Chapter Notes

Before this starts, I just want to say a massive thank you to all the readers and especially the ones who take the time to comment. I am absolutely awful at replying; I don't want to sound repetitive, so I start with the best of intentions but end with half-written comments that are inevitably lost before I actually post them. It's terrible. But I am genuinely grateful for each and every one of them, and each and every one of you. And now that I have waxed lyrical, Phryne and Jack can finally have a Sunday dinner (even if it is Thursday).

They were not late, a fact that Phryne graciously did not point out was due to her excellent driving. They even had time for her to stop and send her telegram to Mac.

She had woken that morning with the unnerving feeling there was an underappreciated distinction between pleasure and happiness, and that it had been quite awhile since she'd had both. Wrapped in the quiet of her bed and watching Jack sleep, she had loathed the idea of getting up; her assignations often ended with the intrusions of the real world. It was a silly and far more sentimental indulgence than she usually allowed herself, but the idea of staying in bed all day had tugged at her until she said as much. She saw Jack's face- resigned, as if he expected it- when she suggested it and gotten over her trepedition.

They had left the bedroom without the entire thing collapsing. She was not Cinderella, there was no fairy godmother, and her vehicle had not turned back into a pumpkin at midnight. Jack was still Jack; she was still Phryne. He tutted at her driving and she flirted in an effort to put him off-balance. Consummation had not been a death knell for their partnership.

The Carters lived in a perfectly boring terrace on the outer edges of the city. Brown bricks, small garden, a child's ball left out. It was comfortable, much like the man who lived there.

Jack offered his arm when they exited the vehicle, and she couldn't help grinning as she took it.

The door was answered by a woman in her mid-thirties who could have passed for a model of domestic happiness. She reminded Phryne a bit of Rosie, until she smiled. The smile was enormous and welcoming.

"Jack!" she exclaimed, clasping him tightly. "It's so lovely to see you. And you must be Miss Fisher. Pleasure."

She reached out to shake Phryne's hand.

"Call me Phryne, please."

"Only if you call me Annie," the woman said amicably. "Come in! Ted's in the parlour having a drink before dinner, so I'll take you through and finish dishing up."

Annie led them into the house, which was much like the outside- uninspired but comfortable, clean and neat. It was nice, if not to Phryne's taste.
"Rosie wrote of your divorce at Christmas," said Annie over her shoulder. "We were all very surprised, though I suppose the announcement of her engagement only a few months later went some way to explaining it."

Phryne liked Mrs. Carter already. The Christmas letter was an interesting tidbit- Phryne had never given much thought to the timing of Jack's divorce; he was married and then he wasn't, and certainly hadn't shared that information with her before he felt was necessary.

"How is her fiance?" Annie asked.

Rosie must not have written about Sidney's business dealings then. Phryne couldn't blame her; while the night on the Pandarus seemed a lifetime ago, it had only been a few months. The exact charges were still being determined when she had left Australia; no doubt revisiting the topic with a distant friend was not high on Rosie's list of priorities. It wasn't her story to tell though.

"The engagement was called off," Jack said, no doubt thinking the same thing.

"I gather her fiance lacked the moral fibre she required from a husband," Phryne added.

Annie nodded. Phryne was left with the distinction impression she was contemplating this information from several angles. They reached the parlour, where Ted was reading a book. Annie excused herself, and the three remaining adults made polite small talk until they were called to the table.

Dinner conversation was delightful. Annie had met Ted through her work at a convalescent hospital during the war, and Jack as well when he went to visit his brother Daniel. The Carters had settled in England initially, but had eventually moved back to Australia to care for Ted's mother; two years later they had moved back for a variety of reasons. Phryne and Annie spent a fair amount of time comparing the two countries, each deciding their country of birth was by far the clear winner. Annie had a blunt sense of humour that reminded Phryne of Mac, and there was quite a bit of laughter as they ate. Then they moved on to children- the Carters' daughter Peggy was by all accounts a brawling nightmare, though she was beautifully behaved at the dinner table. The son Jimmy, who was mercifully napping, had recently mastered the word "help" which proved invaluable as he was constantly climbing on to the furniture and in need of rescue. Phryne talked about Jane's European tour, and how annoyed she was that her foster daughter had barely settled back in school before this England trip had arisen.

"If I'd known, I would have had her stay and collected her myself," Phryne said. "Still, she was glad to be back in Melbourne. She's to spend holidays with my Aunt Prudence until I return, and has the rest of the family at her disposal if anything arises."

"And I left her the contact details for the commissioner for serious matters," Jack added absently.

Phryne looked at him in surprise. That was an unexpected tidbit of information. He caught her look and gave a small smile, the one he usually used when he surprised her.

"You forget, Miss Fisher, that I vouched for your suitability as a guardian. It would be absolutely terrible for my reputation if any harm befell her."

She hadn't forgotten his assistance in bringing Jane into her life. It occurred to her that she had never thanked him properly. She slipped her hand on to his knee and gave it a gentle squeeze before pulling away.

At the mention of the commissioner, Ted and Jack veered on to the topic of officers they had known
and just who had and had not risen up the ranks. Her inspector was far less reserved in this setting, and she realised that he had so firmly entered her sphere that she had never questioned what his looked like. Perhaps when they got back home they could clear up the matter.

After the dishes were cleared, the girl left to play outdoors and the adults went back to the parlour for another drink. Annie put on a record that Phryne hadn't heard, and they spent the next hour talking about music and art. Annie was surprisingly well-versed on the topics, and Phryne decided the woman was positively wasted running a household. As the first record ended a cry was heard from upstairs, and Annie went to collect the baby.

Jimmy was, to Phryne's eye, much like any other child of the age. Affectionate and sweet and not at all appealing to her. She continued her conversation with Ted. Jack however seemed smitten, pulling faces to get the boy to laugh. She remembered the slight tightness around his eyes when she asked him if he and Rosie had ever had children, back when they had first met. It was a shame they hadn't, really, even though it would have set him on so different a path that Phryne doubted she would have ever met him. Annie seemed to have the same thought, as Phryne saw her watching Jack.

"You and Rosie never did, in the end?"

Jack shook his head.

"She never fell."

Phryne detected a hint of regret in his voice.

"Perhaps it's not too late?" Annie asked, casting a brief glance to where Phryne stood.

"Perhaps."

A feeling of claustrophobia suffocated her. All the assurance she felt that he would not ask her to change was shaken with one word; naturally he would consider marriage and children the end point of whatever they had started. He was progressive in so many ways, but he still valued traditional conventions- she'd seen it on that first full day, when he spoke of his time with Rosie. And again that very morning; she had felt rather than heard his muttered admission of love, and had half-convinced herself that it had been her imagination. Her enjoyment of the afternoon was thoroughly dampened, though she managed to muster fake enthusiasm until it was time to leave.

"Are you alright?" Jack asked as they reached the end of the Carters' street. "You seem quiet. It's almost as unnerving as repentant."

"I saw you speaking with Annie. You know I can't- I won't..." she trailed off.

"Children?"

She nodded, her eyes firmly on the road. She tried to ignore the threat of tears; the idea that they might be compatible in so many ways and so far apart on the ones that mattered was more than she could contemplate. *The intrusion of the real world,* she thought bitterly. *Perhaps we should have stayed in bed after all.*

"I know, and I would never ask. I'm quite happy to dote on other people's children nowadays. But that's hardly something you can tell a happy new mother."

Oh. Of course he thought about it.

"Other than the toddling terror, did you enjoy yourself?"
"Very much," said Phryne honestly.

They drove in silence for a few minutes, and Phryne played over the dinner in her mind. Something had been odd about the conversations, and her mind finally caught on the small detail.

"Jack? I thought you said that your brother died at Ypres?"

"When did I say that?"

"Not long after we met. We were talking about my work with the ambulance unit, and you mentioned it."

"No, he was wounded at Ypres. He died of complications six months later."

She hummed.

"Phryne," he warned. "I can see your mind working. I can present you with the paperwork to prove it."

Which was a strikingly odd thing to say. She thought over information she had gathered over the course of their friendship; far better German than French, an aversion to discussing specifics, some seeming familiarity with men in positions of influence. Intelligence work, perhaps.

Jack sighed.

"I am not discussing my service record. Rosie used to try to wheedle information out about the specifics, and when I declined decided that I must be a secret hero sworn to secrecy. It was all grunt work, and my reluctance was entirely for reasons that I am sure you can appreciate. Now drop the matter."

Well, she certainly didn't want to be a Rosie. It was odd though. Whatever it was, Annie and Ted seemed to be aware. Perhaps Annie herself hadn't always been stuck in a life of domestic drudgery. Still, she had to respect Jack's wishes on the matter.

"What matter?" Phryne asked, innocently. "I was just thinking of the other reason I am fascinated with your ties."

"Which is?"

She bit her bottom lip and turned to cast an appreciative eye up and down his body.

"If we get back to the house, I can show you."

He didn't utter a single word against her driving the whole way back.
"Will you be attending the dinner on Wednesday?" Margaret Fisher asked.

Jack looked up from his breakfast plate and blinked. He hadn't heard of any dinner.

"Mother!" Phryne exclaimed, entering the room as if she had been waiting for her cue. "I've already told you- Jack works for a living, a feat most of your guests would be unable to fathom, never mind achieve. He'll be far too busy. And since I'm assisting him on his case, I suppose that I'll have to decline after all. Tragic, but the good of many trumps the desires of a few."

Margaret's face shared the same steely sort of determination that Phryne's often had when she was set on getting her way no matter the argument, Jack noted with amusement. Perhaps she was like her mother, as she had so mournfully proclaimed.

"You will be attending, Phryne. It's essential."

Phryne looked as if she were planning a counter-attack when they were interrupted by the butler entering.

"Breakfast, Miss Fisher?"

"No, thank you Mr. Abbott. I'm just looking for my hat- the one with the peacock feathers? Have you seen it?"

"No, Miss."

"I really do miss Dot," Phryne sighed, clearly distracted by her quest to find the missing millinery. "Still, busy day ahead of us! I expect it will be late nights all week."

"Not on Wednesday," Margaret said firmly. "You know how much will be riding on this dinner."

"You are so dramatic, Mother!" Phryne exclaimed, and Jack snorted. She glared at him. "I'm just not available."

"Miss Fisher, I do believe that we can spare you for a few hours," Jack said, mostly for the amusement of seeing her indignant stare.

"See, Phryne? Even the inspector agrees that you should attend. I've invited some truly charming men."

Suddenly, Jack felt like his amusement had backfired. Phryne just looked smug.

"Very well," conceded Phryne. "I'll have to come and find my own diversions then."

Phryne leaned over and snatched a piece of toast from his plate. Jack raised an eyebrow, pointedly ignoring the physical proximity of her upper body.
"I thought you didn't want breakfast, Miss Fisher?" he chided.

She grinned wildly, then took a deliberate bite.

"Toast tax. All guests are expected to pay. Especially the treacherous ones."

Which actually raised an issue he had been meaning to address. It might be acceptable to have unmarried guests for months at a time with little speculation in her circles, but it would raise questions in his. And his pride disliked the notion of accepting her hospitality without contributing.

"On that note-"

"Absolutely not, Jack," she said, ahead of him as usual. "You are a guest, not a lodger. Now finish eating or I'll leave you behind. Ah, there's my hat!"

Grabbing the offending item, she left the room with the same intensity as she had entered.

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When they returned to the townhouse that evening, Phryne headed directly to the library. They had spent yet another day shifting through paperwork, as they didn't have a single live lead- no witnesses, no fingerprints, no notable forensic findings. The only progress, if you could call it that, was that all post offices had been instructed to immediately telephone Scotland Yard if there were letters addressed to the police; if the initial letters had been from the killer, they might be able to trace the origins of subsequent letters more easily at a point before they reached the offices. They hadn't had a moment alone to discuss the dinner party; Jack had not been pleased by Phryne's sudden concession when other men had been mentioned, though he had resigned himself to the fact that they were an inevitability. He hoped that she would at least be subtle about it, but perhaps her failure to mention the dinner party completely had been just that.

"Avoiding your mother, Miss Fisher?" Jack asked as they entered the room.

She grabbed a book, barely stopping to glance at the title, and settled on the lounge.

"Do I ever avoid things?" she asked archly over her novel.

"Never, I'm sure."

She rolled her eyes.

"She committed me to this blasted party before you were in the country, and she's right that I should be there. I didn't appreciate your attempts to throw me to the wolves though- 'we can spare you for a few hours', honestly!" she mimicked, rolling her eyes again. "It would be in poor taste to hope for a murder, but perhaps a burglary requiring my expertise will arise and spare me the hassle."

Jack just laughed, picking up a book of his own and settling on the opposite end of the chaise. After a few minutes he felt her foot creep into his lap, and he brushed her ankle without looking away from the words on the page. The most surprising thing about Phryne, he reflected, was how very tactile she was. Perhaps it shouldn't have been surprising- she had never been shy about extolling the virtues of sexual or sensual pleasures- but every deliberate brush of her hand, every press of her leg, was a pleasant shock to his system.

They sat together for awhile- occasionally Jack's hand would skitter up her leg towards her knee or
she'd skim her foot across his thigh, but they were absorbed in their reading material. It was not domestic- such a moniker would no doubt have Phryne shuddering in horror- but... comfortable. Natural, perhaps, as if they had been doing it for years instead of days.

There was a knock at the door. Phryne moved quickly, tucking her feet beneath her and straightening her clothes.

"Come in," she called.

Abbott came in with a tray carrying tea and several envelopes.

"I thought you might be in need of a drink, Miss," he said.

"You are an absolute saint, Abbott, thank you."

Jack stood to take the tray, but Abbott walked past him to place it on the table before stiffly leaving the room. Jack stood in the middle of the library, feeling rather like a naughty child being reprimanded for reasons that were unclear.

"I believe you have gravely offended my butler," Phryne laughed, eyes dancing in amusement.

"I've seen you do the exact same thing!"

"You're a guest. Besides, nobody expects me to follow the rules."

Jack shook his head and sat down, then poured them two cups of tea. Phryne opened the first envelope, quickly skimming it's contents.

"Oh, Guy and Isabella are having an engagement party next week!"

Jack had not been impressed by Phryne's cousin. The treatment of his brother, while not entirely unexpected- Jack had, in fact, seen much worse- had stood in stark contrast to the love from Prudence and Phryne. If he had ever been in doubt of the depths of Miss Fisher's heart, they had been laid to rest when he saw her with Arthur. His recent death had been hard on her.

"What was the party at your aunt's then?" he asked, taking a sip of tea.

"Oh, they've called off and repledged their troth three times since then," Phryne said flippantly.

"They are utterly devoted but extremely fickle, and I shudder to think what will happen if they ever make it to the altar. Paragons of modern marriage, those two."

Right. Jack resumed reading, trying very hard not to waste any more thought on Phryne's cousin, his very forthright fiancee, or the types of parties they threw. And he most definitely did not think about what would have happened if Murdoch Foyle hadn't emerged the night of their first engagement party- fresh from the divorce court, one gaudy night had seemed like a lifeline thrown at him. It would have no doubt been a mistake- it ran counter to both his feelings and his morals- but he had fantasised about it many times since. Having had Phryne, the fantasies would no doubt be far more detailed and distracting. And he was reading. A book. A... novel? He glanced down. No, a poetry collection. Of course. He was reading a collection of poetry and not thinking of Cleopatra.

"It's from Dot, how lovely!"

Startled by the interruption, he lowered his book to look. Phryne was carefully studying the return address on the envelope she held.
"Jack, this bungalow they've rented..."

"Yes?"

"You wouldn't happen to know who owns it, do you?"

Her ability to find out the strangest things never failed to surprise him. It had seemed serendipitous at the time- Hugh had been looking for somewhere to rent, and Jack had needed someone to look after the house. Besides, it had been bought and renovated just before his marriage with the intention of filling it with happiness, and had been devoid of it for far too long. Perhaps he'd rent a flat when he returned to Melbourne; he had always meant to and never found the time.

"Why do you ask?"

"No reason. I suspect their landlord is a pushover who gave it to them at the lowest possible price without being insulting."

"Slightly below that," he said. "The piece of mind of reliable tenants while he's abroad is worth it."

"And contributing to their house savings is simply coincidence, is it?"

Jack lips quirked. "I suppose you'd have to ask him directly."

"For someone who scolded me for helping Hugh along, you are awfully soft on him yourself," she said.

It sounded like she was teasing him, but the look in her eyes was gentle and affectionate.

"He's a good man, and he might just have it in him to be a great one with the right guidance."

He couldn't help thinking of his own mentor, and his subsequent fall from grace.

"Especially with Dot by his side," Phryne added, smiling at him. It was stunning how quickly the right word from her could cheer him. "So shall we see what Mrs. Collins has to say?"

She opened the envelope, pulling out the three page letter. She read it to herself, and Jack picked up his book again.

"Oh, Dot's mentioned you! Here- 'The inspector has gone to London for a case, and Hugh and I are very worried. Have you seen him? It would reassure us to know that he had a friend. Do keep an eye out, and perhaps feed him if necessary.'" Phryne chuckled. She shifted to the seat beside him, then looked up through her lashes. "Does everybody you meet try to fatten you up, Jack? You really ought to be less transparent."

"Miss Fisher, are you attempting to seduce me yet again?" he asked in mock horror, barely suppressing a laugh.

"Is it working?"

"It implies that there is a time when I am not completely beguiled by you, so you're beginning with a false premise."

"Excellent answer, inspector!" she said, dropping the seductive pose. "And one you'll be liberally rewarded for, once I've finished with these letters."

"You're incorrigible."
"How are the happy newlyweds?" Jack asked, looking down at her dark hair with all pretense of reading gone.

"What makes you think they're happy?" Phryne said. "Hugh seems to have gotten it into his head that converting to Catholicism means that his family gets precedence for Sunday meals. Dot's quite cross about it, actually."

"Well," Jack said, shifting slightly to point to the last page. "Dot's signed Mrs. Dorothy Collins so large it takes up half the sheet. She mustn't be that cross."

Phryne laughed again.

"How very astute, inspector. Full marks to you."

"It is my job," he replied.

"Well, they are having a lovely time. Dot's explanation for not staying at Wardlow makes perfect sense, really, though she's over several times a week to help Mr. Butler. And it sounds like they have almost reached a treaty on the work situation; I don't know why Hugh's been so pig-headed about the whole thing."

Jack had a pretty good idea, actually. He'd never seen his constable as shaken as the night of the Fletcher and Sanderson arrests- he had stopped by the station after dropping Rosie off at her sister's, unable to face home but unwilling to disturb Miss Fisher at such an hour. Hugh had been sitting in Jack's office with a glass of whiskey and a stunned look. When he'd seen Jack he had blustered and apologised for the intrusion, but Jack had just taken a second glass and poured himself a drink. 'Go home Collins. Sleep on it.' was all he had said before heading off to Wardlow. It was far easier to deny a fear than to confront one.

"Paragons of modern marriage, then?" teased Jack, unwilling to break the Hugh's confidence without good reason.

"They're doing better than Guy and Isabella, at least," Phryne said. "Now shush so I can finish my reading. I have plans for later."
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

I swear there might be a plot to this story somewhere, but damn if I can find it. The conversation between Jack and Charlie is chapter 3 of Marked (Interludes) if anyone is curious.

The dinner party had moved to the parlour for music and drinks. Phryne was at the piano with one of the guests when she heard the door opening, then Jack's baritone speaking to Abbott- she couldn't make out the specifics over the noise of the party, but she could make a reasonable guess. She finished the song and looked up to see Jack watching her from the doorway.

"Do you know Let's Misbehave?" she whispered to her partner.

Freddie nodded.

"Good, play it the song after next."

With that, Phryne slipped away from the piano and headed to the door. Jack stepped back to let her into the dimly lit hall.

"Enjoying your evening, Miss Fisher?" he asked.

"It's been perfectly lovely," she replied, a tad more tartly than she had meant to.

"There does seem to be a disproportionate number of attractive young men."

His jealous streak really did wear thin at times.

"Jack, you've met my mother. She arranged this before you were in the country, so it's not a personal insult. I'm not certain if the attractive surroundings were even meant to entice me to marriage or if it was for her own aesthetic edification, actually."

"Your piano partner seems quite enticing."

"Freddie? He's heir to either a very large fortune or a very small country, and I don't remember which."

It was meant to be a flippant remark to make Jack laugh, but it missed its mark entirely.

"Well, far be it for me to keep you from interesting diversions. I'm retiring for the night."

If there had been the barest hint of jealousy in his voice, Phryne was certain she would have yelled at him for being a fool. He just sounded resigned, and it made her feel awful.

"My interests are many and varied, Jack," she began, laying her hand on his arm. "But they rarely overlap without prior agreement of all parties. Besides, Freddie is part octopus."

She was such a bloody coward. It was not what she had intended to say, and not what he wanted to hear. Perhaps it was for the best, though; it was a far easier promise to keep, and would no doubt
suffice while she regained her grasp on her courage.

Her relationship with Jack reminded her of silk knickers. When she had first come into the inheritance, she had vowed to only wear the very best undergarments. She enjoyed many of the options, but none had been as divine as the first time she had donned silk. For awhile she continued with variety, but soon discovered that days she wore lace found her longing for silk instead, and eventually all her lingerie was of the latter. Oh, she still enjoyed other materials- the brush of velvet, the tickle of lace, even flannel had its place on occasion- and wore them in her outer garments, and contemplated them as she browsed the House of Fleuri catalogue each season. But given her choice, she ordered silk knickers every time.

Somehow, she didn't think Jack would appreciate the comparison.

"How was your evening?" she asked instead.

"Let's just say that answers do not magically appear on the fifty-third reading of an autopsy report."

She moved closer, felt his arms wrap around her. She was forgiven then. She wasn't entirely sure which of them had been in the right, or if it had even been an argument.

"Perhaps the dinner party would have been a better use of your time after all."

"Let's not be too hasty."

His eyes crinkled when he said it.

"I rather missed your commentary."

"Did you?" he asked, his voice dropping to a whisper.

"Terribly. And a few of your more... specialised skills as well."

"I hope you're not suggesting I employ said skills at a dinner party?"

"Well, the empty hall next to a dinner party would suffice."

His hand cupped her face and she kissed him, slow and sweet and so very pleased to see him. After a long moment, she heard the piano's tune change and pulled away reluctantly.

"Oh, what do you know?" she said, slightly breathless. "He's playing our song, Jack. You really ought to come into the parlour, even if it's just one dance."

A subtle incline of his head.

"Lead on, Miss Fisher."

---

They had danced several dances and made introductions to most of the guests when Phryne left him to retrieve drinks. Her return was delayed by another guest, who was desperately curious about the story of the Antipodean gentleman.

"Where have you been keeping him, Phryne?" Felicity asked, preening slightly when she noticed Jack's gaze was on them.
"In the boudoir, mostly," Phryne said flippantly, ignoring the sudden stab of possessiveness.

"He's an absolute delight."

"I've never been one to share my toys, you know that."

Felicity was an old friend, but she could be a shameless flirt.

"Message received," she laughed. "Hands off the Australian. Charlie looks game though."

Phryne looked over to Jack again. He was speaking with Charlie, who was the archetype of an Old Friend, and his jaw was twitching wildly. It was time to stage a rescue, she decided, making her excuses and heading back.

"Cocktail," she said, letting her hand linger on his when she passed it over. Then she linked her arm through his. "Hello, Charlie. Enjoying yourself? You've met Jack, I see. He's a good friend of mine, visiting all the way from Melbourne. Now if you'll excuse us, he owes me another dance."

Jack drank the cocktail quickly, and Phryne pulled him back into a dance before he had time to protest. Freddie had left the piano and the music was supplied by the gramophone, a sultry little jazz tune she couldn't place. He was quiet. Too quiet, if she knew him; no doubt dwelling on some unpleasant contemplation.

"Penny for your thoughts?"

He was silent for a minute. Probably debating whether or not to answer, she decided.

"I try very hard not to, but I find myself questioning your taste in men."

"I think it's improving," she quipped.

"Phryne..."

"Charlie and I have been friends for years."

"Yes, I gathered that. He was quite vocal about it, in fact."

"You knew I have a great many old friends, Jack. I don't regret that, and I won't apologise for it."

"I'm not asking you to apologise, Phryne," he said, exhaling sharply. If they weren't dancing, she was certain he'd be running his hand through his hair in frustration. "I just... it's not pleasant to realise that everything you say to me has been said to somebody else before."

"What did Charlie say to you?" she asked, suddenly concerned that it was far more explicit than she had first imagined.

"Apparently you're bossy and demanding."

He laughed harshly.

"You've probably told me that a hundred times," she cheekily replied. "If it's any comfort, I was bossy with him because it was the easiest way to ensure my own pleasure. Charlie's a dear, but he had little regard for it."

"And with me?"
Jack could be accused of a great many things, but being uninvolved in her pleasure was not one of them.

"You take direction so well," she murmured. "It's all a bit of fun. If it bothers you that much I'll leave it."

He shook his head.

"Nevermind. It's nothing. We're supposed to be enjoying ourselves."

"Well, I'm enjoying myself immensely."

She noticed that the song was almost over, and Charlie was watching them.

"Dip me," she told Jack impulsively.

He did, and she slithered her way back up his body.

"I'm certain people have been charged with public indecency for less than this," Jack murmured against her hair as the next song started.

Several people were watching now, but Phryne didn't let it faze her. She hooked her leg around his, almost grinding against him.

"This isn't public."

"It's more public than I'd like."

"Are you going to arrest me then, inspector?"

"I didn't say that," he growled, nipping her neck gently.

Oh fuck. For a constrained man, he was scandalously good at this game. She was pretty sure the only reason her knees didn't give out entirely was because she was pressed so tightly against him and his hands were splayed across her back.

"You're full of surprises, Jack. But if you think this is indecent, wait until you see what I have planned when everybody leaves."

He was completely unflappable.

"I look forward to it."

---

"So nice to see you again," she said to each guest, kissing their cheeks as they left. Her mother had retired with a headache and she was left to play hostess. "We must get together again soon."

When it was Charlie's turn, she moved very close.

"It takes a very small man to brag about bedroom exploits," she whispered. "Especially ones that are several years old."
He looked surprised.

"It was just a bit of teasing, Phrynekins."

"It wasn't appreciated," she retorted quietly. She kissed his cheek and stepped back, giving her most gracious smile as she raised her voice. "So lovely to see you. Take care."

When everyone had left she went back to the parlour and found Jack tidying. It was unnecessary, of course, but no less thoughtful for it; she watched his back for a minute, then stepped forward to snake her arms around his middle. He was solid and warm, and she laid her cheek against him.

"Leave it," she commanded. His hands rested against hers. "I want you."

They barely made it up the stairs before she pulled him in by his lapels. The meeting of mouths was hot and frenzied, almost brutal in its intensity. She pulled at his jacket, managing to shuck it off as they stumbled into her bedroom. His attentions had drifted down to her breasts, and she pushed the top of her dress down to grant him access.

"I want you," she panted, fumbling at his trousers. "I want you."

Her hands found purchase, pulled the waist down.

"Too much fabric," she muttered.

He laughed, and the sensation radiated delighted little shocks through her body. She pulled him closer, managed to get her hands beneath his shirt to claw at his skin, convinced he was still too far away as his entire body pressed against hers. She bit his shoulder, sucked at the hollow of his neck, desperate to sear his skin with her actions. He was inside her then, her back against the wall and her dress rucked up over her hips. Inelegant and desperate and exactly right.

"I need you," she moaned.

He stilled, searching her eyes for direction. Dear, beautiful Jack. She was too close to explain, too close to even think properly. She shifted her hips, desperate to feel him moving again.

"I need you," she managed, the only words that came to mind.

Mercifully, he seemed to understand and resumed his rhythmic thrusts.

"Phryne..."

She wasn't sure how he could fit everything- his desire, his need, the scorching heat of his love that she could never quite face- in her name, but it was enough to bring her over the edge. He followed.

"I need you," she muttered into the crook of his neck as she rode the aftershocks of her orgasm.

"You have me," he hoarsely answered, his hands pressed against her back. Grounding her.

It was so perfect a response she found herself blinking back tears. She had never said that to another lover. Perhaps she'd tell him so later, when she didn't feel so utterly boneless. She found that the idea didn't terrify her nearly as much as she thought it should.
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

Oh man, this is one of the chapters I've been worried about for ages. It's one of those "Have I actually managed to make this a believable development, or was I too subtle/incompetent?" Feel free to voice an opinion either way!

Also, I am officially declaring an intention to kind of hand-waved the details of London's boroughs. I don't care how long I live in this country, I do not understand London. (I am not a city person. The very first time I talked to my now father-in-law, it was because I couldn't get ahold of Mr. FireSign's mobile and I was alone in London trying to reach him. FIL reassured me that he was in London, since I hadn't been certain for reasons that are long and boring. My totally charming response? "Him and 8.5 million other people." It was an excellent first impression.)

Jack was struck by the intense feeling of being watched. He didn't startle- he hadn't startled awake since the war, when such a thing could get you killed, but it wasn't the slow sloughing of slumber either. He stayed still, eyes closed, as he tried to assess the situation. He was warm, in a comfortable bed. That was good, at least. There was someone breathing beside him, and he could feel their warmth. A finger trailed along his cheek, gently pressed against his nose. A quiet beep. Of course.

"You're awake early, Miss Fisher."

His eyes opened. She gave him a half smile, her hair mussed. She was so soft in the morning.

"You were restless."

Was he? He couldn't remember any reason to be, but the claws of anxiety had not loosened their grip on his chest since he woke. Jack blinked, then fell back against his pillows with a groan.

"I'm sorry for disturbing your slumber," he apologised, managing a smirk in her direction. "I know how preciously you guard it."

Phryne laughed, dropping a kiss to the side of his mouth as she did so.

"I couldn't sleep anyway."

"No?"

"No. I was rather distracted by the good fortune of a handsome man in my bed. Especially one who had flown all the way from Australia to be there."

But he hadn't, had he? He has wanted to, more than anything; he'd looked at shipping schedules and long service leaves and had almost convinced himself he would do it. That he wasn't a coward. Then this case had come, and it was easier to hide behind duty and honour and unfinished business than to make that leap of faith.

"An unsung hero," he said, struggling to keep the edge of bitterness from his voice.
"I wouldn't say unsung," Phryne laughed. "We might be in the first movement, but the performance has definitely begun. On that note..."

She twined herself around him,

"It's very early, Miss Fisher."

"It is. Early enough that we don't have to get out of bed yet, even with these unsociable hours we've been keeping."

To her credit, Phryne had been at Scotland Yard early every morning and left when Jack had- with the noticeable exception of the previous day's dinner party- despite the fact that there was very little investigating that played to her strengths. Still, only Phryne would call 8:30 unsociable.

There was a knock, then Abbott's voice came though the door.

"I'm very sorry, Miss, but there's a Detective Inspector Carter on the telephone for Inspector Robinson and he's not in his quarters."

To Jack's great surprise, Phryne blushed as she pulled away.

"He's in here, Abbott," she cheerfully responded, hurriedly motioning him to dress. Her eyes tore around the room in a desperate attempt to find his discarded clothing. "Just getting an early start on the day, didn't want to disturb the rest of the house by going to the study. He'll be right down."

"Very well, Miss."

They heard his footsteps walking away, and Phryne began to laugh.

"I certainly don't mind Mother finding out about my loose morals- she'd hardly be surprised by them either way- but the idea of Abbott's judgement is too much," she confessed, pulling on a stocking. "He was so dear to me when I first came to England, messy and rough though I was. Not everyone would have been so understanding."

Jack had gone into the situation with both eyes open and no expectations- marriage was not her intention, fidelity unpromised. Even his determination not to be one of a parade had been laid aside in the end, so desperate was he to bask in her. There was a sting in hearing it laid out in such terms though; he loved her, and he could hardly find that immoral. Unconventional, certainly, and almost guaranteed to end in heartbreak somewhere down the line when they reached the point he asked for more than she could give, but not immoral.

He pulled his shirt on, smoothing the worst of the wrinkles out by hand and hoping his suit would cover the rest. He didn't want to risk returning to his room to change, not with Ted on the phone.

"You'll do," Phryne said, casting a brief glance at him before securing her dagger in her garter. "I'll be down in just a moment, see what Ted needs."

Jack headed downstairs and picked up the telephone receiver that Abbott indicated.

"Hello."

"Jack?" came Ted's voice. "There's been a letter."

Jack motioned for Abbott to bring him something to write on, mouthing thank you when he did, then took the details from Ted. By the time Miss Fisher came down five minutes later, looking immaculate
as always- it really was unnerving, how quickly she went from one to the other- Jack was already off of the telephone.

"Here's the address, Miss Fisher. I do believe that the situation calls for your... peculiar type of driving."

"Oh Jack, I knew you'd learn to see things my way!" she had said, already striding for the front door.

"I don't believe I was given much of a choice."

If he didn't know to expect better from a Baron's manservant, Jack would have sworn he heard Abbott mutter 'Nobody ever is.' from behind him.

---

The post office was a tiny little thing in Twickenham. Ted was already there, along with a photographer and two constables who were shifting through the rest of the bag of letters for evidence.

"I haven't opened it yet," Ted said as they approached. "Thought I'd leave it until you were here. Good morning, Miss Fisher."

"Morning, Ted!" said Phryne. It was far too cheery a greeting for the circumstances, but Jack recognised the tightness around her eyes and the set of her mouth; her greeting might be frivolous, but Phryne herself was not. "Let's see the wretched thing then."

The envelope was completely innocuous, a standard sized white envelope made from paper of middling quality. Nothing distinctive enough to track down, of course. It was addressed to "T. Carter c/o Scotland Yard" with the headquarter's address; the ones in Melbourne had been addressed to Howard Dressel in the same manner, at least once he had taken over the case.

Ted opened the envelope very carefully, allowing the photographer to document every step. He read the letter over once, then silently handed it off to Jack. Phryne leaned in to read as well, allowing him the briefest whiff of her French perfume; it was intoxicating even there.

_Inspector Carter!_

_What an unpleasant surprise, to find you and that Jack Robinson in London to ruin my fun. I am a Moriarty looking for a Sherlock, and instead I find myself with a couple of second-rate Watsons. At least there appears to be a darling Miss Marple this time around._

_Since you failed so spectacularly last time (did you know that Bill lived for nearly 24 hours? Yet you daring heroes were still too late.) I suppose I'll have to make this easier for you. Less fun for me, but I imagine I can find ways to compensate for that. But not yet._

He'd signed the letter with the branding he'd left on the victims.

"A name?" Phryne asked.

Jack exhaled loudly, resisting the urge to crumple the letter and throw it in the trash. That fucker.

"An Agatha Christie character, I think," said Jack. "But I only know of the one short story."

"Agatha's next novel is about her, actually," Phryne said. "I don't know if it's common knowledge yet, but Mother was asking her about it last time they spoke."

Of course Miss Fisher knew one of the most famous mystery authors in the world. In fact, he fully expected to hear that Sir Arthur Conan Doyle was a regular dinner guest next. She raised an eyebrow at him and Jack realised that he'd said it aloud.

"But what does it mean?" Ted asked, unaware of the exchange.

"With any luck it was a jibe at my elderly spinsterhood," Phryne said glibly. "He does seem the sort to aim for unfair hits, and he's not to know that it's by choice. I'll speak to Agatha though, see if there is some obvious detail we've missed."

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The next few days were a blur. Jack was vaguely aware of warm food being pressed into his hands and eaten, but not the rhythm in which it occurred. The only time he saw the sun was when he occasionally left the offices to speak with a witness or expert in person; he was in before six and never home before midnight. Phryne had even taken a taxi back to the townhouse several times, leaving him the car keys with the admonishment not to fall asleep in the office.

"Jack, I'm due to meet Agatha for lunch," Phryne had said at one point, early on. He hadn't looked up from his list of stationers in the south of England as he motioned a farewell.

"Bring one of the men," he said.

"Aren't you afraid I'll give them the slip?"

"Miss Fisher, I am reading. I will no doubt spend the next six hours calling paper distributors in the vain hope that we can find out where this envelope was purchased. I'll just have to trust that there is a shred of common sense in you."

"Fine, Jack," she said, picking up her handbag. "Try not to starve yourself."

It was only a few hours later, when she'd come back in with the announcement that lunch with Agatha Christie had been an investigative bust but a personal delight, that he realised that she'd sounded hurt.
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

I'll either have a LOT of time to write in the next two weeks or absolutely none at all, so a quick update before the chaos descends.

As always, thank you for reading. I adore getting feedback, positive or negative, so always feel free to be critical.

"Are you sure you don't want to come?" Phryne asked, looking at Jack in the mirror as she applied her lipstick. "Nobody would object if I brought you along. Isabella would probably enjoy it, actually."

"It's fine. Go see your cousin, I'm going to spend the evening with a book."

Phryne turned to look at him directly.

She was worried about him; it had been ten days since the letter had arrived, and he was barely sleeping. What little he managed was restless and broken. It had taken a week before he had done anything beside follow leads; his dedication to his work was admirable, but it had veered firmly into obsession. A few days earlier she had dragged him home at a reasonable hour, under the pretense of dinner with her mother being an absolutely necessity; his distracted mind was clearly still dwelling on the case the entire time, but it was slightly more tolerable than another evening at Scotland Yard. She'd said as much, and he'd given her a pained look.

"Promise me?" she said, examining her reflection once more. Her dress matched her eyes almost exactly, an icy blue sheath with silver accents. She fastened her hair slide.

"I already have the book selected."

He seemed sincere.

"Dance with me before I go then?"

"Why?"

He seemed genuinely confused, and she gave him a smile.

"Because if I'm to endure several hours of onerous dance partners and excessive drinking, I'd like to get at least one good waltz in."

She was not looking forward to the engagement party, if she was honest. Guy and Isabella were always up for fun, but the timing could not have been worse; she wasn't in a celebratory mood, and her energy could be better employed elsewhere. She wasn't exactly sure where that was, but she was going to resolve this case. Her attendance was required, however, at least for a few hours; she'd go, have an agreeable time catching up with old friends she hadn't seen, then return home in time to get some sleep before resuming the investigations in the morning.

She didn't have any music in her room, but it didn't matter. Jack offered his hand, and she pulled
herself in. Breathed deeply, Jack's familiar musk a soothing balm to all her worries. He was there and he was fine, the same solid presence that he had always been. It would be fine.

---

The house was quiet and dark when she came in around midnight. There was a light coming from beneath the door of the library, and she chuckled. Jack had no doubt lost himself in his book, and would give her a warm, slow smile when she interrupted him. He'd pull her onto his lap for a kiss, and she would lick that hollow of his neck that always drove her to distraction. It was an image far too tempting to ignore, and she slipped off her heels to make her silent approach.

Easing the door open, Phryne looked around the study. Jack was at the desk, not one of the armchairs as she had anticipated. His suit was half-undone, his tie loosened, his hair freed from its usual pomade. He looked up; his eyes were glassy and his responses slowed, and she spied a glass of whiskey and a nearly empty decanter beside him. She moved closer, saw his case notes laid out on the desk.

"Oh Jack," she said softly.

"What time is it?" he asked.

"Gone midnight."

"Oh."

"You promised."

"I know. I thought I could just read it over once; I thought-"

He swallowed, blinked slowly.

"You thought that you could make it right if you could just find the missing detail. The lynchpin that would allow it to unravel."

She knew the feeling all too well.

"Yes."

"You're drunk, darling," she said. Her voice caught in her throat. "Come to bed."

He shook his head.

"I'm not drunk," he countered, attempting to stand. He gripped the edge of the desk tightly, body swaying. "On closer examination, I might be somewhat inebriated."

Phryne moved to help him to upstairs. His arm was slung over her shoulder, her's wrapped around his waist in support.

"Did I tell you that Rosie left me over this case?" he asked as they reached the staircase.

"No, you didn't."

"She came back after a week, but it was the moment I knew it was over. Oh, we lied about it for another two years but there was no saving it by then. I was such an awful husband. All I could think when I found out was that I'd have more time for work."
"I'm sorry," she said.

"Don't be sorry," he said, somewhat sharply. "It was my own fault."

"Even if it was- and I doubt that the blame lays solely on your shoulders no matter what you've told yourself- I can still be sorry," Phryne said. "I can't imagine it was easy."

The circumstances of his divorce had nagged her since that discussion at the Carters' dinner.

"I was a coward. I'm often a coward, as I'm sure you've noticed. Couldn't be a husband. Couldn't be a Roman soldier. Couldn't even get to London without a pretense. I'm just waiting for the day you say so."

She stopped. Is that what he believed?

"You're here, Jack, and that's what matters. You're here because you need to be, and I hope because you want to be as well."

"I want- I want a lot of things that... that..."

His words slurred as he trailed off. The alcohol had finally hit him in full force, it seemed; he didn't finish his sentence. Phryne brought him into her room and sat him on the bed.

"You know, it cost me my marriage and I still couldn't catch him," he said, laughing bitterly. "And now he's back and it's my fault. Every death is on me."

The ache building in her chest cracked, physically painful in its intensity. She sat down beside Jack, pressed a gentle kiss to his temple. Breathed him in for the second time that night, drawing courage from his comforting scent. He was there. They would be fine.

"Jack, I asked you once to help me not be afraid of shadows. Let me remind you now. Please."

Her plea was little more than a whisper, not trusting her voice with anything more. She waited. Ever so slowly, Jack nodded his acquiesce.
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

Alternative chapter title: Emotional Vulnerability is FireSign's Porn, with bonus bad metaphors. Beliefs may need serious suspension.

When Jack woke up, his head was pounding and his mouth was dry. He cautiously opened one eye and found the room mercifully dark; there was just enough sunlight from the edges of the curtains to spot the glass of water on Phryne's beside table. He reached for it, blinking to clear his vision, and found that it was accompanied by a note and a medicine packet.

_massively misjudged both alcohol and time. Take the headache powder and go back to sleep._

_Px_

Jack groaned, casting his mind back to the night before. He remembered sitting down to have another fruitless look at the case files, and the vortex of time that followed it. Less clear was Phryne's return, reduced to a series of images and an overwhelming sense of guilt and self-loathing. He swallowed his medicine and laid back down. An uneasy sleep reclaimed him.

When he woke again, he could sense the presence of another person. He managed to lift his head long enough to see Phryne curled in a chair with book in hand. She had opened the curtains and his head was not swimming, but he still allowed himself to drop back into the pillow.

"Good morning, Jack," she said, not unkindly. It was almost worse than if she had been angry with him. "I expect you feel completely wretched."

He did.

"What time is it?"

It hurt to speak.

"Eleven, give or take."

He groaned again.

"I've spoken with Ted, and as it's a Sunday you are expressly forbidden from going to Scotland Yard. Baines and Peterson are in, and they will of course call us if there are any developments, but if we haven't found something by now there's nothing to find."

Her voice was suspiciously perky regarding the matter.

"You're enjoying this, aren't you?"
"Enjoyment might be a step too far, but I am savouring it. Such indulgence from my steadfast inspector might never happen again," her lips quirked. "Don't worry though, I merely told Inspector Carter that we were both feeling the after effects of my cousin's engagement party. He sounded almost relieved."

She tucked a bookmark to mark her page, setting it aside and moving towards the bed. Jack closed his eyes again, desperately wishing to avoid the forthcoming conversation. Her hand brushed a stray lock of hair from his forehead.

"How much of last night do you remember?"

Her voice was soft and understanding and too much. He preferred the teasing.

"Enough to know a made a complete and utter arse of myself," he replied, eyes resolutely shut. She chuckled, the sad sort of chuckle when there was no other response.

"To begin, Jack, I owe you an apology. When I asked you to come after me... I didn't think it through. I've always been impulsive, and you were there and I was so happy. I never questioned how difficult it would be. But-" and here her hand slid down to meet his. "It was never a test; if you hadn't made it here, I would have come back to you instead. Wild horses couldn't have stopped me."

"I don't think they'd be brave enough to try," Jack offered, feeling the beginnings of a smile tug at the corners of his mouth.

"That was not my only transgression, I think. The day of Guy and Isabella's engagement party... your mysterious appointment was with the divorce court, wasn't it?"

"Yes."

Jack had tried to forget the burning shame, but it rose in him unbidden.

"So when you said that you would play my Roman soldier...?"

"Yes," he confirmed. He didn't need her to finish the question; it had haunted him.

"And you never said, not once in all those months. Why?"

"I wasn't proud of it."

"It felt too much like infidelity?"

Her quick understanding never ceased to amaze him.

"Yes."

"Why? You weren't married, you hadn't been in a marriage for a long time."

"The ink wasn't even dry," he said, condemning himself for the weakness. "And because I'd thought about it."

"There is no shame in thoughts, Jack."

There was when you hadn't thought of your own wife that way in years. There was when you relived a kiss given under duress, alone in your bed. There was quite a bit of shame, all of it his. He
kept silent.

"Jack, look at me."

He did. The firmness of her tone compelled him. Her head was tilted slightly, as if examining a piece of evidence; her teeth were worrying her lower lip in a way that made Jack want to soothe it with his tongue; her eyes were somehow both terribly open and wonderfully closed. They were silent for a long time. She laced her fingers through his, the only point of connection between them.

"You can't carry the blame for everything, darling."

"Only the things I'm responsible for."

He expected her to draw away in irritation, but she simply squeezed his hand once more.

"How many men do you think I killed, during the war?" Phryne finally asked. "How many men, do you reckon, died because I was too slow, or I triaged incorrectly or with incomplete information, or because I told myself I could save them when they never stood a chance?"

"You can't blame yourself for that."

"But I do. Whether or not I should is irrelevant. My death count no doubt surpasses yours, or Ted's, or anyone else who has been caught in this case."

There was a certain irony in invoking Ted as an example, but he let it pass. She didn't pause to allow him time to interject as it was.

"The point is, Jack, I can't live if I carry that burden all the time. I can't. It would crush me beneath its weight," her thumb stroked the back of his hand gently. "And neither can you."

"It's different."

"No, it's not. I almost wish it was. But it's not."

Phryne leaned in to press a kiss against his forehead.

"No man is an island, Jack."

"And any man's death diminishes me."

"Is that how it goes?" Phryne asked, nose wrinkling.

"Yes."

"I never liked the poem."

The absurdity of the situation struck him, and he laughed. A smile flit across her face.

"Jack..." her voice was serious again. "Don't carry it alone. For your sake, and- quite selfishly- for mine. Let me help you."

It was a tempting offer; he couldn't accept. Sharing the burden would simply crush her all the sooner. She seemed to understand without a word, because she gave him a wistful look.

"There's food on the tray, and the tea should still be hot. I'm going to take a bath. I won't order you to join me, but I have found that a long soak can wash away a multitude of sins and the tub is certainly
big enough for two."

She gave his hand a final squeeze before standing. The door to the bathroom made a gentle click as she shut it.

Alone, he found himself suddenly famished. As he ate the sandwiches, he contemplated the conversation. Mulled over it, examined every angle available. When he was finished, Jack found himself drawn to the bath if only to rinse away the last uncomfortable reminders of the night before. The water was still steaming, the scent of sandalwood filling the room. Phryne looked at him expectantly from the water.

"I can't..." he began. She deserved an explanation. "I can only try."

"That's all any of us can ever do."

She moved, making room for him in the tub.

---

Out of the bath, they had both wrapped themselves in robes.

"What next?"

He caught her wrist, pulled her towards the bed and onto his lap. Tucked a stray strand behind her ear. Admired the beauty of her sharp cheekbones, the contrast between her skin and hair. Admired her. Kissed her.

"Make love to me," she murmured against his lips.

They had never given it a word; words had power. Power to hurt, or to heal, or to frighten. Jack pressed his forehead against hers.

"Whenever you ask."

It was slow and subdued, as if they were both afraid to break the tentative understanding. She curled into him when her orgasm came, whimpered softly. When she finally withdrew her cheeks were damp.

"Phryne?"

He reached up to brush the tears away. She managed a watery sort of smile in response.

"Last night," she explained, voice faltering. "Last night, you were further from me than when you were in Australia. And there was no boat or plane on this earth that could get me there."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry. You're here now."

She pulled him down, so they were both lying on the bed in a tangle of limbs.

"Is it that simple?"

"It can be. You just have to allow it."
A leap of faith.

When he had been about thirteen and Daniel fifteen, his parents had taken them camping for a week near Buchan. It was not one of their more successful holidays; Dan was in the midst of his first love affair and miserable to be separated from a girl whose name he couldn't even remember a year later. Jack was in the midst of his first dalliance with Shakespeare, feeling the tragedy of Romeo and Juliet with the sort of keenness only a teenager could. But halfway through the week Jack and Dan had found some caves and shelved their quarrels long enough to go exploring. On their way back, in a particularly difficult passage, Jack had felt claustrophobia descend; the darkness, the almost chilling temperature, the proximity of the stone walls getting ever closer. He was tired and hungry— in a fit of pique he had refused to pack the sandwiches his mother had made— and absolutely furious with himself; he knew better. In the almost complete darkness, Dan's hand found his shoulder and Jack had braced for the scathing remarks that only a sibling could produce. His brother would not have been wrong.

"Go on then, Jackie," Dan had said instead. "Mum's making stew."

It was one of the biggest regrets of his life that he had never thanked his brother for that moment.

"You're thinking again, Jack," Phryne teased. She fluttered her fingers against his hip. "Penny for them."

The moment of truth. Leap or lose.

"My brother would have loved you," Jack said impulsively.

He was rewarded with a huge grin and a tenderness in her eyes that told him she knew exactly how much that meant to him.
Chapter Notes

A late update, and in the next few weeks I suspect there will be even fewer. I have not forgotten this story and I am working on it, but between real life and the loss of a huge chunk of the already-written stuff it is going slowly. Bit of a muddly chapter, methinks, but it'll do.

Potentially interesting note- the theatre our couple attends in this chapter is now known the The Gielgud Theatre on Shaftesbury Avenue. It was called The Globe Theatre at the time, and I couldn't resist the idea of Jack going to see Shkespeare at The Globe even if it wasn't the real one. The theatre was renamed in the 90s after John Gielgud, who played Bendick in multiple productions of Much Ado About Nothing. None of them were in November 1929 or at that particular theatre, but an amusing connection.

Also, part of this was one of the very first things I wrote for the fic. At the time I couldn't recall seeing Much Ado used in in the fandom, but it has been since because it really is a wonderful line.

When Phryne woke up the next morning, she had a brief moment of panic at finding the bed empty. A minute later she heard Jack whistling--since when did he whistle?--in the en-suite and relaxed. She thought about the previous day; not quite the Sunday of mutual ravishment she had suggested a few weeks earlier, but it had given her (and, she hoped, him as well) some much-needed clarity. And then they had affirmed their newfound understanding, repeatedly and with great pleasure. The memory of it was enough to make her smile, the smell of both of them on the sheets she was wrapped in a familiar and welcoming sensation. The subject of her reminisces rejoined her in the bedroom a minute later, already dressed for work.

"Early start?" she asked.

"It's nearly eight," he replied. "I couldn't bear to wake you up when you looked so peaceful. Even if you do snore awfully."

"You're a terrible liar," she retorted, ignoring his snort of disbelief as she rolled out of bed and headed towards bathroom. As she passed next to him, she paused. "Jack?"

"I'm fine, Phryne. Honestly," his voice was quiet and rough. "And I'll tell you if I'm not."

Then he kissed her cheek in a manner that was so familiar that it felt domestic and her heartbeat quickened.

In the quiet of the bathroom, Phryne washed her face and took a deep breath. Staring at herself in the mirror, she wondered where to go from there--Jack seemed so much like himself this morning, and neither one of them would enjoy her impulse to coddle him. No, they would go forward as normal and she would simply keep an eye on future developments. The first step would be getting to Scotland Yard in time, and she began to dress.
Downstairs, she found Jack already eating a large breakfast.

"Excellent," she said cheerfully, stealing a piece of toast from his plate. "I thought perhaps you might have gone on ahead without me."

"And miss the pleasure of your driving?" Jack wryly replied. "Never."

Phryne sat beside him, propping her feet up on another chair and staring at him languidly.

"If you must complain, Jack, I'll let you drive," Phryne said. He stared at her, clearly stunned into silence. She grinned wickedly, and dropped her voice to a whisper. "But only if you ask very, very nicely. Maybe even beg."

"I'd rather run the risk of death."

"Spoilsport," she pouted, eating the last bite of toast.

---

She watched Jack carefully over the next few days, but he was just Jack. Focused, yes, but the sheer intensity of his tunnel vision was gone. He joked with the other officers a few times and was the first to call for lunch. He even, when standing to leave, tilted his head in that familiar way to indicate she should come with him and she did without question. Every day they would take the break to stroll along the Thames, pausing to watch the boats in the water or to the sights. There was a bench that gave a magnificent view--the Houses of Parliament and Westminster Bridge to their right, County Hall across from them--and they usually ended there. In the evenings they would head home; sometimes they left at five, other times much later, but it was always together. Once inside the townhouse, they would talk of other things, or read, or socialise with guests of Lady Fisher's. There was equilibrium, precarious though it was.

On Tuesday's lunchtime walk, Phryne laid a hand on his arm.

"Jack, I have a small favour to ask."

"Words to strike fear into the heart of any man."

"That's unfair," she chided, but she was smiling. "It's Mother's birthday on Friday, and my father's coming into London to celebrate with her before returning to whatever dark corner he'd secreted himself into to sort out the whole nasty affair in Melbourne."

"Special investigative permissions or not, I don't have the authority to arrest him," he said.

In hindsight, Phryne could not remember why she had been so evasive with Jack about her father's presence during the thwarted dinner and the subsequent murder. Shame, perhaps, or fear that he would be taken in by Henry's charisma as most people were. But Jack was not intimidated or charmed by the Baron of Richmond, and was quite quick to poke light-heartedly as his flaws. Yet he remained, somehow, respectful of Phryne's more complicated feelings towards her father--he understood her need to protect him, and why she chose to fly him home. She hadn't expected anything less, but she had still side-stepped real answers at the time. It was disconcerting to acknowledge that she regretted it.

"Phryne?" he asked.

She realised that she hadn't responded to his comment, and forced herself to smile flirtatiously.
"It's worse," she said, fluttering her eyelashes dramatically. He gave a tiniest hint of an indulgent smile in return. "She's insisting that we both attend the theatre with them. I really don't see any way for me to get out of it, but I'll understand if you're too busy with the case."

"No," Jack said, shaking his head. "The last thing I need is to get 'too busy' with the case to appreciate... London's more appealing sights. I've made that mistake once."

It was, quite frankly, ridiculous how often he made her smile genuine.

"London is what holds the appeal?" she teased. "I suppose I can understand. So much history, so much variety--"

She waved her hands as she spoke, to encompass all of London's finer points.

"So much Phryne," he interrupted, his voice low and deep and full of lustful promise. "You'll find that it eclipses every other consideration in my view."

"Oh good," said Phryne playfully. "I thought I was losing my charm."

He kissed her then, right there on the street. He kissed her so thoroughly that her toes curled in her shoes, and when she reluctantly pulled away she couldn't catch her breath.

"You will ruin me, Jack."

And while she laughed as she said it, she had the sudden and terrifying thought that it might be true.

---

Jack was in a borrowed dinner jacket, the sleeves marginally too long. Nobody would notice, thought Phryne, if only he'd stop fidgeting with the cuffs instead of working on the bowtie. He'd be the best looking man there either way.

"Oh, come here," she said. She secured his tie, then stepped back to survey her work. "There. You are the very model of a modern Major-General!"

"I had hoped you had forgotten that particular revelation," Jack replied, smiling wryly.

"I try very hard not to forget anything about you, darling."

She leaned up with the intention of kissing his cheek but nibbled his ear lobe instead. Well, it was there and she could hardly be expected to resist, could she?

"Phryne..."

It was both a warning and a plea, and Phryne smiled. It really was fun to wind him up, and the retaliation was always delightful. Roaming hands and scolding voice and just a little bit of exerted authority. Delicious.

"Is that a hint as to where we are going, then?"

"Hmm?"

She was still thinking of his hands.

"The Major-General. You're not dragging me to another operetta, are you?"
"I thought your opinion of them had improved?" she teased. "But no."

"Then what are we seeing?"

"You'll enjoy it."

"That doesn't inspire confidence."

"Fine then, one clue. And I'll even make it easy for you. 'There was a star danced, and under that was I born.'"

"Much Ado?"

The sheer glee on his face was like a child at Christmas. She was clearly going soft, because she found it endearing. The idea of an entire evening of distraction without the job casting even the faintest shadow was equally welcome.

"At The Globe," she confirmed. "Obviously not THE Globe, but it's a lovely theatre and we have a box. It does mean we're seated next to my father, but it's a small price to pay I think."

"If if gets you in that dress, I'd pay a lot more."

It was a stunning gown, Phryne thought. She hadn't replenished her wardrobe a great deal since arriving in London, knowing that her time would be relatively brief and anything purchased would either need to be shipped or left behind. This gown had been a rare exception. It was a gorgeous navy velvet with silver trimmings that shimmered when she moved, and it had reminded Phryne of the night sky. The Queen Anne neckline that did positively wondrous things for her clavicles and delicate lacing in the back had cemented her need, and she'd bought it with the hopes of having a reason to wear it soon. A night at the theatre was the perfect excuse.

"We should go downstairs before the taxi arrives," Jack said.

"Is that a hint of regret I hear in your voice?" laughed Phryne, adjusting the already perfect bowtie. She didn't dare rumple him properly, no matter how tempting the image, but she couldn't resist the urge to touch him.

"Perhaps a hint," he smiled wryly.

"Can it be? Have I found something more tempting to Jack Robinson than Shakespeare? And will wonders never cease?"

He growled playfully and pulled her closer. His mouth was distractingly close, and she lowered her eyelashes in anticipation.

"PHRYNE! The taxi is already here! Hurry!"

Her bloody mother. Jack released her reluctantly, and they shared a small smile.

"Anticipation will make it all the sweeter?" Phryne asked.

"I think we've gotten quite good at that."

They shared another smile before heading downstairs, arm in arm, to join the Baron and Baroness. Phryne and her father had reached a tentative truce, neither one willing to upset Margaret's birthday, but he had made a pointed effort to not charm Jack. She wasn't sure if he was voicing displeasure or giving some sort of twisted approval.
Jack helped her into her fur coat, and Phryne reached up to adjust his hat. The look he gave her in response was positively lustful.

"Well then, you had best escort me to the theatre Jack Robinson."

---

The show was exceptional— the Beatrice and Benedick witty and bright, the Hero sweet. A simple line in a larger scene had thudded through Phryne's mind more than once as they returned home, ascended the stairs, laughing as they undressed. It was a supplication as he removed her jewelry and laid it aside carefully. She heard it in the rhythm of their lovemaking, building to a crescendo in her ears.

Afterwards they laid entangled in each other, sated if only for the moment. He kissed her shoulder.

"You look like the cat that has gotten into the cream."

She barely flinched; another lover would have overlooked it. But Jack was not another lover. He looked at her with concern but didn't press.

"Rene DuBois used to call me his chat noir."

It was an admission, a confession, a plea.

"A cat is too mundane, on second thought," he said lazily, trailing a finger down her torso. "A sphinx perhaps, the enigmatic guardian of treasures."

"And voracious man eater," she laughed.

His eyes crinkled, and the line came to mind once more.

_I love you with so much of my heart that none is left to protest._
After his night of excess and the subsequent fallout, Jack woke early on Monday morning to find Phryne splayed across him with her hair in his face. He stayed still for several minutes, appreciating the solid, reassuring weight of her presence and the tiny snores that occasionally came. Eventually he knew he needed to move and slipped away, chuckling at her sleepy protests as he did so.

He felt--well, he felt far better than he had any right to under the circumstances; there was still someone murdering for sport, and every lead they had was dead. But it was what it was; the obsessive route had not worked the first time, and the price had been too high. This time though... this time there was Miss Fisher, a gale force hurricane, on his side. He whistled as he prepared for the day ahead.

---

His return to Scotland Yard was anti-climactic, the seemingly momentous shift actually not more than a single Sunday that went by unremarked by the rest of the world. The only hint otherwise was Ted's occasional worried glance.

"Still feeling the engagement party?" he asked Jack quietly when they had a minute alone.

There were friendships, forged in fires and death, that allowed for a little more truthfulness than would otherwise be acceptable.

"I believe Miss Fisher enjoyed herself. I was otherwise occupied," confessed Jack.

Ted nodded in understanding.

"And now?"

Jack sighed. "Several years ago you gave me some advice--'You can go home late, but you have to go home.'--and I either wouldn't or couldn't listen. You were, of course, right."

"That's one of Annie's," Ted said. "I don't know what I would have done, if I didn't have her keeping me sane."

"Probably something incredibly stupid," Jack replied, and both men smirked knowingly.

"I'm glad, anyway," said Ted, and that was the end of the conversation.
They attended the theatre on Friday night; Jack enjoyed it immensely, but hoped nobody would ask him about it afterwards. The performance was completely overwhelmed in his memory by the way Phryne had looked in that dress. The way she laughed. The way her perfume mingled with the scent of the theatre, the heat of her hand on his knee and the coolness of the auditorium. The way she had murmured "My Jack" against his lips as they fell into bed; she'd said it before, but never with such intensity. Never like she meant it beyond that moment. My Phryne, he thought as he nuzzled the curve of her breast, just for now.

It was the calm before a storm; the rest of the weekend was fraught with tensions, her father's presence once again throwing Phryne off-kilter. He left Sunday evening, after a particularly memorable blow out over dinner about the stock market crash--Lord Fisher insistent that he had a surefire way of profiting from the American collapse, Phryne equally insistent that he batten down the hatches, live below his means, and ride it out--but she was still short-tempered on Monday morning.

The weather cutting short their lunch hour walk did not improve her mood, and by the time they overheard two of their colleagues discussing "that Australian tart and her pocket pet" on their early return she looked ready to go on the war path. Jack tried to lighten the atmosphere, though he had some choice words of his own.

"I thought you enjoyed a good salacious accusation? At least this time I'm the dog," he said.

"Oh, I don't care what they call me," she said, exasperated. "I've heard worse from better people than them."

"Defending my honour then?" he asked. "I've had worse lobbied at me; you should hear what some of the men back home say about our association."

It was supposed to be a joke--his men did rib on occasion but never crossed the line into derogatory; they quite liked Miss Fisher, after all, and they weren't foolish enough to insult their boss--but Phryne threw her hands up in frustration. It was not, on reflection, particularly funny.

"If I were to hazard a guess..." she ticked each insult off on her fingers. "I'm a terrible influence. You're kept somewhere a lot closer than my pockets. I have ruined your once-promising career. I string you along like a plaything."

Jack caught her hands between his before she could enumerate any more sins.

"No, they think I'm trying to steal Mr. Butler from your services."

She snorted, agitation passing.

"As if you could!"

"No, I suppose not. I will have to subsist on your merciful offerings," he said, smiling as he dropped a kiss onto her still clasped hands. "And for the record: you are not a terrible influence; I have ruined my own once-promising career by arresting George Sanderson, and even if that was on you I'd consider it a good thing; you've always been honest about your proclivities... and I would love to be somewhere closer than your pockets right now. Instead I am going to have a long, long talk about appropriate behaviour with Tweedledum and Tweedledee in there."

"Get in line, Jack," she said with a spirited toss of her head. "I'm having a go at them first."
Jack thought he had been holding his own reasonably well in the boudoir despite the discrepancy in their experience; he seemed to surprise her as often as she surprised him at least, and she'd been vocal about her pleasure. But never had she met him with as much ferocity as she did that night; he'd wonder, in the morning, whether they had both had one too many glasses of wine with dinner. In the moment he just tried to keep up, meet her frenzied actions with his own as they stumbled through the door in a tangle of hands and lips and teeth.

She pushed him onto the bed, unhooked his suspenders with one hand, let the other flick open the buttons of his shirt.

"What do you like, Jack?" she growled into his ear, biting the lobe a fraction too hard in the process.

Trousers and smalls were removed next.

"You."

She stood to survey her handiwork with a smirk. "That's cheating. Tell me."

Her own dress was shed unceremoniously, stepped out of as she made her way to the bed.

"You, Phryne. You, any way."

She tsked disapprovingly.

"Let's start with any easy one then, Jack," she purred as she trailed kisses down his body. Took his cock into her mouth, hot and wet and fucking amazing. "This?"

"Yes. God, yes."

Her tongue flicked along his length. Tickling. Testing. Then her teeth, scraping so gently it sent a shudder through his body.

She smirked. "That too then?"

He gulped. Nodded.

"Good. What else?"

How she expected him to think when her mouth was doing that was beyond him.

"What. Else?"

"You..."

"I've already said that's cheating, darling."

Her voice was perfectly level, like she wasn't decimating what little sanity he had left.

"No," he managed as he found the last dregs of coherence. "You, right here"--he indicated his arms--"so I can see your eyes when I sink into you."

"You are displaying a shocking lack of imagination," she scolded, but obligingly slid upwards until she laid on top of him completely.
He flipped them over with a wolfish grin.

"Believe me, Miss Fisher, my imagination is in no way lacking. But nothing beats this moment," he met her eyes as he entered her, watching the minute expressions that crossed her face. Saw all the thoughts she would never say. "This very instant when there's nothing between us for the first time, no matter how many times we've been here before."

She bit her bottom lip, and as much as Jack wanted to believe it was pleasure (because he, for one, felt fantastic) there was a glimmer of unshed tears in her eyes.

"I'm sorry. I wasn't..."

He wasn't sure how he intended to end that sentence. Thinking. Asking you to love me. Saying I love you. It would have been a lie; he meant all of them. He moved to withdraw, but her hands snaked around his back to hold him in place.

"Stay," she ordered quietly. "I need you to stay."

"If you're sure."

"I'm sure."

----

Jack was almost asleep when she spoke again. It was quiet; a tentative query rather than her usual brash assertions, an almost imperceptible tremble in her voice.

"I do, you know? Love you."

He pulled her closer, kissed the top of her head.

"I don't think that's supposed to make you sound miserable," he murmured.

Her finger brushed his chest.

"I'm not..." she sighed, moved so she was facing him. It was a purely symbolic action as the room was too dark to actually see each other. "I'm not miserable. I'm blindsided by the implications."

"Sounds awful," he replied.

"It's not. Not really."

They were both silent for a long moment.

"Phryne, I'm not--"

"Asking me to change," she finished. "I know. That's the thing though, isn't it? People change. I've changed. You've changed. Maybe it's better than the alternative, stagnancy for stagnancy's sake, but people change."

"People grow," corrected Jack. "Like flowers. An overly tended garden will wither beneath the attention; left alone entirely it will grow snared and impassable. But with care and attention it can become one of life's great pleasures."

He felt her fingers tattoo a beat against his chest.
"You've mentioned your garden before," she said eventually. "I'd like to see it, when we go home."

"It's likely to be autumn by then, if not winter. It won't be at its best."

"Then show me in summer."

It was her own sort of declaration: *I'll be there.*

"I can tell you about it now, if you'd like?"

He felt her nod as she settled against his chest, and he began. He talked about the plants that did best in direct sunlight, and the ones that required shade; he talked about soil types and fertilizers and pruning methods; he talked about the hardy flowers, the ones that didn't die, and the delicate ones that he had to coax through the winter; he talked about the colours, the scents, the perfect harmony of all of it together. He talked until they both fell asleep.
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

First of all, a huge, HUGE thank you for all your support and commiserations on the last chapter. I'm feeling slightly less fatalistic about the whole thing now. Updates may still be slow due to NaNoWriMo and then Christmas, but they will be coming.

Secondly, I don't generally provide any background on things outside of the story. I will say, however, that the events of this chapter come very shortly after Margaret Fisher had a letter from Prudence extolling Jack's virtues and confirmed for herself that those two beautiful fools were in love with each other. It's touched on in one of the Marked (Interludes) pieces, but I don't expect people to necessarily read or remember that.

It was still dark when Phryne woke up; the moon had moved through the sky and was now streaming through the window, curtains left open in their earlier haste, casting the entire room in an ethereal glow. Jack was asleep beside her, snoring lightly. She slipped from the bed, donning her robe, then padded softly towards the en-suite for a drink of water. When she came back she paused at the foot of the bed, suddenly frozen; eventually she curled up in a chair to think instead of retaking her space.

Her admission of love had not been particularly well handled. Still unsettled by an overheard conversation, she had blurted it out; she needed him to know, to understand that he was not an item she had cultivated for her own amusement. It was just a bloody awful way to say it. But it was out now, at least, and nothing had happened. Or everything had happened and nothing had changed.

Jack slept with his hand by his face, making him appear far more boyish than his usual sombre air allowed; watching him was enough to cause a strange sort of twist in her chest, as if she could no longer fit everything she was inside her skin.

"Are you coming back to bed?" he eventually asked, quietly.

Not asleep then, though his eyes remained closed.

"I was admiring the view," Phryne said.

His lips quirked into a sleepy smile, and his hand skittered towards her in offer. She moved as lithely as a cat from the chair to the bed, and his fingers curled around her hand in a brief welcome before he released her. She sat propped against her pillows, seemingly the taller one for once, Jack's dozing head hovering chastely at the level of her bosom.

"Go to sleep, Phryne," he said, eyes still closed. "It makes more sense in the morning."

"It makes sense now," she said. "This is the best time of day for thinking wicked thoughts."

His sleepy chuckle was deep and gentle and so very Jack in his essence.

"I'm not awake enough for wicked thoughts," he said, but his gently questing hands suggested otherwise.
He found what he sought, and brought her to a gently shuddering climax without opening his eyes or otherwise stirring from his repose.

"See?" he said innocently. "No wicked thoughts."

"I don't know," she replied. "Wherever did you learn to do that, Jack?"

He opened one eye, looked at her in bewilderment.

"After all we've done, that's the surprise warranting questions?"

She brushed his face with one hand, felt the day's stubble tickle her palm.

"I'm in the mood for truth," she said simply.

He wrapped his arm around her and moved closer. Still half-asleep, he obviously didn't feel in the mood to prevaricate or play.

"Rosie."

Phryne felt a sudden spike of jealousy. It was a terribly unbecoming trait, one she had chided Jack for more than once. But she knew Rosie; more to the point, perhaps, was she knew the protectiveness Jack provoked in her even after their marriage was over. He did inspire loyalty as fiercely as he gave it, her noble Jack. Rosie had parts of him Phryne had never dreamt of; his first youthful optimism, a vow that he had stuck to in unforgiving circumstances. Things she didn't necessarily want—boys were fun but fickle, marriage not really her inclination—but didn't like being denied either. She found she could not voice such thoughts though, and instead toyed with his hair.

"Are you going to elaborate?" she said.

"Not really," he murmured. "It would be ungentlemanly."

"Ahh, the sanctity of the boudoir," said Phryne. "I'll presume it wasn't murder then."

Jack chuckled.

"There were some... issues when I returned from France, but I found work-arounds."

There was something in his tone that said so much more; longing, regret, guilt.

"It sounds like you loved her very much."

He nodded, slowly and sadly. "I did."

"Then what happened?" she asked.

She had put together enough to sketch in the broad strokes, a not-unfamiliar story that had played out hundreds of times before. The finer nuances of the situation seemed to be a more closely kept secret, the sort that could explode like a land mine and leave devastation in its path. Perhaps it was best to clear the air thoroughly, even if it did niggle at her long-forgotten insecurities.

He shrugged in response, placed a hand on her bare torso and allowed his thumb to stroke softly. Not quite meeting her eyes, he began to explain.

"Before the war, we knew what we wanted. I was just a constable at the time, but I was keen and ambitious and we were in love. We thought that was enough. Then we started off on the wrong foot
after the incident with the plumbing; I had it put in for her, you know, and instead of a considerate
gesture it became a huge time and expense; the sort of expense that was easy for her family, but
strained my salary considerably."

Phryne nodded; in her life she'd been poorer than Jack and richer than Rosie, and the space between
them was vast.

"Then came the war, and..." he trailed off.

There really was no explanation possible, which was part of the problem. Phryne kissed the top of
his head, the easiest part of him to reach. His hand was tracing shapes across her stomach now,
soothing both of them.

"Well, it changed how I saw my job, and my relationships, and myself. And even if I didn't have the
nightmares, I didn't want a cushy office job any more. Rosie just saw it as all the more reason to take
one."

His hand stilled, just above her navel.

"This is where I was the day I said my vows," he said huskily. He began to move his hand upwards,
coming to rest on her breast. "And afterwards, this is where Rosie wanted me to be."

"It's a good place," Phryne said, arching into his touch.

"It is," said Jack. The faintest smile ghosted across his face. "I'm exceedingly fond of it."

"But you weren't there?"

"No."

His hand moved downwards, past her navel and into the thatch of curly hair. His fingers did one
slow circle of her clitoris and Phryne, still tender from his earlier ministrations, moaned.

"You were there?" she confirmed breathlessly, once the feeling abated.

"On a good day. The bad ones would have me around your knees, but I'm too lazy to stretch that
far," he smirked just a little, and the absurdity of the situation--having her lover's battlefield of a
dissolving marriage mapped across her body--hit Phryne. But if it made it easier, the blending of two
intimacies, who was she to argue? Her thoughts were interrupted by his voice rumbling through her
body once more. "But there we were, firmly entrenched in our own positions, and neither of us
willing to go over the top. Or unable, maybe. It's a distinction that doesn't matter, in the end."

Remembering his words earlier that night, she could see the inevitable conclusion.

"And so a garden became No Man's Land?"

"And so a garden became No Man's Land."

Phryne was quiet for a moment, mulling over the new revelations. She traced his jawline with her
finger, nudging his chin towards her so she could see his face properly; scooted down the bed so
they were level; kissed him thoroughly.

"I love you, Jack Robinson," she said when they stopped, her forehead pressed against his. "No
matter where you are."
Phryne went down to breakfast first that morning; there had been a shower involved, and quite a bit of distraction as Jack had tried to shave. She'd eventually had to leave him to it if they had any hope of arriving to work on time. She entered the dining room and selected her breakfast from the food laid out on the side.

"Good morning, Phryne," said her mother. "You look particularly lovely today."

Her mother probably meant it, but it was equally probable that she had an ulterior motive to the observation. Phryne chose the chair furthest from her mother at the long dining table.

"Thank you, mother."

There was silence for a few minutes as both women ate.

"I do believe I recognise that look, in fact," continued the Baroness; there was the bite then. And judging by the look on her mother's face, this one was going to be a doozy. "It reminds me an awful lot of the look of a woman who has realised they have found the love of their life."

The peculiar thing, Phryne thought, was that "love of my life" always seemed to be used as an excuse--"I can't leave", or worse "I couldn't let them leave"; he didn't mean it; I had to follow him to Collingwood, to forgive his transgressions at the cost of others. It was a justification for the very worst impulses in people; all-consuming and destructive, even if you were happy in the midst of it.

Jack was none of those things. She was still Phryne when she was with him; the best parts of herself, more often than not, but always herself. He never asked her to change, but always met her halfway when she did; he held her to the same moral standards as anyone else, even if he indulged her unconventional ways of getting there; he had her back, an unwavering source of strength that never pushed forward. More importantly, he relied on her be the same for him.

"Jack has been married before," Phryne said calmly, their recent conversation on her mind. She generally found a factual rebuttal was the most efficient method to silencing her mother's meddling. "So, logically, you have either doomed me to caring for him more than he cares for me or have dismissed the woman he spent fifteen years with. Neither is particularly appealing or flattering."

As Phryne predicted, her mother took it with absolutely none of the grace expected by her station.

"I know you enjoy this detective game, Phryne," Margaret said imperiously. "but this really is one area where I am the expert. I do have my uses, you know. There's no need to be snappish."

The martyr card. Her mother was annoyed.

"Don't be ridiculous, Mother. Jack's not the love of my life," Phryne said, taking another bite of her egg before adding, "He's my partner. I wouldn't accept anything less."

While Phryne was pretty certain she'd regret the assertion when her mother started haranguing her about marriage, it was absolutely worth it for the look of shock on Margaret Fisher's face. Phryne continued to eat her breakfast.

A few minutes later Jack came downstairs to join them in the dining room, and Phryne shot him a warning look. The last thing he needed was to get blindsided by her mother's inquiries. He came over to her, dropping a kiss on her forehead as a pretense.

"What?" he whispered.
"My mother's playing cupid again," Phryne responded, equally quiet. "Don't give an inch or she'll be picking out china patterns."

Jack winked at her and snagged a piece of toast from her plate, then sprawled in the chair next to her.

"Good morning, Lady Fisher," he said with a slow smile, his tone almost indolent.

"Good morning, inspector," replied Margaret stiffly.

She was clearly unimpressed by his new manner, and Phryne tried to hide a grin. Jack's unexpectedly playful side did have it's advantages. Which she unfortunately did not get to explore, as there was a knock on the door. Phryne turned to see Abbott at the threshold.

"Excuse me, sir. There's an Inspector Carter on the telephone for you," said the butler.

"I'll take it," Phryne said, standing up. "Jack was just about to eat breakfast."

She went into the hall and picked up the receiver left on the table, hoping the call was about a personal matter. It was highly unlikely, given that they'd be seeing him in an hour, but hope did spring eternal.

"Hello Ted," she said.

"Miss Fisher?"

"Afraid so," replied Phryne. "Jack is unavailable at the moment, so you'll have to give me a message and I'll pass it on."

Through the phone line, she could hear Ted sigh. The sound gave her a shiver of foreboding.

"There's been another murder."

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