A Glass Splinter

by Fire_Sign

Summary

July 1928 - Eugene Fisher is Baron of Richmond-upon-Thames. In Melbourne, his poor relations had no idea how close they had been to inheriting a title.

(Alternatively: On the first of November I sat down with a blank document, the first of many cups of tea, and two questions: "What would have happened if Henry Fisher had never inherited?" and "What if Phrack had had their gaudy night and it broke them as badly as Jack's face in that scene?" This fic is neither...)

Notes

Oh, I could probably write a chapter's worth of note alone. In ascending order of importance:

This is not a terribly happy story. It is, I hope, an interesting journey that appeals to you as much as it did to me. But the working title was SuperAngst, and it was apt. It meandered very far from where I thought it was going (ANGST! RECRIMINATION! EXPLOSIVE DRAMA!) but the core essence remained.

As the summary suggests, this fic is not quite what I had envisioned. I still rather desperately want to see a fic where the Fishers did not inherit the barony. I have reason to believe that there is a Gaudy Night in the near offing.

Updates will hopefully be daily, with possible two or three day breaks at midpoints. Best laid plans of mice and men, though, so I will make no promises.
The title comes from a Neil Gaiman quote:

Have you ever been in love? Horrible isn't it? It makes you so vulnerable. It opens your chest and it opens up your heart and it means that someone can get inside you and mess you up. You build up all these defenses, you build up a whole suit of armor, so that nothing can hurt you, then one stupid person, no different from any other stupid person, wanders into your stupid life.... You give them a piece of you. They didn't ask for it. They did something dumb one day, like kiss you or smile at you, and then your life isn't your own anymore. Love takes hostages. It gets inside you. It eats you out and leaves you crying in the darkness, so simple a phrase like 'maybe we should be just friends' turns into a glass splinter working its way into your heart. It hurts. Not just in the imagination. Not just in the mind. It's a soul-hurt, a real gets-inside-you-and-rips-you-apart pain. I hate love.


This began as a NaNoWriMo fic. I did reach the 50 thousand word mark, but it took another month and a half to finish the story. I lost track of the cups of tea consumed count, but the number is high. As was the number of chocolate digestives.

This is the longest thing I have ever written. I would love to feedback, both the good and (perhaps especially) the bad.

SarahToo might be the most patient beta in existence. She is certainly the fastest.

Lastly, without the AMAZING Phrack Slack writers holding my hand, poking me with sticks, and working through plot snags with me, this would never have been written. And a funnier, kinder group to hang with there is not. And I will get teary, so I'll leave it at that.
Phryne Freeman took a deep breath, smoothed her skirt (classic and well-fitting, even though the material was showing the slightest hint of wear), checked her fingernails (a childhood habit), and moved towards the Andrews home. Aunt Prudence was sure to be there already—she had an uncanny ability to show up early for maximum gossip opportunities—and Phryne knew that the impression a punctual arrival made would be vital if she were to succeed in her day's goal: to forge a connection with Lydia Andrews, and by extension gain her allegiance in Phryne's attempts to make a serious investment in John Andrews' company.

Bert and Cec, friends met through her husband's job at the docks now working as taxi drivers, had dropped her off at the end of the driveway at her request. The short walk up was vital in Phryne's efforts to don her most charming high society facade; Aunt Prudence had gone through some trouble to finagle the invitation, the only sort of assistance Phryne's pride would allow her, and she was determined to succeed. As she came to the door a maid came out the door in tears. Well, that wasn't exactly unheard of in these places; unfair dismissals were an unfortunate part of her aunt's circle, though most of the girls had the good sense to leave out the servants' entrance.

"Hello!" said Phryne cheerfully. "I'm here for lunch with Mrs. Andrews."

"I'm very sorry," said the maid through her tears, "but lunch has been cancelled due to an unfortunate family incident."

Phryne was immediately intrigued; unfortunate family incidents could usually be spun to her advantage, if she could prove herself useful.

"What sort of incident?" she asked.

The maid gave her a watery sort of look, and before she could answer two men came out bearing... a body on a stretcher? That seemed unlikely.

"I'm afraid Mr. Andrews passed away quite suddenly this morning," the maid said mournfully.

"How awful!" Phryne said. "I must go express my condolences to Lydia."

Then she steamed straight past the maid into the house, rightfully guessing the use of Mrs. Andrews' Christian name would stun the girl into compliance. Indoors she found Aunt Prudence, who was managing to strike the delicate line between remorseful and giddy at the news of Mr. Andrews passing; no love lost there, then.

"Phryne!" she exclaimed. "It really is the most awful news."

"I heard, Aunt Prudence. John Andrews dead? Whatever happened? He always struck me as reasonably young and healthy," said Phryne, glancing at the doorway to ensure they weren't overheard by the family.

"He just dropped dead!" Prudence exclaimed, then lowered her voice. "In the lavatory. And now there's this awful policeman harassing poor Lydia and asking all sorts of questions..."

"I'm sure the policeman is just doing his job," consoled Phryne, though she doubted it herself. She generally found Melbourne's police officers a lazy, easily manipulated lot; good on those occasions when she... sought resolutions for the problems of her friends, not so great when you expected them to actually do their job. Still, all was not lost.
At that moment, Lydia Andrews came into the room, looking understandably pale and shaken. Phryne had met her a handful of times before, at Aunt P's parties, but this was their first intimate gathering. Not quite what she’d had in mind.

"Oh, Lydia, Aunt Prudence just told me about John. How very awful," said Phryne with far more conviction than she actually felt. "How can I help?"

Lydia raised and lowered her hand twice, lost for words.

"He's gone," she said plaintively. "I don't understand it. We had breakfast this morning and now he's gone, and the police are thundering around calling my house a crime scene and insisting the guests leave so they can speak with the staff."

Odd, thought Phryne. But perhaps workable, if she could just get a few more answers. The weak link was probably the constable she saw in the entrance as she came in; very green and a little sweet, and probably terrified by Phryne's forms of flirtations. That maid that had greeted her was still hovering by the doorway with a tea tray though, and that showed promise.

"Lydia, I hope this isn't too untoward, but I do have some experience... shall we say, resolving delicate matters for friends when it comes to police inquiries. I do hope we're friends, I mean, and I would hate for you to have more stress than necessary at such a delicate time," Phryne said, smiling kindly; internally she was still sizing up the situation. Something didn’t sit right, though it was probably just the shock.

"Oh, would you?" asked Lydia, eyes wide.

She showed Lydia Andrews to a seat.

"Sit down and rest, I'm sure the police will need to speak with you again, or at least they will if they are doing their jobs with any aptitude. I'll just go make a few unofficial inquiries of my own and be back in a jiffy."

Phryne left the parlour, stopping in the doorway to convene briefly with the maid. The poor girl—Dorothy, her name was—looked terrified to even be talking to another human. Phryne had met rabbits that were less skittish. Still, the girl agreed to Phryne's request, strange though it probably seemed.

The bathroom was hideously ornate, and the chalk outline of John Andrews’s body was right in the middle of it. Phryne took a preliminary assessment of the scene: very little was out of place, no signs of blood or any obvious weapons. The position of the body was peculiar; she assumed at first that it was John’s heart or some other sudden demise, but the fetal position suggested some amount of agony. She rifled through the cabinets, finding a pack of pink-papered powders—for female hysteria, she thought, and wasn't that a ridiculous idea—that seemed out of place in what was clearly John Andrews’s bathroom. She snuck one into her bag quickly, then heard footsteps approaching the door. She stood quickly, turning on a tap.

"Just finishing!" she called cheerfully, letting the water run for a little longer than necessary.

There was another knock, firmer this time. She did like a man with a good knock, though the chances of the police officer on the other side being worth the hassle was highly unlikely. Phryne swung open the door with a dazzling smile.

"I'm so sorry," she began, but the man—good-looking, she thought, with a serious sort of air that
meant he'd be no fun at all—pushed past her without waiting for her to finish her apology.

"This is a crime scene, Miss..."

"Mrs. Freeman," Phryne said, then cursed internally. Bloody copper had just played her. Well, turnabout was fair play; she batted her eyelashes. "What did you say your name was?"

"Detective Inspector Jack Robinson," he said brusquely. "And I would like to know why you are interfering with my investigation."

"Interfering?" she asked, infusing her voice with an almost sickening level of surprise. "I merely needed to use the facilities."

"Of which there are several," said Inspector Robinson. "Most people would deliberately seek out those other facilities. Yet here you are, in the bathroom where a man just died."

"And rather gruesomely, by the look of things," said Phryne. If he wasn't going to play into her flirtations, she'd find another route. "The position of the body and relative lack of blood indicates something internal. Your presence instead of someone lower in the ranks suggests you believe it to be rather suspicious in nature. Poison, perhaps? The timing suggests it was consumed early this morning, possibly with breakfast, though obviously it would depend on the specific poison..."

The green constable—he really was sweet—was making a note of her comments on his pad. Good. Perhaps the police would actually investigate if she pointed them in the right direction.

"I appreciate your assistance, Mrs. Freeman," said the inspector in a tone that made it abundantly clear that he appreciated no such thing. "But I will need to ask you to leave. Now. Or I will have Collins remove you."

"Surely you would want to remove me yourself?" she asked, smiling. There was a certain gall to having her flirtations rebuked, the man probably not a homosexual—she did have a keen eye for these things, she'd married one after all—but somehow still immune to her; if they were to be crossing paths in this investigation, she'd have to step up her game. "Perhaps in handcuffs?"

"Please leave now, Mrs. Freeman," was all he said in response.

She sashayed out of the room, deliberately not looking back. It wouldn't help to be desperate.

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When she came back downstairs, she saw Aunt Prudence providing her particular sort of emotional support to Lydia Andrews. There was a knock at the door and a tall, lithe man enter with the grace of a cat. He was charming and attentive to Lydia Andrews; likely a lover, but certainly a bold one to come into the house of a widow while her husband's corpse was still warm.

"Mrs. Freeman, allow me to introduce Sasha DeLisse," Lydia eventually said, seeming to regain her senses. "Sasha was supposed to dance for..."

Aunt Prudence and Lydia Andrews reached the same conclusion at the same time and exchanged a horrified look.

"The hospital fundraiser!"

"Lydia was supposed to host a fundraiser this evening," explained Prudence. "She's raised thousands of pounds for the Women's Hospital."
Phryne smiled—this was just the sort of way to prove herself indispensable, and would allow her to speak with several other business opportunities in the process.

"The Women's Hospital is very dear to me," she said, smiling. It wasn't even a lie; Mac was dear to her and the hospital was dear to Mac, so a fundraiser would no doubt be of genuine interest. "Why don't Aunt Prudence and I take over? We'd have to host it here—there's no way we'd have the time to find another venue or inform the guests, but we'd handle everything else."

Sasha DeLisse smiled in approval, and dropped a kiss to her hand. Phryne recognised the name now; her interest in the arts was difficult to truly indulge on her salary, but she did what she could. Sasha and his sister were well-known dancers, although Phryne had a feeling that something had happened to the sister recently; death or disfigurement or some sort of tragic backstory that seemed to follow artists around. She didn't have much patience for theatrics unless it was on the stage though, and she debated whether or not Sasha would be worth the hassle of bringing to bed. Probably not if he was Lydia Andrews' paramour, but the hungry look he gave her suggested that Phryne might have been wrong about that assumption.

Unfortunately, Lydia Andrews—already pale and weak—chose that exact moment to collapse into the dancer's arms. No matter how far away French battlefields were, there were some things you did not forget easily; the advantages of a cool head in an emergency was one of them.

"Take her upstairs!" ordered Phryne. "I'll telephone a doctor. And see if you can find where that inspector's wandered off to. I have a feeling he may want to hear about this."

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After Lydia had been attended to (the doctor's opinion was that it was merely shock, though he couldn't rule out anything more untoward), Phryne left the Andrews house. Her scheduled taxi was not there, as she expected to be several hours longer—all in all the drama had taken just under an hour—so she walked to the nearest tram stop and headed towards Melbourne's Women's Hospital.

When she got there, she found Bert and Cec standing in the corridor; Bert looked annoyed, as he generally did, and Cec looked worried.

"Had a girl tossed into our taxi after someone tried to rid her of her troubles," explained Cec. He was always the soft-hearted of the pair.

"Bled all over my bleedin' upholstery!" grumbled Bert, but Phryne could tell that he was worried rather than cross.

"Who is attending her?" Phryne asked.

"That friend of yours. Doctor MacMillan?"

"Good," said Phryne. "She's in the very best hands then. I'll just go through and see how the girl is. I need to talk to Mac on another matter entirely."

The other matter proved to actually be connected; the anonymous girl's purse contained a letter of reference on the stationery of John Andrews. Alice Hartley was her name. She was so young; too young, really, to have her life hanging by a thread because some man didn't use a French letter. Mac shook her head in agreement when Phryne said so.

"She won't talk. They never do. We had a copper come in a few times to try and gain their co-operation, take down the biggest amateur in the game, but I think he's given up by now. What was his name? Roberts? Robinson? Something like that."
They both knew that procuring an abortion could be ten to fifteen years in gaol; the cost of cooperation was just too high.

That evening Phryne mixed with the cream of Melbourne's society, ignoring her own rather unassuming origins.

"Your mother was from good stock, at least," said Aunt Prudence in her brusque manner that Phryne supposed was meant to be a comfort but was really just extreme snobbery.

"Pity my father's English relatives didn't all die off in the war," countered Phryne dryly. This was a not-infrequent topic of conversation. "There's rumours that if you go far enough back we're related to the king. Can you imagine my father on the throne?"

Aunt Prudence clutched at her chest in horror at the mere idea.

Sasha came over to ask Phryne for a dance; not Lydia's plaything then, but probably angling for something out of her as the evening's host. A fact that was confirmed later in the evening when he pocketed her earrings (fakes, but very convincing ones) and disappeared. Phryne sighed, debated whether or not to go after him.

"Don't you dare, girl!" exclaimed Prudence, clearly reading her mind. "If you absolutely must make a fuss, telephone the police and allow them to handle matters."

"Right," said Phryne. "As if I could trust them to do anything about a pair of earrings."

"What about that detective inspector? I didn't think much of him this morning, but he came during the party to take that maid in for questioning. Arsenic, apparently! In the sugar, which is why poor Lydia was ill as well. Can you imagine?"

Prudence's tone made it clear that she could imagine, and probably in more detail than a penny dreadful.

"What? Dorothy? That sweet little mouse who couldn't bring herself to answer the telephone? I'm sure she was just dying to off her employers," said Phryne sarcastically. "And I had such high hopes for the man."

"Phryne!" exclaimed her aunt, scandalised.

_She enjoys it, really_, thought Phryne, _I'm just providing her with entertainment_.

"Well, there's no point chasing after that bloody dancer now!" said Phryne. "He's had far too much of a head start. But perhaps your suggestion of involving the police has its merits, Aunt Prudence. I'll just go down to the station and make a report. You didn't happen to catch which station they were from, did you?"

"Of course I did, girl! I was hardly going to let him in without getting his card," her aunt scolded. From an immense bag, Prudence produced a square of paper. "There, Detective Inspector Jack Robinson. City South Police Station."

"Marvelous, Aunt P!" said Phryne, taking the card. She kissed her aunt's cheek and left the house before her aunt could argue about taking a car at this time of night.
"Mrs. Freeman," greeted the Inspector as she stormed through the door. He didn't even *blink* at her arrival.

He looked... tired, actually. Phryne was surprised to see him still at the station, if she was honest; it was more likely that the poor maid would be held overnight and browbeaten into a confession on flimsy grounds in the morning.

"Inspector," she said, as coolly as possible. Now was not the time for flirting. "I've heard you've accused that poor woman of *murder*!"

The inspector winced, then glanced towards his office. For the first time Phryne noticed that he had three cups of tea on a tray.

"I've been steadfastly avoiding the term, Mrs. Freeman."

For the first time, Phryne felt like her rushed defense of the maid might not have been necessary. She wouldn't allow that to stop her though; she pushed straight past the inspector and headed into his office where Dorothy was sitting in a chair in tears. The green constable—Collins?—was sat in a chair next to her, clearly meant to be a comfort. The boy could hardly be a comfort; too twitchy.

"Dorothy?" Phryne asked.

The maid turned, blinking quickly.

"We were just about to have a cup of tea and send Miss Williams home," said the inspector from behind her. "Unfortunately she's been let go at the Andrews household and the last tram to her mother's left twenty minutes ago, so I'll be driving her home when my shift is over."

"Right!" said Phryne, at loose ends for once. She didn’t allow it to faze her long. "You can stay with me, Dot—do you mind if I call you Dot?—if it would be more convenient. I know a very clever woman who might be able to help you in the morning, and we have a spare room."

"Oh, thank you miss!"

Phryne pointedly ignored the inspector’s look of consternation, helping Dorothy gather her coat and bags before heading out of the office.

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The next day Phryne noticed an article in the newspaper announcing that Sasha DeLisse had been shot and left for dead, but the quick thinking of a passer-by had saved him and he was now expected to make a full recovery. She noted the hospital he had been taken to, and immediately headed out to it. Perhaps she could recover her earrings, and if not it was likely information the police could use; it's not like men stole the jewellery off of their dance partners for an amusement.

When she arrived at the hospital, she charmed her way past the nurses and found Sasha's bed. The dancer had the decency to look embarrassed, at least.

"My earrings?"

"I needed them."

"Why?" She didn't add that he was an idiot for assuming they were real; it might very well be the reason he was in the hospital now. "And I know where you were recovered and I know what goes on there, so don't concoct some fanciful story either."
It was a bluff, but it worked. Sasha spilled the whole sordid story—his sister's descent into addiction, his pursuit of justice against the Snow King. Phryne could relate to that at least, and she gave him a sympathetic sort of smile.

"That was incredibly foolish," she said. "But I'm entertained just enough to help you. I'll need more details before the police arrive—"

"Too late, Mrs. Freeman," came a now-familiar voice from the doorway.

Phryne turned. *Time to cross swords once more*, she thought, and realised that she welcomed the opportunity. It was rare for a man to make such sport out of it.

"Inspector Robinson! I was just speaking to Sasha about the recovery of my earrings."

"The ones that he tried to hock for cocaine, you mean?"

"Well, I can hardly be blamed for what he did with my lost property!"

"No, I imagine not. And yet I do not find myself convinced of your innocence."

Phryne moved closer, allowed her upper body to brush against him. Riskier than she usually liked to play it at this stage, the possibility that it would frighten him off very real.

"What if I were to... aid you in another one of your endeavours?"

The detective's jaw muscles twitched. Intriguing. Perhaps he was not as immune as he first appeared then.

"I don't need your assistance, Mrs. Freeman. I need you to leave my witness alone and go home. Trust the police to handle this matter."

"Why would I?" she asked indignantly.

It was a method sure to ruffle a few feathers, and she wasn't even playing at this point. Obstinate man. Couldn't recognise help if it came up and slapped him in the face. Which she just might, if he kept up that smug look.

"Because it's a police matter," the man practically seethed. "And last I checked, you are not a police officer."

"Well, seeing as how the police officers in this town can't even manage to arrest an abortionist who is maiming young women, I'd say that's a good thing."

That same muscle in his jaw twitched. His face really was distracting, thought Phryne. Almost like marble.

"Leave. Now, Mrs. Freeman, or I will have you arrested."

"On what grounds?"

He stared at her, and Phryne found that she could suddenly think of several incidents—most of them long past, but not all—that he could (and would) arrest her for, and she was no longer certain he was unaware of them.

"Fine!" huffed Phryne. "But this is the last time I try to help you."
"I'm sure I can survive the disappointment," the inspector said, drolly. "Goodbye."

As she stormed away, determined to re-examine the situation and regroup before embarking on a hastily made plan, Phryne couldn't resist a parting shot over her shoulder.

"I really could have helped."

"I fail to see how," the inspector called after her, equally determined to have the last word.

Phryne was standing in her kitchen with a kettle in her hand for brewing a pot of tea for herself and Doctor MacMillan (who had stopped by after her shift at the hospital to discuss what could be done to help Alice Hartley) when the entire situation made itself clear. Phryne never forgot a person's tea preferences; it was a small detail that made a huge impression, and so she filed the information away at a first meeting. Phryne took her tea with sugar. Mac preferred a slice of lemon. And Lydia Andrews drank it black.

“Sorry, Mac, I've just had a thought. I know where I've seen those nerve packet powders,” said Phryne, not voicing her suspicions about Lydia Andrews just yet. “I really hate to run off and leave you, but it is time sensitive. If I'm not back by midnight, call City South police station and tell them I'm at Madam Breda's bathhouse.”

Mac knew her too well to argue or question.

“Why City South?”

“The inspector there is the one investigating the death of John Andrews.”

“Are you going to explain?” asked her friend, raising one perfect eyebrow.

“Absolutely not,” grinned Phryne. “I'll be in and out in ten minutes; my lockpicking skills are in need of a brush-up.”

“How you have not spent most of your life in gaol eludes me,” said Mac dryly.

“It's my Fisher charm. My father is useful in that regard, at least.”

Phryne grabbed a taxicab—she really needed to find a way to keep Cec and Bert on hand for these situations—and headed towards the Turkish Bathhouse in Little Lonsdale. Aunt Prudence had told her all about it at the fundraiser, and Phryne had seen several pink packets in the proprietor's handbag when she had taken her purse out to bid on the silent auction; from there it was easy to make a few leaps of logic and realise that John Andrews had been the Snow King, and Lydia Andrews had known presumably murdered him for it.

Phryne was half right—not a poor result, really; Lydia Andrews had been the mastermind all along, a fact Phryne discovered after she was grabbed by the Snow Queen's thugs and forced into the sauna. The correct conclusions she had drawn were poor comfort as she felt her consciousness fade in the oppressive heat; she made a last-ditch attempt to reroute the steam before attempting the lock once more.

When Jack Robinson opened the door, she had never been so relieved to see a copper in her life.

“Fancy seeing you here,” she quipped. “If you hurry, you should have just enough time to arrest Lydia Andrews for cocaine smuggling.”
“That was a damned foolish thing to do,” said Inspector Robinson, passing her a glass of water.

She sat on a chair he had conjured from somewhere, wrapped in his coat while his constables searched for her stolen outfit, and sipped the drink gratefully. Her head was still swimming, but she already felt better. A moment later Mac pushed through the crowd.

“Phryne!” she exclaimed. “Are you alright?”

Without waiting for an answer, Mac crouched down in front of the chair and began to examine her. When she was satisfied, she stood up.

“You'll live, assuming I don't kill you. You're lucky Inspector Robinson was at the station,” she scolded. “He remembered me from the hospital and came straight away.”

Phryne gave the police officer a wan smile.

“I suppose your timing was good,” she said.

“I'm going to need your statement, Mrs. Freeman. If you'd accompany me back to the station—”

Phryne stood obediently, sensing compliance was in her best interest if she wanted to get out of this without charges.

“It can wait until your clothes have been returned,” said Inspector Robinson, looking quickly away.

Well, she thought with no small amount of satisfaction, if that was all it took to get a reaction she would have done it a lot sooner.
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

A short chapter and an early update. I might compensate by posting Chapter 3 before bed, depending on how much hassle the formatting gives me.

Jack stood in front of the Freeman home, a sensible bungalow in East St. Kilda that was very like his own except for the lack of flowerbeds, debating whether or not he wanted to knock on the front door. He had stopped by on his way home in the hopes of clearing some minor paperwork on the Andrews case, leaving him free to focus on the paperwork for more recent cases in the morning, but realised that he really was tired. Still, duty called.

He knocked, and heard someone laughing as they approached the door.

"Inspector Robinson!" exclaimed Mrs. Freeman, eyes sparkling. Her black hair was loose and flowed past her shoulders; it always stunned him to realise how much hair a faux-bob could hide. "Whatever did I do this time?"

Jack cleared his throat.

"I—I have some paperwork I need you to sign. Lydia Andrews' case is going before the courts next week and I just need to clear up a few details in your statement. It won't be more than five minutes, but if it's a bad time I can come back."

Oh God, he really was tired if he was fumbling worse than Collins.

The woman stepped aside to let him in, the sleeves of her dress fluttering. Her dress was green and glittery and very Bohemian, a far cry from the sensible suit she had worn during the Andrews investigation.

"Stay here for just a moment," she directed, disappearing into the parlour.

There was some very quiet discussion Jack couldn't make out, though he had to admit he was intrigued, then she came back out followed by two men. They both nodded at Jack before donning their hats and coats and heading out the door.

"Sorry about that. My husband was just heading out with a mate," she explained. "Come on in; we can go through to the kitchen if you need a table, or there's the fire in the parlour that makes it far more pleasant."

"Parlour will be fine," said Jack, giving her a professional smile.

"Do you want a drink?" she asked. "Whiskey?"

"No, thank you," he said stiffly. "I'm still on duty."

"Tea then? Or I think Dot made cocoa."

"Dot Williams? The maid?" Jack asked.
"Yes. Seeing as how I played a role in her employer's arrest, she's been staying in one of the spare rooms until she finds another position."

That was a surprising turn of events, he thought. Phryne Freeman had struck him as a ruthless sort of woman, not the sort to open her home to those in need.

"Tea would be lovely," he said, taking a seat in one of the armchairs that framed the fireplace.

Mrs. Freeman headed towards the door leading to the kitchen, and Jack took a good look at the Freemans' parlour. It was a practical whitewash, but someone had painted a mural of flowers on the far wall. The furniture was an eclectic mix, but all of it solidly built at least, and there were several bookshelves overflowing with volumes; from his seat he couldn't make out titles, which was a shame as he found very little illuminated a person's character quite so well as a browse of their reading habits. Art adorned the walls, most of it classic scenery but a couple of more modern pieces; not all of it was good art, as far as he could tell, but it was a lovingly curated collection nonetheless.

"Biscuits?" called Mrs. Freeman from the kitchen. "Or I was just about to eat supper if you wanted something more substantial."

"I never say no to a biscuit," he replied, ignoring the rumbling in his stomach; He had eaten a pie from the cart for lunch, but that had been hours earlier.

Mrs. Freeman came out of the kitchen carrying a large tray laden with sandwiches, biscuits and tea.

"Help yourself," she said. "We don't stand on ceremony here. You look like a feral cat that nobody's fed in a week."

"Thank you," said Jack dryly. "It's a flattering comparison."

Mrs. Freeman winked at him, then gave an exaggerated grin. "My mother used to lecture me about bringing home strays."

It was just so ridiculous that he smiled back.

"So, you said there was some paperwork?" she asked, settling in the armchair across from him.

"Yes. Mostly just signatures on copies on your statement, but a couple of things needed to be clarified as well. It's all marked down."

He handed over the file, and she began to read. When she was done she removed a pen from her décolletage (seriously?) and began to sign where indicated. Jack was not done with his first sandwich when she finished and passed the folder back.

"I should get going," Jack said, looking mournfully at his half-eaten food.

"Don't be absurd. You can finish eating, at least."

Jack considered what was waiting for him at home—cold, empty rooms that hung heavy with the weight of his failures—and seized the chance to avoid it for a little while longer.

"Thank you," he said stiffly.

"As repayment, you can tell me about your day," Mrs. Freeman replied, tucking her feet beneath her and looking at him. There was a piercing quality to her gaze that made him slightly uncomfortable.

"It was a long day," he said. "And I don't want to talk about it."
"Did you solve whatever exciting case you had at least?"

"It was solved," he said curtly. "But seeing as how it ended up with me sending a fourteen year old girl back to an orphanage that she'd run away from in favour of a life with a pickpocketing hypnotist, I wouldn't count it as a win."

Mrs. Freeman grimaced. "No, I suppose not."

Jack was becoming more and more curious about the background of Phryne Freeman; she moved in upper class circles, lived in a middle class house, and reacted with the experience of one intimately familiar with poverty. It was also none of his business.

"Her name's Jane," Jack offered, desperate to find some mostly safe topic of conversation while he ate. He didn't miss the unsettled look that crossed her features before she schooled them into submission. "We found her wandering along the railway with a handkerchief full of stolen jewels from our dead woman..."

He told Mrs. Freeman the whole story, or at least the parts involving the wayward runaway. Every time he hesitated she drew more from him; she'd be a hell of an interrogator, he thought begrudgingly.

"All in all, she seemed the resourceful sort of girl that could really blossom in the right environment. And instead I had to send her back."

"Do you have babes of your own, Inspector Robinson?" Mrs. Freeman asked. Her voice was gentle, and Jack had the impression that it wasn't simply her playing him.

"No," he said, shaking his head slightly. It was never an easy question to answer; they had no children at home, which was what the question meant. But he could never forget the sight of John, perfectly formed and far too early. "No, we were never blessed."

They were both silent for a moment, the air charged with unmentioned grief.

"Could you not take her in then?" she said finally. "Surely Welfare would see that a police officer and his wife are a better option than one of those places."

True, but a police officer who never stopped working and a wife that hadn't spoken to him beyond clipped telephone calls in months and had been living with her sister for longer would never be acceptable. He just shook his head, finishing his tea.

"I apologise," he said. "Sometimes the futility of it all wears. It wasn't your business, Mrs. Freeman, and I'm sorry to have involved you."

"Call me Phryne," she said, smiling slightly. "Nobody else does, but we can be partners in melancholy and surely that warrants given names?"

"Jack," he said. "Everybody calls me Jack."

"Well, Jack," she grinned at him then, a warm, open smile that spread slowly from the corners of her mouth to her blue eyes. "I think we've both gotten what you came for. Feel free to stop by with any more paperwork you need signed."

"Good night, Mrs. Freeman," Jack said, standing. "Thank you for the tea."

The evening had left him with a very different impression of Phryne Freeman, and he found that his
earlier exhaustion did not weigh quite so heavily as he headed back towards his police vehicle.
Chapter 3

A couple of weeks after their surprisingly intimate conversation, Phryne saw Jack Robinson again, this time over the dead body of Leonard Stevens. It was not how she intended to end her evening at the Green Mill; she and Charlie had both come out for a dance, and she had her eye on several charming and discreet young men.

"Mrs. Freeman," he greeted her without missing a beat as he crouched down to examine the corpse. Phryne began to wonder if the man was just completely unflappable. "I was wondering how long it would be before you emerged to wreak havoc again. I'm fairly certain your presence is much like Pandora's box."

"Hello to you too, Jack," she replied, raising an eyebrow. "I've secured the scene and made sure that the witnesses couldn't speak amongst themselves the best I can. And you may want to investigate this —" She produced a wad of notes from her decolletage. "Stevens was carrying it."

"And you rifled through a dead man's pockets?" Jack asked, taking the proffered money.

She smirked. "Securing the scene."

She had also been looking for clues; given her tenuous but real connection to the bastard, she had to ensure he wasn’t holding anything incriminating.

"I'm pretty sure the scene needed to be secured from you, not by you."

"Oh Jack, I'm sure you could have secured the scene much more efficiently," she simpered, then grinned wickedly. Perhaps off-balance was the trick to gaining his compliance. "I might have even cooperated, if you'd asked nicely enough."

The police officer stood up, singling out his constable. It was that green one again, the one Dot kept talking about.

"Collins, search the witnesses. Thoroughly."

Phryne watched in amusement as Hugh Collins attempted to gain permission to search the American singer—Narene? Something like that. She was schooling him quite resoundingly.

"That's just cruel, Jack," she said. "The poor boy looks like he'll be sick at any moment. Let me do it."

Jack shook his head. "He needs to learn."

"Trial by fire? Come on now."

"Believe me, Mrs. Freeman, this is barely a hot summer day."

Phryne sighed.

"Your constable has been by three times this week," she observed. "I presume to ask Dot to step out with him, but he seems to falter at the final hurdle."

"Probably the Firemen and Policemen's Ball," Jack replied. "He keeps telling my men that he has the prettiest girl, then looks vaguely ill about the whole thing. I can only presume he hasn't actually asked."
"Mm," said Phryne. "That does present a conundrum."

Much to her surprise, the inspector seemed to be considering the problem as much as she was.

The policeman had a serious look on his face.

"Take a seat please, Mrs. Freeman."

Phryne sat in the chair nearest the window.

"I'm afraid we found some photographic plates under some floorboards in Leonard Stevens's flat," he said, and pushed an envelope across the desk. From the weight, she knew it was the plates in question.

Phryne cursed; she didn't need to hold them to the light to know what was on them. She had managed to retrieve the original prints of her husband and his lover during her break-in, but hadn't been able to find the actual plates. Charlie had scurried off in fear before then; she could appreciate his desire to run, but he hadn't bothered to tell her where he was going.

"You don't seem surprised," Inspector Robinson—that was undoubtedly who he was right now, the smiling man who told her to call him Jack nowhere in sight—observed.

"There are many reasons people marry, and love is probably the least common reason of all."

"And why did you marry Charlie then?"

"His brother Vic was a good friend before the war, and he asked me to check in on Charlie if he didn't make it back," she shrugged. She had cared for Vic a lot, and his death had seemed to exemplify the futility of war. "About five years ago Charlie’s mother discovered his... particular interests. He needed the plausible deniability a marriage provided, and I needed to cash in on the Freeman name. Between a small bequest from my grandmother and Charlie's old plane—I was sad to see the plane go, by the way; it was an absolutely marvellous machine—we managed to buy our bungalow and a second one which we let out. Now Charlie works as an amanuensis down at the dock offices and I manage our investments. It's not much, but we manage."

She closed the folder. She couldn't quite get a handle on Inspector Robinson and did not know how to play it; she suspected he had seen right through her tragic and delicate woman act, but had been equally unresponsive to her flirtations. She would have chalked the latter up to a happy marriage, but she generally found that the happily married enjoyed flirting the most; a nice ego stroke with no danger. Pushing him off-kilter seemed nearly impossible. She decided to opt for honesty.

"It's a bloody stupid law," she said. "Loving someone should hardly be a crime."

The inspector nodded slightly, as if in silent agreement. "I wish I could change the law for you, Mrs. Freeman, but I am its servant and not its master."

"There's always a way around it," she countered.

"And I have no doubt that you find it every time," he said with the barest hint of a smirk, then raised his teacup in a silent toast. "And as I do not currently know the whereabouts of your husband or the other gentleman pictured, I cannot act on the information. Have a nice evening."

Phryne could recognise a dismissal when she saw one, and stood to leave. She hesitated, pretending...
to search her purse in an effort to give herself time, then decided to share the information she had been sitting on. It was a gamble, but Inspector Robinson was far fairer than he could have been.

"Since you know about Charlie, I should mention that Stevens tried to blackmail us about a year ago. I believe B—the other gentleman was in a similar situation. We didn't pay and he let it drop," Phryne said, neglecting to mention that he had dropped it after Phryne had threatened him with her old service pistol. Strictly speaking she wasn't supposed to have it. "But I doubt we were the only people he tried to shake down."

"Thank you for the information, Mrs. Freeman," he said; by his manner he was Jack once more. Phryne was pleased. She found that she was reasonably fond of Jack.

She was visiting her mother-in-law the next morning in the hopes of finding Charlie's whereabouts—the relationship between mother and son was strained, but bordering on overly dependent—and was surprised to see Jack just leaving.

"Mrs. Freeman," he said, tipping his hat.

"Inspector Robinson."

"Have you heard from Charlie yet?" he asked, all formal enquiry.

Phryne shook her head.

"Did the dragon give up anything?" she asked in return, sotto voce.

"She's hiding something. We've found she's been making regular payments to Stevens."

"Really?"

Phryne was shocked. Mrs. Freeman the elder was a battle-axe and not likely to bend to someone's demands; what could Leonard Stevens have over her? It was unlikely to be Charlie; she seemed to think it Phryne's full time job to cover for her husband's relationship with Bobby, and would have contacted her first.

"I had assumed she was protecting her son, but when I asked she seemed genuinely surprised that he had been approached as well."

"No, I don't think it was that. I'll let you know if I find anything else."

"Would you?"

"Leonard Stevens was a conniving, lecherous arse, but that doesn't mean he should have died for it," Phryne pointed out. "You might not think well of me, inspector, but I do have some morals."

"Who said I thought poorly of you?" asked the detective, seemingly confused.

"Your face is terribly disapproving," she said. "It's enough to make a person feel like a naughty school child. Good day, inspector."

Summoned to the office of Jack Robinson a second time, Phryne thought it best to walk straight in; it would save all the social niceties and perhaps give her some small chance to scope out the inspector's
office. There were trophies on the mantle—she couldn't get close enough to make out the details—and no personal pictures, though she knew he was married.

He was reading through a folder as she steamed in, and he hastily shut it and locked it in a drawer when he saw her. Odd man; secretive, but almost sickeningly honest.

"Please, take a seat, Mrs. Freeman," he said, one large hand sweeping to indicate her choice of two. She took neither. "We have been going through photographs from the Green Mill, looking for people we have yet to identify that may be of interest to our Stevens. You seemed quite familiar with the establishment, and I thought you might be of some use."

It was the sort of irritatingly dismissive backhand comment that made Phryne’s hackles rise, but if it meant access to the case and an explanation of its events, then she would let it slide.

When Phryne discovered Vic in the photograph, she had felt a sudden need to sit down before she fainted. She was not one for fainting in general, but it was a confrontation of her past that she was unprepared for.

Vic had been a friend before the war; he knew Guy, Guy allowed his cousin to stay around, and Vic and Phryne had hit if off almost instantly despite the three years difference in age. He taught her to fly when she was 14 and how to truly kiss at 15, then he went off to war, asking her to look out for his family if he never made it back; she’d been keeping her own family together for years by that point. She’d followed him—well, not him particularly, but the whole idea of seeking freedom while fighting for it—as soon as she was old enough to lie about her age convincingly, joining an ambulance unit in late 1916. She had seen Hell in those two years, then a sort of poverty-stricken Heaven in Europe for two more before finances and an unusually long gaol stint for her father forced her return to Australia.

She had grieved for Vic. Hard. Not out of any real love—even as a teenager she knew the difference between lust and love, and Vic was just the sort of lustful experience that she enjoyed without strings—but because it left her with the unfortunate duty of care for Charlie and Mrs. Freeman the Elder.

It had started easily enough, checking in on them from time to time, gritting her teeth while she talked about Victor Freeman, War Hero to his mother and brother. Then Charlie's secret had come to light and Mrs. Freeman threatened to disown him, raging that her only real son had died in Europe and she was left with nothing but a source of shame.

Phryne had been furious. Charlie was a good sort of boy; foolish in love, perhaps, and foolish in finances for certain, but sweet-natured. And it fell on her to clean up the mess; she'd found a way to spin it to her advantage as she always did—"There's always an angle, Phryne dear" had been her father's mantra since she was still in plaits—but it came at the price of dearly held freedom.

Confronted with the truth, that it had all fallen on her shoulders because Vic couldn't or wouldn't do it himself...the white hot rage and frustration overwhelmed her.

A tumbler of whiskey was pushed across the desk to Phryne, and she raised her eyes to see a concerned looking Jack watching her.

"It's a Flyboy's scarf," she explained. "I think you should call the repatriation office, see about a pension for Victor Freeman. And hope like hell you find him before I do, because there might not be a Vic left by the time I'm through."

Then she stood without touching the drink and walked out of the office.
"What are we going to do about my constable and your friend, Mrs. Freeman?" asked Jack congenially when the case was solved—it wasn't Vic after all, but the trumpet-playing husband of the American jazz singer.

She tilted her head as she looked at him. Curiouser and curiouser, she thought, this detective inspector. Perhaps if he had been on Janey's case...but no. She couldn't afford to think of that, especially not now. She had just received notice that Murdoch Foyle was coming up for parole; she had to focus her attentions on keeping him in gaol now, not what might have been.

"Had Hugh still not gotten his head out his arse?" she said coarsely.

There were times her Collingwood life slipped out, and the inspector gave her a... not surprised look. An assessing one, perhaps, like it was the sort of information he would carefully store until it was needed.

"It seems that he's in mortal fear of her Catholicism."

"Oh, for heaven's sake!" Phryne exclaimed. "It's a dance, not a marriage proposal."

It was not a particularly funny joke, so Phryne was surprised when he laughed, genuinely laughed, at it. He had a warm laugh for such a cool man.

"I do believe I said much the same thing to him," he said.

In the end, their machinations were for naught; Dot found her inner strength and asked Hugh herself. She was absolutely stunning, and all fears of Catholicism seemed to flee Hugh's head when he arrived at the Freeman house to escort her. Phryne and Jack, however, found themselves both at City South Police Station that evening. Jack poured her a whiskey which she actually drank, then handed her the photographic plates.

"What do you want me to do with these?" Phryne asked, though she knew deep down. Jack had found her a loophole and was granting his tacit permission. He was a continual source of surprise, Phryne thought, and she thanked him quietly.

"I do think well of you," he said, already opening one of the files on his desk and taking out his pen. "And nobody should suffer for love. Good night, Mrs. Freeman."
Chapter 4

Constable Collins was waiting for him when Jack arrived at the scene of Melbourne's most recent murder. It was a young man; too young to be lying dead, bleeding out onto some cold road in the middle of the night. Collins filled him in on the specific circumstances, including the witness who attempted to save his life. Jack groaned at the mention of Mrs. Freeman's name. What could she possibly be doing down at the docks at that time? Earlier in the day, perhaps, for business, but eleven at night? With a strike on? The woman was a policeman's worst nightmare.

And damn it all, he was actually looking forward to working with her. She'd managed to involve herself with three of his minor cases in as many weeks. He was under no delusions that she wouldn't insinuate herself into this one so quickly and thoroughly that he would be unable to point out the moment he could have stopped her.

He raised one eyebrow at Hugh's explanation of driving Mrs. Freeman home.

"Let me make one thing clear, constable. There may be times that we can have a mutually beneficial relationship with Mrs. Freeman, but you must be completely clear who wears the trousers in this relationship."

When she opened her door an hour later, she was wearing slacks; Jack couldn't even say he was surprised. He simply shot Hugh a warning look and asked his questions. Her vagueness about her reasons for being on the docks was equally unsurprising.

"Delicate domestic matter for a friend of my Aunt Prudence," she said in a sing-song, leading him and Collins through to the parlour.

His first assumption was an extramarital affair, but given her forthrightness regarding her own marriage he couldn't see her bothering with delicacy.

"And how exactly did you gain a reputation for handling 'delicate domestic matters' Mrs. Freeman? I thought you specialised in investments."

"Several years ago a friend found themselves in a difficult position, no thanks to one of Melbourne's dedicated police officers," the sarcasm was almost dripping from her voice. "It took two minutes of thought and a couple of enquiries to clear the matter up and save him from the hangman's noose."

"And so you now attempt to clear up all sorts of matters for a select few?" he clarified, taking a seat in an armchair and motioning his constable to take notes.

She glared at him coldly from her position on the chaise lounge. "Only when you fail to do it first. And the ‘select few’ are those who need justice, so I don’t appreciate the insinuation."

He yielded the argument with a slight tip of his head and she relaxed into her seat.

"Well then," he said. "I suppose our aims are similar enough that we can work together. Now, tell me what you know about Yourka Rosen."

She stiffened.

"Was that his name?" she asked, with no hint of her usual sass. Jack noticed the way she had moved as if to wash her hands of his blood, though her hands were perfectly clean and well manicured. Something else to file away in the peculiar conundrum of Mrs. Phryne Freeman. "I was in the office
of Mr. Waddington when two shots rang out..."

Her relating of events was thorough and methodical, and her voice steady. The only hint that the woman had been shot at and held the hand of a dying man only hours before was a slight tremble in her voice as she related the specifics (and they were specific specifics) of his injury.

"I was in an ambulance unit during the war," she said to his unasked question. "It was a pretty damn familiar wound. There was nothing I could do."

"I'm sure you did more for him than many others could have," said Jack with complete sincerity.

The case was full of twists and turns, ending up with Miss Dorothy Williams being held hostage by Latvian bank robbers at the bank the trained team was not sent to. Jack wasn't certain whether it was a deliberate ploy by Mrs. Freeman's new admirer (the man was very obvious, and Jack spotted the telltale bruise on her neck when she turned her head) or just one of those ridiculous events that seemed to occur often around Phryne Freeman.

Either way, he did not believe that his constable had gotten off a shot from a gun he'd wrestled from one of the would-be robbers. It was, however, a convenient explanation and would stand the boy in good stead; Jack found he had real affection for Hugh Collins, his fledgling career, and his romance with the sweet Miss Williams. Perhaps he reminded Jack of himself Before. He gave Mrs. Freeman a deliberate look, to ensure that they both knew that her lies had not fooled him.

"As I have forbidden Constable Collins from doing your bidding, I suppose I should drive you home myself."

"Thank you."

Her complete disinterest in even half-heartedly attempting to return his banter was enough to tell him all he needed to know; she had done it, she was horrified to have done so, and she would do it again in a heartbeat. He had no words of comfort to give her; he doubted she would accept them if he had.

A few hours she was back in his office.

"I need your help," she said perfunctorily.

"Delicate domestic matter?" he assumed.

"Lila Waddington. Daughter of Gerald Waddington. Fifteen years old and missing."

"I haven't had any reports cross my desk," Jack said. He hated runaway cases; there was so rarely a happy outcome even if they made their way home.

"Of course not," she said derisively, and he considered the possibility that she had taken on the case despite her Aunt Prudence’s friend and not because of it. “He couldn’t risk having it made public.”

Absolutely appalling. Jack didn't subscribe to the idea that people could deserve to have children—it was a biological prerogative, not some gift given or denied by a non-existent Almighty no matter how much Rosie believed otherwise—but there was always something horrifying when you realised how very often children were left to the whims of the cruel or incompetent.
"Then how can I help?"

She outlined what she knew—the notebook (he didn't ask how she'd obtained it from Lila’s school; the answer was likely to be highly illegal), the suspected affair between stepmother and brother, the attempts to convince Lila that she was mad. When Mrs. Freeman got to the part about the Mayday Asylum, her eyes like blue fire, Jack was out of his chair and striding to gather his hat and coat.

"You could have begun with that part," he said, tilting his head towards the door. "Shall I drive?"

He could feel his cheek twitching in anger as they made their way to Beechworth, and by the time he had barked commands to the attending nurse his jaw ached from the clenching. The sight of Lila huddled and clutching her Rosary was nearly enough to make him lose his carefully-controlled temper; the only thing to stop him was the knowledge that it would traumatise her more. He scooped the girl up and walked out of the Asylum.

When they reached the car, Mrs. Freeman opened the door and Jack placed Lila inside.

"Hospital?"

Phryne—Mrs. Freeman shook her head. "I don't think she'd handle it. The order she wanted to join though... they'll have the ability to care for her, and she'll be more comfortable. It's the best of a bad lot."

Jack didn't argue, just followed Mrs. Freeman's directions. When they arrived at the order, Phryne went ahead to speak to the Mother Superior while Jack waited with Lila; the poor child had shut down completely, and if the nuns wouldn't take her in he wasn't going to make her go back home no matter how many favours he had to call in or how influential her father was.

A few minutes later Mrs. Freeman came striding back with the Mother Superior keeping pace. Two equally intimidating women, Jack thought, watching them talk matters over and make arrangements as they walked.

When Lila was eventually settled and arrangements made to ensure her safety, including a visit from a doctor friend of Mrs. Freeman's—Jack recognised her from the Women's Hospital, though he didn't know her well—they drove to speak with Lila's father. Jack waited outside, aware that Mrs. Freeman could just as easily call a taxi, and watched the striking workers.

To his amazement, the returning Mrs. Freeman was accompanied by Mr. Waddington; the man broke off and headed towards the workers, and some sort of agreement appeared to be reached.

"If I didn't know better," Jack observed, watching the event unfold. "I would think that somebody had twisted his arm."

Phryne gave him a guileless smile.

"I can't imagine who would have done that," she said.

There was a pause as they watched Waddington return to his offices and the men speak amongst themselves.

"I've seen my own fair share of strike action," Jack said after a moment. It was, perhaps, a sort of tit-for-tat for her earlier revelation that she had seen the war.

"The police strike of '23?"
He nodded, giving a murmur of assent. "Shoulder to shoulder. A lot of good men lost their jobs. I was one of the lucky ones."

He could feel her appraising eyes on him.

"Really, inspector? I would have thought you more of a fence sitter."

"It would be a tactical error to think you have me pegged just yet, Mrs. Freeman," he said, opening the door to the passenger seat. "I'll drive you home."

As they pulled up to the bungalow, Jack saw a girl standing by the front door with her school bag. When she saw the car she began to wave wildly; as she came closer Jack had a bolt of recognition. It was the girl from the train last month.

"My aunt often has need for girls," Mrs. Freeman said quietly. "It's not much, but despite her flaws she's a fair employer. After you mentioned Jane, I tracked her down to see if she'd be suitable in a year or two."

That was...remarkable. It also completely failed to explain why the girl was present now.

"Inspector Robinson?" asked the girl, pulling level with the vehicle. "Hello! Miss Phryne said that you were responsible for my good fortunes, but I wasn't sure I believed her. I'm still not certain it's not some lovely dream, actually."

"Go indoors, Jane," ordered Mrs. Freeman. "Get started on your homework, please."

The girl complied, tossing another thank you over her shoulder as she did so.

"She was a very charming girl, Jack; just enough trouble to be interesting. We had a spare room."

"So now you're her mother?" The whole situation beggared belief.

"No. More like... an aunt?"

"Or a guardian angel," Jack said, knowing exactly how much a warm bed and enough to eat would change Jane Ross's life.

"You know what?" asked Mrs. Freeman. "I rather like that. Guardian angel. And you could be her fairy godfather, since we never would have found each other if it hadn't been for you."

And she actually reached out and squeezed his hand in thanks. And while he had warned her not to assume she had him pegged, he realised he had fallen into the same fallacy. No, he’d only just begun to glimpse the depths of Phryne Freeman.
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

My "post every day plans" might be slightly derailed early next week for two or three days. Currently debating whether to double up chapters today and tomorrow so that it ends in a natural place to pause or just hope for less chaos (and by chaos I mean husbandly husbanding) than currently anticipating. Watch this space for news, or something.

Phryne bought the Margaret Preston at auction, a rare indulgence; she always purchased artwork for Janey's birthday, no matter her financial situation, but this was particularly dear. She loved this painting immensely though, and it was bound to be a good investment—she was thankful that her friend Levi had mentioned the auction to her.

Of course, the painting did end up being ill-gotten goods, which put rather a large kink in the whole thing. It also led her to a dead body, which probably should have been an even larger kink, but she really was coming to rather enjoy the whole thing. Not that she wished for people to be murdered, but if the cases kept falling into her lap then who was she to complain if they needed her to help tidy loose ends?

"Mrs. Freeman," greeted the inspector when he arrived. "I can only presume that you have some connection to the deceased?"

"No," said Phryne, then pointed to where Ben Abrahams was standing with the wrapped canvas. "But I did very briefly own that Margaret Preston over there, until it was made clear that I was in receipt of stolen goods. Shame really; it would have been the second most expensive thing I owned—the first is the most wonderful portrait by Pierre Sarcelle and I'd rather live on the streets than part with it—and worth every penny."

The inspector gave a somewhat snarky reply in turn, but listened to her observations openly. She really had begun to wonder whether she should take him to bed. He was married, which wasn't ideal, but her initial assessment that he'd be no fun had taken a rather resounding beating during their acquaintance. There was a dry humour to the man, and a sharp wit that would make bedroom bantering a joy; the ability to banter was often high on her list of preferences in a bedfellow. And he did cut a rather dashing figure in those suits, exerting a quiet sort of authority that drew you in. No, she really was going to have to decide and soon.

Phryne liked the accused murderer, despite her initial suspicions; Miss Lee was the sort of woman that people called a cold fish, just because she had the audacity to keep her emotions close and manage her own affairs, and Phryne had no patience for that sort of nonsense. And so she investigated, ignoring Jack's doubts given the strength of evidence against her. When it was determined that the rat poison found in the bookshop was not the cause of death, he took it graciously. Well, mostly graciously; Miss Lee still had motive and opportunity.

"It must be dull," said Phryne, perched daintily on a chair in his office. "To be so terribly cynical."
"Are you quite done running my station, Mrs. Freeman?" he asked, pointedly ignoring her comments.

He was terribly good at the curt dismissals; not quite cutting enough to be hurtful, but clear. She had no interest in becoming compliant—she’d tried it and discarded it—and wrestled back control of the situation by taking a mere second too long to leave.

As far as Phryne was concerned, her breaking and entering that night was perfectly justified and the fight with the other intruder a minor inconvenience. What fascinated her was Inspector Robinson’s reaction; a sort of utterly resigned amusement. Hmm, he could be quite trainable, possibly even worth the hassles involved with multiple encounters in the boudoir. She didn’t often issue repeat invitations; sex was for pleasure, and in very rare instances a comfort to share with a trusted friend, and repeat performances encouraged attachments in her casual flings.

When she pulled the recovered piece of paper from her bosom, he did seem appreciative. A promising development.

And if she watched his long fingers just a little too eagerly as he smoothed the paper, pointing out the alchemy symbols he recognised, well, who could it hurt? They really were marvellous hands.

Phryne requested Mac’s help in creating the chemical reaction Jack had found as a hidden message.

"You don't usually introduce me to your toys, Phryne," she said, when Phryne explained that Jack would be there. She hadn’t even mentioned how charminngly playful he had been about it; another tick in favour of bedding him.

"He's not a toy, Mac. He's married and probably not worth the hassle...even if he does have the most magnificent voice."

"Since when does married stop you?" her friend laughed.

"When there's no agreement," Phryne said. "I enjoy openness, not infidelity."

Which was a definite tick in favour of the leave it side of the conundrum.

"Fair enough," said Mac, taking a long drag from her gasper. "I still think there's more to this than you're telling me."

Phryne sighed.

"I think... I think I might need his help," she confessed. "I'm running into wall after wall..."

"Foyle?" Mac asked, and Phryne nodded. Of course her friend would recognise the desperation in her tone.

"Parole," she explained.

"Why didn't you say?"

"Because I knew you'd tell me to step back, and I can't let him out to ruin any more lives."

"He almost ruined yours, last time you fell down this particular rabbit hole."

"He ruined it before then," Phryne said. "But let's not talk about that now. Will you help us?"
Mac shook her head and eyed her friend.

"I have the sort of enquiring mind that leads me into all sorts of trouble," she answered. "Befriending you, for example..."

"That's the spirit!"

That evening, Phryne introduced Mac and Jack. They greeted each other stiffly, almost too stiffly in Phryne's view—she had rather thought the two would strike it off quite well given their similarities. And they had met each other before, Mac had said so during the incident with the Turkish bathhouse. Perhaps there was a professional association they chose not to acknowledge. A sort of niggling memory arose, Mac's mentioning an inspector investigating “Butcher” George Fletcher without success. It would be one hell of a coincidence, but Phryne's life had been filled with them.

———

When she explained the presence of wolfsbane in the bouquet from Simon Abrahams, she could almost hear Jack's raised eyebrow over the telephone line.

"He is aware you are married?" he asked.

"I think the fact that I'm a Gentile was more of a deterrent, to be honest, but I can be very persuasive. Meet me at the bookshop?"

She didn't bother to tell him that she was already there; he'd just ask questions she wasn't interested in answering. Where ignorance is bliss, 'tis folly to be wise, she thought, and resumed her search through the stacks of books.

She found the one she was searching for just minutes after Jack arrived.

“This book, it's the one Miss Lee talked about, Saul's favourite. If he was poisoned through that cut on his hand…” she flipped the pages, stopping when she found the one she sought. “Raisins and Almonds—that's the one he read to her.”

There was a brownish smear on the paper, near the top.

“Looks like blood,” Jack observed, moving to take it from her.

She pulled it away, giving a deliberate look at his bare hands.

“Yes,” she agreed. “I think we should handle this book with the greatest respect.”

He quickly put on gloves, then took the book to examine it. Remembering how she’d found the formula hidden in the spine of a book, Phryne hiked her skirt up just enough to extract the dagger she kept there. It had become a habit during her time in Europe, and the rooftop fight earlier had reminded her of the wisdom of being prepared.

“You didn't see that,” she said in response to Jack’s questioning glance. She cut the spine, and a white powder spilled out. “I suspect that powder is aconitum, derived from wolfsbane. The prettiest purple flowers, but the poison from the roots attacks the nervous system, causing fitting, nausea…”

“You're an expert in botany as well as criminology now?” he asked, clearly not interested in reprimanding her about her attempted dalliance with a suspect a second time.

“I confess some help from Doctor Mac.”
“Ah,” he said. “So I take it you know where the young Mr. Abrahams sourced his gift?”

“I believe so,” she said. “If you test the murder weapon, I’ll know for sure soon enough and call it in.”

Phryne was exceptionally glad she had her pistol—a not-at-all-permissible souvenir from the war, lovingly maintained as a security measure—with her when they went searching for Simon; she aimed it at Chaim Abrahams steadily. Some small voice at the back of her mind reminded her that Jack should be on his way as backup, assuming Dot got through; it was far more reassuring than it had any right to be for someone who had lived and died quite happily by her own strengths for many years. But it was never a pleasant business, she thought, holding a man at gunpoint; desiring an extra set of hands and eyes could hardly be considered a weakness.

And when Ben lost his head—honestly, she had the whole thing under control. Simon didn't even appear injured —and she lost her gun, she was very thankful indeed that she had called in the cavalry. She just had to last long enough for them to arrive, or for Chaim to drop his guard long enough for her to redress the imbalance. Which was going well, Chaim monologuing the transgressions against him and what would no doubt make a fantastic confession if they survived the whole thing, and then Simon decided to play hero. Really, the entire family were senseless fools. She tried to stem the flow of blood, hoping that Simon wouldn't pay the ultimate price for his act of gallantry.

Behind her she heard Jack and Hugh arrive as she watched Chaim take his brother hostage. She looked to Jack, hoping to signal the fact that the gun was empty, but he was intently focused on the men in front of him. She'd have to do it herself then; the cost of releasing pressure on the wound was less than the blood loss if the situation continued for any length of time; Simon didn't have enough time left for negotiations.

"Put the gun down, Chaim," she said quietly, moving towards him.

"Stay out of this, Mrs. Freeman!" Jack said harshly. She ignored his warning, moving closer. "Get out of the way, damn it!"

"Put the gun down. Give it to me," she directed the desperate man.

Chaim pushed his brother away and turned the gun on himself, but the chambers were empty. He collapsed in tears, and Hugh pushed forward to make the arrest.

"That was a damned stupid thing to do," Jack hissed in her ear.

Which it was, but not nearly as stupid as he probably thought. And it had worked, hadn't it?

"I knew there were no bullets left," she countered.

"I don't want to know how," he said curtly, turning to leave the room. "I'll telephone an ambulance."

When the case was done, she found Jack sitting in his office. The situation seemed to weigh on him; she noted the tension in his body, the slightly resigned slope of the shoulders and the bent head. He looked like he needed a friend.

"Jack?" she asked quietly.
"Still here," he sighed, his voice particularly gravelly.

Definitely in need of a friend then, and a stiff drink.

"Poor Miss Lee," Phryne said, pouring two glasses of whiskey. "Saul was lost to her from the moment they met."

"I've been contemplating," he said as she slipped into the office and took a seat in the chair she had begun to think of as hers. "What to write to his wife."

"Five years and half a world apart...what kind of a marriage can survive that?" she asked; it was one of those moments where the war loomed particularly large and dark.

"I went to war a newlywed," Jack offered, clearly feeling the same presence.

"But you came back."

It was the best she could think to say.

"Not the man my wife married... oh, sixteen years ago."

His lips twisted in the hint of a sardonic smile.

"War will do that to you."

There were some things that could never be explained with words; they had to be experienced or not, and the repercussions played out.

"My wife has been living with her sister for some time now," he said. Like a kaleidoscope, things shifted into place quite suddenly. "But a marriage is still a marriage."

"Especially to an honourable man," Phryne said, raising her glass in a toast.

The air hung heavy with understanding.

No, she couldn't bed him. She wouldn't. And it was a damn shame too.
Chapter 6

Jack was disturbed early on a Sunday morning by the ringing telephone. He rose out of bed and slipped on his slippers before heading to the telephone. It was work, no doubt; it was too early in the morning for Rosie's weekly telephone call of obligation that always came after church.

"Jack Robinson," he said when he picked the phone up.

"This is Sergeant Crossley from Hawthorn station. I've got a suspect here who is refusing to talk to anyone but you," said the brusque voice on the other end of the line.

Jack rubbed his eyes, trying to clear the exhaustion before he responded.

"Elsie Tizzard?" he asked. She was usually a safe bet, especially after a Saturday night.

"No," said the Sergeant. "Name's Phryne Freeman."

Jack felt instantly more awake. What the hell had that woman gotten herself into now? Half the time she seemed like a perfectly normal person, possibly even pleasant; the other half she was breaking into buildings—he'd never mentioned he'd recognised her perfume at Leonard Stevens's obviously searched flat, and there were the multiple incidents at the bookstore—and wreaking havoc. Crossley was not a good enough officer to tell the difference.

"Where are you?" he asked.

Crossley gave him the address, which Jack recognised as the Freemans' bungalow. Not a break and enter then, presumably.

"Oh, and Robinson, hurry up. The coroner wants to move the body and she won't even let him in the room."

It took Jack less than ten minutes to get out the door, thankful he had shaved the night before, and head towards St. Kilda. Miss Williams was standing outside the house with Jane Ross; Miss Williams looked pale and withdrawn in a flannel robe, and Jane was glaring at the constable who was guarding them.

"Thank goodness you're here!" called Mrs. Freeman's ward when she saw Jack approaching. She ducked past the constable before he had time to react and met Jack near the door. "Mr. Freeman's died overnight, and Sergeant Dimwit inside seems to think that Mrs. Freeman is behind it. As if she would!"

"I'll look into it," Jack assured her. "Now go wait with the constable."

Jack went up the stairs, skipping the one that always creaked—*how had he been there often enough that he had noticed?* he wondered—and striding into the hall. Sergeant Crossley was in the parlour.

"This had better be important," Jack said gruffly. It was the sort of bad manners that Crossley took for authority.

"Had a telephone call reporting a suspicious death. Arrived to find that the deceased was a twenty-seven year old male, reportedly discovered by his wife when she woke up."
"And?"

"And she's been lying, because there's no way he died in that position."

"Perhaps she moved the body to check for a pulse?"

"She claims she didn't. It's all very suspicious, and when I left the room to telephone the coroner she locked the door behind me and insisted that she'd only speak with Inspector Robinson. Must be nice, having a bit on the side looking like that."

Jack hated the man. He was petty and rude, and probably not entirely wrong about the impression Mrs. Freeman's request had made.

"She's a witness in one of my investigations," Jack said bluntly, not in the mood to deal with it then. "Where is the body?"

———

Jack headed towards the back of the small house, where the master bedroom was. The rest of the decor was much the same as the parlour and kitchen he had already seen on previous visits; meticulously clean and put together with a careful eye, although there was nothing remarkable about the individual components. The only thing that seemed out of place was one photograph in the hall, of two young girls in matching dresses. One was Mrs. Freeman, he was pretty certain—she had a familiar glint of mischief in her eye and the steely resolve on her face; the other was a girl of perhaps nine, with pigtails and a sweet sort of smile. He had visited Mrs. Freeman a handful of times to clear up matters of their—his cases, often staying for a drink and a game of draughts, and she had never mentioned a sister. A friend then, perhaps, or maybe a cousin.

The master bedroom was the farthest from the entrance, and was the only one of three bedrooms with a closed door. He knocked.

"Mrs. Freeman?"

There was a shuffling sound, then the click of a deadbolt. The door opened, and Phryne was standing behind it. She looked exhausted. Which was perhaps a fair enough emotion when you had just lost your husband, regardless of the actual relationship.

"Hello, inspector."

She motioned him in. Once he entered, Phryne moved away to sit in a chair on the far side of the room. Between them was the bed, and on the bed laid the corpse of Charlie Freeman. Jack closed the door.

"Are you going to explain?" Jack said.

Phryne shrugged.

"His heart's never been great. Strenuous exercise or questionable substances might have done it."

"And yet you told Crossley that you woke up with him like this."

She rolled her eyes.

"Somebody did. It just wasn't me."

"Ahh, his..."
"Yes," she said. "Exactly. And we could hardly leave him at B—his friend's house. Thankfully it's close enough that we could walk him home like a drunkard while it was still dark."

Jack pinched the bridge of his nose, exhaling loudly.

"How did I get drawn into this?"

"Your Sergeant was looking for foul play, and he's the sort of dullard that would manage to find it even if it wasn't there. At least you will actually investigate."

"Thanks," said Jack. "I think." It was too damn early in the day to be dealing with this. "I can't just take over another police officer's investigation though."

"Of course not, Jack!" He couldn't tell if she was being sincere. There was something completely inscrutable about Phryne Freeman, an enigma he never could trust but found himself liking nonetheless. "I just need it to be done properly, and you'll do that. So I'll sit in this chair and answer your questions, and if you decide it's murder and I'm behind it than I will go down to the station without complaint."

"I doubt that very much," said Jack, but he gave her a small smile. "I think compliance goes against your very nature."

She smiled innocently and folded her hands primly onto her lap; her eyes were positively lascivious. "It depends on how nicely you ask. I might even let you cuff me."

Jack ignored the flirtation—it was getting harder to do so, the way she darted so quickly into the fray and set his pulse racing before he could quash it—and set about examining the body. The signs of lividity were inconsistent for the position Mrs. Freeman and the unnamed lover had placed him in; even Crossley would have noticed. No immediate signs of foul play, though it would take an examination by the coroner to be certain.

"Phryne!" called a man's voice from the hall, then a scuffle. "Phryne!"

The door swung open on a young man, who had clearly bypassed Crossley’s guard with some effort; he was still breathing heavily. "Is it true?"

"Hello, Bobby," Mrs. Freeman said. "Inspector Robinson, this is Robert Sullivan. He's been Charlie's particularly good friend since they were seventeen."

Jack recognised him from the photographs found in Leonard Stevens’s house the month before; he also recognised the utter devastation on his face. He had seen it too many times when delivering bad news to the family of victims. Mrs. Freeman rose from her chair and hugged the boy, then nodded towards Jack.

"That's Inspector Robinson; he knows," she said, quietly enough that nobody outside the room would hear. "He'll probably have a few questions for you, but he won't be cruel about it. It won't leave this room unless it absolutely has to, will it Jack?"

"Please sit down, Mr. Sullivan," Jack directed, uninterested in making promises.

The boy—for regardless of age he struck Jack as a boy—looked around the room, and Jack realised too late that the only seats were the chair Mrs. Freeman had just vacated and the bed where the body still was.

"I'll stand, thank you," said the boy. He looked exhausted, eyes rimmed in red and face blotchy.
Clearly he had been crying where Mrs. Freeman had been controlled; she remained beside him in a silent show of support.

Jack asked him a few questions, searching for inconsistencies in their stories. Mrs. Freeman, rather miraculously, stayed quiet the entire time. It was likely that their story was true.

To lose one’s... partner so suddenly, with so little allowance for grief...it was unfathomable. The fear of discovery and prosecution would make it all the worse. Jack sighed, rubbed his face with his hand as he considered.

"Mrs. Freeman," he said eventually. "It was quite fortunate that our discussion jogged your memory. I'm sure in your grief you misunderstood Sergeant Crossley’s questions, and were too embarrassed to clarify when you realised the error. It is an unfortunate indignity that your frantic attempt to rouse Mr. Freeman resulted in him falling off the bed, and that you returned him as best you could to maintain his dignity."

"Thank you, Jack," she said quietly, laying a restraining hand on the agitated Bobby.

"We will still need to establish cause of death, of course, so I'll ask that nobody in your household leaves town until an inquest is held."

Mrs. Freeman nodded. "Of course. We'll do our best to answer any further questions you or Sergeant Crossley have."

Two days later, Jack stopped by the Freeman house to deliver the news. The widow was well turned out; the simplicity of her black dress made her colouring—like Snow White of Grimm’s Fairy Tales, with her blood red lips and ivory skin—stand out all the more. He was ashamed to have noticed such a thing given the circumstances.

"I'm sure Crossley has already told you, but the coroner's findings have come back as a heart attack."

"He hadn't, actually, but I thought it was the most likely," said Mrs. Freeman, gesturing Jack inside. "We were just about to sit down for dinner, and Bobby is here. Perhaps you would join us and reassure my household in person?"

Jack nodded. "I would like that."

Phryne led him through to the kitchen, where a large group had gathered; ostensibly to support the widow, though Jack suspected the reality was to support Charlie Freeman's long-time lover.

"Jack, I believe you know most of my friends. Jane and Miss Williams you've met before, and Mac of course. This here is Bert and Cec—"

"We know him," grumbled Albert Johnson. "Oppressor of the widowed and orphaned."

"Saviour of this particular widow," Mrs. Freeman replied. "So mind your manners. And rounding out the group is Charlie's friend Bobby. Please sit down, join us."

Jack took a spare chair near the door—there was more than enough for everyone, and Jack suspected that the Freeman house often saw large gatherings—and took a plate passed to him by Miss Williams. Most of the group was watching him with interest, and Jack shifted uncomfortably. Phryne noticed, as she leapt to offer an explanation.
"Jack was kind enough to stop by with the latest information about poor Charlie," she announced. "You will all be pleased to know that I am no longer in danger of being arrested, and we can therefore move on and make funeral arrangements. And Bobby, darling, if that old battle-axe of a mother-in-law tries to keep you away she'll have to go through me."

Several other people voiced their agreements, and the attention was thankfully shifted away from Jack's presence. Once it had passed, he found the group was oddly pleasant company; they spoke of Charlie with great affection, laughing at stories and supporting one another through melancholy. It was a ragtag sort of family, Jack realised.

Much later that evening, as he said his goodbyes, Doctor MacMillan cornered him.

"Phryne won't say this properly—she never does—but thank you. There aren't many people who would have done what you did."

"I couldn't do anything else and live with my conscience," Jack replied. "Will Bobby be alright?"

"Eventually, I imagine. Phryne won't let him grieve alone."

"No," said Jack. "She has one hell of a heart."

The doctor gave him an appraising look.

"She does seem to find the right people when she needs them," Mac finally said. "Good night, inspector."

“Good night Doctor MacMillan,” he replied, putting on his hat and stepping out into the night.
Chapter 7

Phryne walked into City South Police Station with her head held high and her guts twisted into knots. Hugh Collins was at the desk.

"Mrs. Freeman!" he exclaimed.

Phryne glanced around the room quickly, looking for other witnesses. It was mercifully empty.

"It's Miss Fisher now," she said. "Premature, I'm sure, but after the dust-up at the funeral I'd rather chew off my own leg than be caught in that particular trap any longer."

"Right, Mrs—Miss Fisher. Are you looking for the inspector? Only he's just gone out..."

That was a relief, the only good bit of luck since her telephone had rung that morning. Whatever odd understanding there was between them would have been no doubt damaged by the forthcoming scene.

"Actually, I'm here to speak with one of your arrests. Henry Fisher?"

"Oh, yes. Ohhh," drawled Hugh. "Your...relative?"

"My father," said Phryne, choosing not to elaborate. "If you could take me down?"

"Yes, of course Miss Fisher."

There was a certain relief in regaining the use of her name; she had never been a Freeman despite its many advantages, and was a through-and-through Fisher despite its many pitfalls. As they headed down to the cells, Hugh asked after Dot. The poor boy was obviously sweet on her and too timid to do more than take her out and then return her home at a perfectly respectable hour without so much as a kiss. Phryne would have to do something about it; she had just the book, for starters, and a bit of gentle direction never went amiss.

Her father was lying on a bench in the holding cell; Hugh, despite proper protocol, left her and headed back upstairs.

"Hello father," Phryne said scathingly. "It's been awhile."

"Phryne, my dear!" he said, sloppily standing and lurching towards her as if to hug her in greeting.

Phryne flinched involuntarily, even though she knew perfectly well that the space and bars between them would be enough of a deterrent.

"I don't want to hear it, Father. Three years I've managed to avoid your messes, and now you've dragged me right back into one. The drunk and disorderly is so commonplace it almost doesn't warrant a mention, but assaulting a police officer?"

Her father sat back on the bench.

"Since when did you become such a respect-mongerer, girl?"

"Since I decided that I was done living like you do. It is a difficult concept to grasp, I know, but there are lifestyles beyond your carpe diem nonsense."
Henry Fisher looked contrite, though Phryne knew it was an act to lull her into compliance. She had seen through his machinations at an early age, aware that the real Henry had none of the charm he displayed in public, and had proceeded to learn and catalogue his every trick for her own uses. The student had long outstripped the master.

"I had to call you," he said pathetically.

"Mother sick of cleaning up your disasters again?" Phryne asked. Her parents had spent the last ten years in an increasingly frequent cycle of separation and reconciliation where nothing ever changed and nobody was ever happy. *Passion*, they called it; Phryne thought of it as poor self-control.

"She's visiting your Aunt Prudence," he said, even more pathetically. He was pulling out all the stops for this guilt trip. "It's Janey's birthday."

Phryne froze. Felt the obligation that had driven her to the station despite their estrangement shrivel into nothing. He never changed; it was the same song he'd been singing for years—my daughter's gone, my wife has abandoned me, nobody knows how I've suffered.

"You can sleep it off here," she said coldly. "And you can find a way out of this yourself when you're sober."

And she turned on her heel and strode away.

———

Back in the airy lightness of the main station, Phryne paused to choke back a sob. *How dare he?* How dare he blame his poor choices on the disappearance of his child? Because that's what it always was with him; an excuse to wallow in how horrible things had been done to him, with no regard to how the actual victims had suffered. How Janey had suffered.

She wiped the furious tears from her eyes and took a steadying breath; she would have to come up with some excuse to Hugh and beat a hasty retreat. She hated it, but she also knew her limits. She could do this. She took a deep breath and pasted a smile on her face.

"Hello, Hugh," she said cheerfully as she came into reception. "Thank you for that. All sorted now; you needn't even tell anybody I was here."

"Of course, Miss."

"Now, before I go Hugh," Phryne said, stopping by the desk. "I wanted to speak to you about Dot."

The poor boy looked like he could think of nothing more terrifying.

"Dottie?" he said in a strangled voice.

"Yes. It's her birthday soon. I hope you've sorted a gift—it doesn't need to be much, so long as it's thoughtful."

Hugh nodded enthusiastically. "I've ordered something I'm sure she'll like."

"Good. She's a lovely girl, Dot. If you ever need advice..."

Phryne was almost certain there were literal stars in the young constable's eyes as he voiced his strenuous agreement about Miss Williams's many virtues. The moment was disturbed by the sound of a door opening.
"Collins, do you—Mrs. Freeman! What are you doing here?"

Phryne cursed under her breath before turning to face Inspector Robinson. When she did, it was worse than she had expected. He had a split lip and a black eye, and Phryne had a sinking feeling she knew the source.

"Somebody take umbrage at your policing, inspector?" she asked as lightly as she could manage.

"Ahh," he said evasively. "Small incident with a drunk and disorderly resisting arrest."

"Henry Fisher?" she asked, already knowing the answer. Jack looked surprised, so she felt the need to explain. And then apologise for her reprobate father. Again. "I've reverted to my maiden name; I'd prefer you call me Miss Fisher from now on. That charmer cooling his heels in your drunk tank is my father."

And there was the awkward sort of pity that usually came after her association with the man came to light. The damned tears of frustration came back without warning.

"Please, come into my office Miss Fisher," said the inspector. "Collins, two teas. And try to make them palatable."

Phryne moved towards the relative sanctity of Jack's office; it was less public than the reception of the station, at least, and closer than the bedroom she really wished to retire to. Alone, for once.

"Don't worry, Jack," she said as she passed him. "I'm not here to ask you to let him off."

The door shut behind her as Phryne took her seat. Jack did not sit behind the desk as he usually did, instead perching on the edge of the desk near her. In the close proximity she could see how very long his eyelashes were.

"Does it hurt?" she asked, indicating his injuries.

"I've felt better," Jack said. "But there's nothing that a little time won't forgive."

He attempted a policeman's reassuring smile—the sort she recognised was meant to put witnesses at ease without reaching his eyes—but winced in pain. Phryne stood up and moved closer, reaching out to maneuver his chin so she could better examine the injuries. They really weren't serious, at least; she tenderly brushed her thumb over the cut on his lip, feeling the tickle of his sharply exhaled breath against her hand. A frisson of electricity jolted through her; the familiar sensation she associated with particularly skilled lovers in close proximity.

Hugh came into the room carrying a tray with two teas and Phryne jumped backwards as if scalded.

"Sorry sir!" said the constable.

Phryne sat back down, examining her reaction. She hadn't had a chance to seek out a liaison in a few weeks, it hadn't really been on her mind since Charlie had passed; clearly it was getting to her. She took a sip of the tea—a step above swill, but a hot and welcome distraction from what had just transpired.

When Hugh had retreated again, Phryne looked up at Jack. He was staring intently at his own teacup, lost in thought.

"I'm sorry," Phryne said, though why was harder to articulate.
"For what? As far as I know, you didn't take that swing."

"My father is...it's a particularly difficult day for him," Phryne began, chastising herself for making excuses for his unconscionable behaviours yet again. "It's my sister's birthday."

"The girl in the photograph?" Jack asked, and she started. What had he seen... oh, after Charlie's death, of course. Always a detective.

"Yes," Phryne said, then laid out the whole sordid story, omitting the detail about Murdoch Foyle's imminent release on parole and her attempts to block it.

Jack listened with the steady intent of a policeman, interrupting only to clarify one detail or another.

"And there's never been a connection made with your sister?" he asked at the end.

"No," said Phryne. "It's all just circumstances and intuition."

He nodded grimly.

"I'm beginning to believe your intuition," he said. "Though I can't imagine that's any particular comfort."

"An open ear is more comfort than I expected," she said. Phryne stood to leave, brushing imaginary dirt from her skirt. She felt off-kilter and vulnerable, the realities of the morning's events cantering through her mind. "Thank you, Jack."

She gripped her handbag a little too tightly and headed out the door.

"Oh, Jack?" she said, popping head back into the office a minute later. He was already back at work in his seat. "Dot's birthday is next week and I've secured four tickets to the theatre through a friend. Hugh's coming, and I wondered if you'd be the other escort? So it's somebody he knows? Poor duck is all nerves as it is."

He looked up from the paperwork in front of him and gave her a small, lopsided smile.

"Just have him pass the details on," he said, then returned to the papers in front of him. "It would be a pleasure."
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

Another two-fer today.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Jack sighed, closing the folder of information he had brought home before locking it into his desk drawer alongside his notes about George Fletcher's operation. Another hopeless case to throw himself against when he couldn't stand the silence of an empty house. A house that seemed destined to remain empty; Rosie had recently made it quite clear that she had no intention of returning.

He had expected it to hurt more, the dissolution of his last connection to the world. Still, there was always the job; he was good at that. And for tonight there was a performance at the theatre and the urge to push young Collins outside his comfort zone.

Glancing at the clock on the mantel, he realised that he'd have to start getting ready if he wanted to pick up Collins by the end of his shift.

———

He was late, Collins was unable to make it at all, and naturally there was a suspicious death on stage. He thought about pointing out that death seemed to follow Miss Fisher, but her husband’s death and recent revelation about her sister made him think twice. She looked well though; if nothing else, the promise of another mystery brought colour to her cheeks. He knew even before Bart Tarrant's revelation that he had just hired her (to investigate a ghost, which was ridiculous even by theatre people standards) that there was no chance of keeping her out of the investigation. Still, it was better to have a loose cannon on your side than aimed towards you. Usually. He had his doubts when she pressed close to him to whisper about actors and speaking thespian. The woman could make anything sound salacious.

And he was rapidly becoming unable to resist.

———

They began the investigation, and he was surprised by how in sync they were despite their disparate investigative styles. Miss Fisher seemed completely at home in the theatre, which would have been absolutely unsurprising if he had ever given it a moment's thought. He asked her how she had met Bart Tarrant, expecting a ridiculous story about stepping in to finish the second act of a show after the lead actress and her understudy both took ill; it was the sort of story that seemed likely with her.

"I am a devoted fan of the arts," she said instead. "Which translates as too poor to be a patron, too proud to be an actress."

"Never dallied with the stage then?" he teased.

"Oh, I wouldn't go that far. There was that time when I was eleven, and my brief foray as a dancer while I was in Paris."

He raised an eyebrow and she gave him a suggestive smile. "Both of those are stories for another
time. *Particularly* the dancing."

He had, on a few occasions before being decamped, been to French clubs where dancing had taken place. It had left quite an impression, even if he had not felt any real desire to pursue such a thing at the time—he had been too exhausted, physically and emotionally, and Rosie had been waiting for him at home. The image of Miss Fisher as one of those girls popped unbidden in his mind and he shifted uncomfortably.

The image was eventually replaced later in the day by the sight of her tying an absurd hat on her head with a laugh; less suggestive, but no less appealing.

"I thought you didn't like operetta?" she teased, catching his appreciative look.

There had been a shift in their interactions of late; Jack was not sure if it was the accidental exposure of her background or his own marital failure somehow lifting its weight with the outcome settled, but he found he didn't mind.

"I didn't," he said, aware that he was smiling far more openly than he had in awhile. Her vivacity was catching. "But I do now."

She was to play the role of Rose in rehearsal with Gwylim Evans; a charming young actor that would probably catch her eye. He'd come to realise that her dalliances were discreet, but many and varied. He found it oddly understandable. It was not his idea of a marriage, but it had suited her and Charlie just fine. Or mostly fine. She certainly hadn't let it weigh on her at least, and he had to admire that. And she made a wonderful Rose.

"Do you smell...hyacinths?" she said mid-scene, snapping him out of his thoughts.

It was such a non sequitur that he was immediately on alert, scanning the area; he saw the sandbag swing slightly and lurched forward, calling out.

He had just enough time to get her out of its path, even if she hit the stage floor rather hard. Her eyes blinked several times before she responded to his worried "Phryne?" She appeared to have been winded rather than anything more serious, but he kept a careful eye on her.

"I'm alright, Jack," she said, accepting his aid in getting upright.

Gwylim Evans was not so lucky, and the production saw a second death in as many days.

In the subsequent search of the theatre, she claimed to have seen the ghost. Which was almost enough for him to march her straight to see Doctor MacMillan to rule out a serious head injury; the only thing stopping him was the knowledge that she'd never go. Headstrong to the point of foolishness, really.

When they were finished at the theatre, he offered her a ride home.

"No, thank you. I have my own car now."

"Do you?" he asked, surprised.

"I thought that if I were to be taking on more of these private investigations and in a more professional context, personal transportation was essential."

"Terribly practical," he admitted.
"And so much fun!" she replied as they reached the theatre door. "The streets of Melbourne aren't particularly challenging, given the places I learnt to drive, but I do get what I need."

Oh, he was definitely beginning to admire Phryne Fisher.

Just outside they ran—rather literally—into a man Phryne introduced as Lin Chung. Jack didn't like him; he was not sure if it was professional concern for Miss Fisher's recent head injury, a response to the man's apparent belligerence, or just plain jealousy. No matter what it was, he made the mistake of trying to direct Phryne anywhere. He was half-convinced she left for dinner just to spite him; the rest of him was aware of exactly how conceited that sounded.

The next morning he steadfastly ignored the telltale signs of an assignation as they discussed the case and interviewed the dresser. When it was suggested that Lin Chung could be an opium dealer, based on the admittedly limited evidence before them, their easy rapport was lost.

"It sounds like you're questioning my judgement," she said.

"No, no. I'm questioning your taste in men," he countered.

It was not, he reflected later, his finest moment. It hardly mattered though, as she gave a pithy reply and walked off.

The case was resolved—the denouement of a twenty year old murder and a secret love child revealed with the usual Phryne Fisher aplomb—and he found her sitting on the edge of the stage, lost in thought.

"Congratulations," he said, more to announce himself than anything else.

She turned and smiled wanly at him. "I do hope that wasn't a compliment I heard? You might just change my opinion on the Victorian Constabulary through charm alone."

"The horror!" he said said dryly. Whatever was bothering her was not so easily chased away, so he opted to try again. "But there was one thing you didn't figure out."

She looked at him quizzically.

"My aversion to operetta," he expanded.

The question caught her attention, her head tilting slightly as she looked at him.

"You do know I love a good mystery," she said. "Let me see..." time stretched between them as she considered. "A bad experience on the stage."

Well, that had taken far less time than he had hoped.

"Pirates of Penzance," he said.

She giggled—genuine, full on giggled—at his confession, and he couldn't help but smile back.

"The reviewer thought my performance as the Major-General was underwhelming."

That was putting it delicately. He'd been subjected to the sort of scathing treatment reviewers reserved for amateur theatre. Rosie, who he had been courting at the time, had found the whole thing to be the height of hilarity.
"Let me judge for myself," said Miss Fisher.

"Can't remember a word of it," he lied. There were limits to how far he would go, even for someone he was rapidly realising was a friend.

"What rot! Once those patter songs are in there, you can't get rid of them."

"I'm more of a Shakespeare man," he said. At least he wouldn't fall flat on his face with the Bard if it didn't deter her.

"Go on, then," she ordered with a regal wave of her hand. "The stage is yours."

But what to quote? He considered and discarded several possibilities, for being inappropriate, or unbefitting of the mood, or too on-point (one from Antony and Cleopatra sprang to mind, and that was a thought that required further contemplation. In private.) or because he could not be as exact as he would have liked.

He thought about the moments he had seen her without her carefully cultivated artifice. Sometimes coarse and sometimes refined, sometimes kind-hearted and sometimes burning with the fire of indignity, but shining and open and alive. He liked that woman, the one he thought of as Miss Fisher and sometimes Phryne; it had been so easy to make the requested change when she asked, because Mrs. Freeman had never sat well on her shoulders. Then the obvious option came to him.

"Therefore, to be possess'd with double pomp,
To guard a title that was rich before,
To gild refined gold, to paint the lily,
To throw a perfume on the violet,
To smooth the ice, or add another hue
Unto the rainbow, or with taper-light
To seek the beauteous eye of heaven to garnish,
Is wasteful and ridiculous excess."

Her smile this time was slow and lazy and tinged with the slightest hint of emotional vulnerability.

"A career in the theatre may just be yours after all," she said.

She had understood. Of course she had; she was Miss Fisher.

"I think I'll stick to crime," he said, before the moment became too heavy, and took her outstretched hand to help her stand.

Chapter End Notes
I cheated. I could not ruin and/or do justice to the Antony and Cleopatra exchange, and this fit the general idea of appreciating things for what they are rather than trying to improve them. Or something. It's from King John, Act 4 Scene 2.
Chapter 9

Alright, my darlings. This is the reason I doubled up on chapters for a couple of days! There is a chance that I will not be able to update until Thursday or so, and this was a natural place to break the narrative.

Also, it covers the events of Murder in Montparnasse. I know this can be triggering, so if needs be, be kind to yourself and skip it. The gist of the events are covered in the next chapter.

Phryne was going over her finances when a knock came at the door. She opened it to find an older woman at her doorway, looking vaguely familiar.

"Phryne!" she exclaimed in a heavy French accent. "It has been too long."

It wasn't until the hat and glasses were removed that Phryne could place her.

"Véronique?"

"Oui, oui, it is Véronique Sarcelle! Have I changed so much?"

Phryne hugged and kissed her friend, laughing. "Not at all! It has been... nine years? since I've seen you, yet you look just as you did at Café Anatole. But what are you doing in Australia?"

"Sarcelle always wanted to come, to paint in this light, and I thought—why not? I will not be young forever. So I have come, and have seen you, mon ami, which was worth the journey alone!"

"I might have one or two more pleasant surprises in me, Véro. First, come to the bedroom."

Véronique laughed. "I was not aware you were that way inclined."

"My dalliance with possessing a Sapphic nature did not last long," Phryne said, smiling; it had been glorious but short-lived, and she hadn't felt the desire since. The willing flesh of a man was her preference. "But it is not what I ask. Come!"

She took Véronique through the small house, pointing out artwork of interest as she went.

"And I am afraid that I had to sell that beautiful painting Pierre did of you, my dear," Phryne said, entering the bedroom with a flourish. "I was in desperate need of the money."

Véronique nodded. "Times, they are tough. I have sold my collection; once Pierre died everyone wanted a Sarcelle. Too late. And now I do not possess even the smallest piece of my beloved."

"Perhaps that painting," Phryne indicated with her finger across the room. "Would be of some interest."

Véronique crossed the room and gasped.

"But how? She was sold to a dealer!"
"I have connections in the art business. Not terribly good ones, but connections nonetheless; they were advised to inform me immediately if this painting ever became available. It is why I had to sell your portrait, Véronique, though I was sorry to lose it."

Phryne watched her friend, always expressive, become completely overwhelmed with emotion.

"He always said this was his best work," she said quietly, reaching up to touch the portrait as if it would bring her closer to her dead husband.

"I've always thought so," said Phryne. "He captured me at one of the happiest moments of my life, despite all the poverty and the fear and..."

She found she couldn't bring herself to say his name. His presence lurked in her memories of Paris, tainting the brief moments of freedom she had experienced. Véronique nodded in understanding.

"Now," Phryne said, refusing to dwell. "How about lunch?"

———

Véronique gasped at the sight of Café Réplique and the appearance of Anatole.

"Mme Sarcelle!" he exclaimed. "Can it be? And Mme Phryne as well; you do not come to visit so often now?"

"I'm afraid I have little time for inspiring art nowadays, Anatole," Phryne said. Café Réplique had never quite managed to replicate the atmosphere of post-war France; she often left the artist evenings with a sense of melancholy instead of creative fulfillment, and her attendance had dwindled. "But is that soupe à l'oignon I smell?"

They were ushered to a table, where Anatole showed Véronique an old photograph of herself and Pierre.

"Are you here with the gendarmes?" he asked.

Phryne's curiosity was piqued; there had been something slightly odd about Véronique's behaviour since her arrival, but she had dismissed it as time and exhaustion.

Anatole explained that the French police were in Australia to follow a lead in Pierre Sarcelle’s death; Véronique claimed the timing was simple coincidence, but Phryne was not completely convinced. As the women caught up over lunch, laughing and swapping stories of their travels and adventures since they had last seen each other, she kept a small part of herself on watch for further oddities.

———

Returning home, Phryne was surprised to find Bert and Cec waiting for her. The cabbies had been her close friends for years, provided they never discussed wealth and the distribution thereof; Phryne was of the opinion that they had never been quite so desperate for money as she had been. It had been a bit of luck—Charlie had met them through his job at the docks and introduced them to Phryne. When they had looked into leaving the docks to run a taxi company, Phryne had been an initial investor and advisor; they'd bought her out soon after, but it had been one of the rare instances where mixing business with friendship had strengthened ties instead of destroying them.

"We want to hire you," Bert said gruffly.

"Don't be ridiculous."
"Why not? Our money's as good as any toff friend of Prudence Stanley's," he muttered, referring to several of her recent small investigations.

"I don't take money from friends," she said. "Put it away and tell me what is going on."

The two men filled her in on the death of their friend Thommo, deliberately run down in the street.

"Boys, I'll need you to accompany me to the police station. We'll get to the bottom of this soon enough."

The drive over was quiet except for Bert's occasional grumbles about the myriad ways the inspector was failing to investigate.

In Jack's office she found him bent over a makeshift map of the crime scene, Hugh running him through events.

"Ahh, Miss Fisher," he greeted her, standing up. "I wondered when the red ragers would call in the heavy artillery."

"Miss me?" she said, coming closer to look over the map.

"I never have time to miss you."

He was smiling though, so she let it pass. It seemed he was finally responding to her charms, and she allowed herself a small sashay as she took the final few steps.

"Go on then, Hugh," she said. "Talk me through it." She picked up the wooden car he was using. "I do like your toys."

The young constable blushed furiously and snatched it back from her hand.

"It's my nephew's," he muttered, somehow managing to blush even redder.

Oh, that was too precious for words. She began pushing one of the cars across the map, complete with sound effects.

"Beep, beep," came a quiet voice behind her.

She turned in time to see Jack's tiny smirk. Oh, he was in a rare mood. If he kept that up, she might just lose the battle in the urge to bed him at least once regardless of his marital state.

Half an hour later he was calling her a professional and making mocking hand motions over her alleged psychic powers and climbing over a fence instead of just unlocking the damn door like a logical human being, and her resolve was groaning audibly.

———

That night, Phryne and Dot were talking over cocoa. It had become a nightly ritual. They were just finishing up and moving to put their mugs in the sink to be washed in the morning when they heard a thump. They both froze.

"Stay here, Dot," Phryne directed. Her gun was in her bedroom, which seemed the likeliest origin of the noise, so she grabbed a broom as she crept into the hall.

Through the door into her bedroom, Phryne spotted a dark figure. She crept closer, but whoever it was—likely male, given the build—heard her coming and turned. A brief struggle ensued before the
intruder fled, carrying a bag.

A moment later Dot ran in, turning a light on in the room.

"Miss?" she said.

In the light, Phryne could see what had been taken: the Sarcelle portrait she had shown Véronique only hours before. That could hardly be a coincidence. Especially as she had a pretty good idea who the intruder was; a decade was not quite enough to erase the memory of the feel of his body and the sounds he made.

"Miss?" Dot asked again. "What's happened?"

Phryne stood tenderly, wincing at the pain in her side.

"We've had a thief, Dot," she said.

"I'll call the police right away, Miss."

"No!" Dot jumped at her vehemence, and Phryne tried to soften her tone. "He got what he came for; he won't be back tonight. It can wait until the morning."

"With all due respect, miss, we're three women alone in a house that has just been burgled. I'll be calling the police."

Phryne looked at her friend in surprise. Just when had her little mouse become a lion?

"If it would make you feel better," she said. "For Jane's sake, and for yours. But perhaps we should leave Hugh and Inspector Robinson out of this? They have their hands full with Thommo's death."

Dot seemed unsure, but finally nodded acquiesce.

"Good," said Phryne. "Go call then."

Dot returned to the hall, leaving Phryne alone in her room. It couldn't really be him, could it? No, it was just unfortunate memories rising to make themselves known.

In the morning, Phryne went down to City South. Jack and Hugh were both in his office, clearly expecting her. Jack nodded to Hugh when she came in, sending him off on some errand. It was a convenient excuse, at least; she suspected his real intention was so that he could lecture her in peace.

"Why is it that you are perfectly happy to bandy my name about and call me in at all hours, except when it might actually help me?" he asked.

"You've spoken with that constable, I take it," she said flippantly. "I wasn't going to call the police at all, but it made Dottie feel better."

"It's good to know that one of you has sense."

"My pride is wounded!"

"As wounded as your side?" he asked pointedly, and she shifted uncomfortably. How did he know? As if he heard her thoughts, he said: "You're holding yourself completely upright, Miss Fisher, and you winced as you sat."
"It's barely a bruise," she protested.

"Of course," he said, crossing his arms. "Now, I want to hear exactly what happened and whatever it was that you didn't tell my constable last night."

"I'm sure I told your constable everything of importance," she prevaricated. "Drinking cocoa, overheard noise, interrupted burglar, painting gone."

"And you have no clue who the thief could be?"

"It was dark."

"That's not actually an answer."

"Nothing else is going to come from this line of discussion," she said firmly.

"Well then, Véronique Sarcelle..."

"Is not staying at the hotel she told me she was."

"Why?"

Phryne shrugged. "Pride? She had a fair amount of prestige when I knew her, at least in certain circles, but she mentioned having to sell all of Pierre's paintings."

"Well, we've tracked down the boat she came in on. Hugh has all the details," Jack said. "Collins!"

Hugh came back into the room and outlined what they knew—a passenger named Sarcelle had arrived ten days ago on the Empress of Australia, and had spent all the time in the ship infirmary with her husband.

"Véronique never remarried," Phryne said, a sinking feeling in her gut. A mysterious male companion coming with her from France? The unlikely identity of her attacker suddenly seemed much more probable.

"So we're looking for an accomplice?" asked Jack.

Phryne nodded slightly. "Perhaps we should speak with Anatole again."

Their plans to head to Café Réplique were waylaid when a telephone call came in to the police station a few minutes later; a fire had broken out at the flat of Bert and Cec's mate Ronnie. Jack was talking to Bert; even with half the conversation Phryne could tell that her friend was uncharacteristically shaken.

"Give me the phone," Phryne said, snatching it from Jack's hand. "Bert? What's happened?"

Phryne's heart lurched when she saw Bert sitting on a carton outside the flat, both hands bandaged and obviously burnt. The man himself was near tears as he related the story: stopping by Ronnie's flat, noticing the smoke, and the entire bed on fire. He had been unable to save his friend, but had managed to salvage a photograph of the four men in Paris.

Phryne offered to take Cec and Bert for a pint around the corner; as she stood she caught Jack's eye, and he gave a tiny nod. He would stay behind and see if anything more could be recovered from the scene.
Once inside the pub, Phryne reminisced with the men about post-war Paris. There was a shiver of shock when they mentioned Montparnasse station, and an almost staggering disbelief when it was discovered that they were the ones who had recovered the painting on the night of Pierre Sarcelle's death.

She knew where she had to head next.

Café Réplique was not yet open when Phryne knocked, but her old friend ushered her inside and began searching through his copies of French newspapers. He found the article he was searching for, and Phryne took the paper with trembling hands. There was a photo of *Woman with Peignoir* and a reference to the Australian diggers who had retrieved it that night at the train station.

"It must be him," she said, trying to stay calm. "Who else would kill for that painting? And now Réne is going after the men who saw him do it."


"Yes," Phryne replied, unaware that she had slipped into the old habit of speaking French. "He is here."

And she knew who he would target next.

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As she drove towards the boarding house where Bert lived, Phryne hoped that she would not be too late. From another corner she saw Jack's vehicle; good, he’d gotten the message. Further down the street she saw a man with his hat pulled down, deliberately striding towards her friends. Even from that distance, she recognised him; it was, undoubtedly and despite the tiniest spark of hope she had held, Réne DuBois. Shots were fired, both from Réne’s gun and Jack’s as Bert and Cec pulled a pair of kids out of the way. As Réne fled, she hesitated for a just a second before following and that was enough to lose him.

She did not allow herself to dwell on the failure long, instead explaining the situation to Jack as best she could without revealing too much of her personal involvement. He did not need to know that she was the subject of the painting or that Réne DuBois was a former lover with an obsession. He'd only fuss and attempt to dissuade her from investigating, which was not an option. She admired the way he took the information in, mused over it, then presented a viable line of inquiry; her own mind was too frazzled to be at the top of its game.

Their conversation with Hector Chambers was illuminating: Réne DuBois had approached him to murder three diggers, had offered to pay with a painting. They even discovered the hotel where he was lodging; the Seascape, where Véronique Sarcelle had told Phryne she was staying.

"She's been there all along," said Phryne worriedly; she knew what Réne was capable of. "Under the name of DuBois."

She strode out of the cell, trying not to run. It would not do to lose control.

When she saw Véronique gagged and bound to a chair, she wished she had flown instead.

———

It was a brilliant plan, one that would allow her to recover her painting and nail that bastard to a wall. But her courage and conviction faltered as she sat at a table in Café Réplique and Jack attempted light conversation. He made a joke about the snails; she shifted in her seat. He had offered her an out
before they’d ever crossed the threshold—he’d couched it in terms of keeping better anonymity without her presence, though they both knew what it really was—but she had insisted. She had not come so far in her life by shying away from unpleasant circumstances.

At that particular moment in time, she was regretting it.

A cork popped across the room and she jerked, hands beneath the table instinctively grasping towards where she usually kept her dagger. It wasn't there, but Jack’s hand was. He laid it on top of hers in a comforting manner.

"You're surrounded by police. You couldn't be more safe."

She gave a shaky sigh. He was right, and she probably would have believed him if Bert and Cec hadn't come into the room at just that moment. A frantic, clawing fear gripped her. They would ruin the whole operation.

"Just what we need," she said quietly, and Jack looked behind him.

"You invited the comrades?"

As if she was that stupid. She shook her head slightly.

"They must have followed us. They'll ruin everything."

She stood up to confront them, get them out of sight before Réne arrived; Jack's hand reached out to touch her again, and he called her name. She stopped. Listened to his gentle warning, changing seats like a compliant child, too scared to do anything else.

He was speaking again, some light-hearted chastisement that neither one of them believed; she knew the moment Réne entered the room, because Jack's entire body language changed in an instant, suddenly tense and aware and ready to strike. She began to turn, slowly, unable to stop herself.

"Eyes front," he ordered quietly. "Phryne....Phryne."

And then his hands were turning her face towards him and his mouth was on hers, so wholly unexpected that she kissed him back. And for just a split second, when the kiss was over, she forgot about everything in the room but the look in his eyes.

It didn't last; by the time Bert punched Réne in the face she had turned her attention back to the scene and was halfway across the room to intervene.

She was too close. She was too slow, too scared, too weak; Réne grabbed her, drew her close with the gun on her.

"My Phryne," he growled. And she hadn't been anybody's Phryne in years, but just the words brought back the familiar sensation of imprisonment. "It has been too long, non?"

And even though she was fighting—there's always an angle, always —a tiny, atavistic part of her brain was already convinced she was dead, and was documenting every last sensation of her final moments. The mingled scents of French onion soup and Réne, unchanged in the passing decade; the bobbing feather of her hat just outside the periphery of her vision; the taste of Jack Robinson on her tongue; the roughness of lace against her skin; all of it heightened to nearly unbearable levels.

She managed to grip the gun, but it wasn't enough; Réne spun her, pressing the pistol against her throat this time. The metal was surprisingly warm on her skin.
"Drop it, monsieur," he said, and Phryne remembered that Jack was there. He was the only thing moving in the restaurant apart from them—she could hear the rustle of his clothes and his breathing—and Réne was watching him as he moved them towards the door. Réne was watching him.

It was enough of a distraction for her to push away, to seize the gun and spin. To aim that gun straight at Réne DuBois's head, though her hands were shaking so hard she wasn't certain of her aim.

Réne began to move towards her, exerting the forceful confidence that had caused her to fall into his trap ten years earlier; she felt herself waver, the first rush of adrenaline fading and leaving her exhausted. Her arms seemed to weigh a hundred pounds each; Réne stepped closer again, his face right at the muzzle of the gun in a display of confidence.

"You would not shoot me," he said with quiet authority.

She lowered the gun and steadied her trembling aim, resting it just above his heart. She cocked the gun.

"I am not afraid of you."

It was a lie; she was absolutely terrified. But she would not allow that fear to control her; even Réne seemed to understand that, as he blew and kiss and ran—straight into the knife of Véronique Sarcelle.

The man who had haunted her dreams for ten years died in a restaurant in Melbourne with a knife in his gut and no fanfare. A mere mortal after all. She sat in front of the body, not quite ready to reach out and confirm it with her own hands.

Jack knelt down beside her.

"You alright?" he asked quietly.

"I believe I am," she managed.

If she wasn't alright yet, she would be eventually. Jack laid an understanding hand on her back.

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When the adrenaline wore off completely, Phryne found she was still sitting on the floor in front of Réne's body. She was aware of Jack beside her—she could feel his leg against her arm and sagged into it, imperceptibly—as he took control of the situation. He was decidedly good at it: authoritative but kind as he spoke to Véronique, passing her care to one of the plainclothes constables; directing two more men to call for the coroner; reassuring Anatole, who was horrified by the turn the sting in his Café had taken; then finally reaching down to gently help her stand.

"I'll take you home," he said quietly. "If you can just last another five minutes."

She nodded. Her own car was around the corner, a purchase that was already making her life easier, but she was in no state to drive it.

"Do you need me to take Miss Fisher's statement?" asked Hugh.

And while Hugh was probably the least offensive option, she wasn't certain she could relive it just yet. She sagged slightly, wondering whether she should find a chair to wait.

"The woman's just had a gun held to her head, Collins," Jack said tersely, grip tightening on her arm.
slightly to keep her upright. "The statement can wait; she's in no fit state to give it now. I'm taking her home."

His perspicacious nature seemed to tell him that she was in worse shape than he first thought, as he took her out immediately. He walked her towards his police car, but she had the presence of mind to extract her keys.

"Red one around the corner," she said. "Please? I don't know when I can retrieve it otherwise."

He took the proffered keys, walked her to the vehicle, and deposited her in the passenger seat.

"Can you wait here?" he asked. "I just have a few more things to handle."

She nodded weakly, not trusting her voice.

He was gone and back surprisingly quickly, or perhaps Phryne was just too numb to notice the time passing. The drive back to her bungalow was silent, and once he had parked he came around to her door to offer her a hand.

He let them into her house.

"Where is the rest of you household?" he asked, looking around.

"I sent Jane and Dot to visit my Aunt Prudence when I realised...when it all began."

She didn't add that her cousin Arthur was in hospital again and the arrangement had the added benefit of keeping Aunt P distracted and all of her family safe in one place.

"Do you have anyone to sit with you?"

She thought, then shook her head no.

"What about Doctor MacMillan?"

"At the hospital. I'm sure she can stop by in a few hours," she said, then noticed his worried face. "I'll be fine."

"That would be more believable if you weren't holding onto my arm while you shook," he said, his tone gentle. He touched the small of her back. "Go take a bath. I'll get you settled in."

She moved towards the bathroom, thankful she had allowed the indulgence of indoor plumbing. She undressed and undid her hair as she ran her bath, then slipped into the water. She wasn't sure how long she stayed in, completely still except the occasional splash of water over her limbs, but the water was cold by the time she emerged. She donned a nightgown and wrapped herself in her warmest robe, not caring how inappropriate it would be for the inspector to see her like that.

When she came back to the parlour, he brought out a cup of tea and plate of toast, still hot; he must have been listening for her. Or perhaps he was merely psychic. The idea made her smile for the first time in hours. She sipped her tea, realising that it had been fortified with whiskey. Definitely psychic.

"Phryne?"

He was watching her guardedly, concern fighting for permission to break through his calm facade. Dear man.

"Why did you kiss me, Jack?"
He sighed. "I'm sorry. That was unconscionable."

"No," she said. "I'm glad. Would you do it again?"

She suspected that on any other day he would say no, gently but firmly, citing his marriage and the complete lack of propriety. But the adrenaline of the encounter must have still been coursing through his veins, because his voice was raw as he asked, simply, "Why?"

"Because I want you to. Because you tasted nice. Because I want to feel something other than fear."

"Those aren't good reasons," he said.

"They're the only reasons I have." She hated the way her voice trembled. "Please?"

His hand reached up, tucking a strand of hair back behind her ear. She leaned into his palm, feeling the callouses of a well-used hand. He drew a ragged breath, then leaned in to press a chaste kiss to her lips. Her tongue darted out, gently testing his resistance; his lips parted without complaint. The kiss deepened, drew out until both of them separated to catch their breath; she kept her forehead pressed against his, and his thumb brushed her cheek.

"Stay?" she whispered, voice hoarse.

One second. Two.

He nodded.

"Yes."

———

They held hands without speaking as they moved towards the bedroom; any interruption would be enough for them to regain their senses. They sat together on the bed, neither one sure how to take the first step; it seemed momentous. Eventually he reached up, moving the edge of her robe off one shoulder then the other. He hissed when he saw the bruises across her chest and disappearing into the lace of her nightgown, from that afternoon and from the night before. He touched them tenderly, then pressed feather-light kisses against every one as if he could undo the damage.

He was gentler than she preferred in her lovers, but it was exactly what she needed; a trusted presence to make memories with, to ease the ache in her body with pleasant sensations.

He found another bruise beneath her chin, from the muzzle of the gun, and licked it experimentally; a shiver ran through her body and he chuckled.

Turnabout was fair play, and she carefully removed his jacket and vest before leaning in to nibble at his earlobe; his quickly in-drawn breath elicited a chuckle of her own.

A few more experimental kisses as they removed the rest of their clothes, so slow and steady it seemed familiar instead of uncharted territory. He kissed along her clavicle again, then down the bruises. He reach the lowest and paused.

"May I?"

It was the first thing either of them had said. She nodded, tears pricking her eyes, and he mouthed a trail of kisses down her sternum and onto her stomach. He paused again just below her navel, waiting for permission; she gripped his hair gently and canted her hips towards him.
His technique was inexperienced but he never made the same mistake twice, reading her reactions and responding to them; soon she felt a familiar coil in her belly and she moaned his name; he moved quickly to catch the end of it with his mouth. She shifted towards him, desperate to feel him inside of her and banish all other thoughts.

"Phryne?"

"Please Jack," she begged. She hated begging. "Please."

He eased himself inside her, as careful as he had been every other step of the way. They moved together; slowly at first, finding their rhythm, then increasing it as they drove nearer and nearer the edge.

Her orgasm hit her quite suddenly, a desperate grunt and shudder and fingernails scratching his back as she tried to stay anchored to the world. He followed after; he made the most delightful little moan as he came. He collapsed against her, then moved aside when he realised his mistake.

For several minutes there was no sound but their breathing. When they had both recovered, he got out of the bed and began to dress.

"Jack?" she asked. "Are you going?"

What it meant was 'Can't you stay?', but that was a step too far.

"I have to get back to the station," he said, buttoning his shirt as he spoke. He didn't meet her eyes. "I'll phone the hospital and ask Doctor MacMillan to check in on you this evening."

He leaned over and kissed her temple, smoothing back her hair. His mouth opened as if he intended to say something, but closed again without a sound. Then he turned and walked out of her bedroom; she didn't see or hear from him again for three days.
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

So I managed to carve out a little time to format and fight a few chapters into submission, so an earlier than expected update! In theory I have enough ready to just read once and post without having to make changes that there won't be another break until the intended one. In theory being the operative term.

The night of Réne DuBois's death, Jack Robinson got blindingly drunk for the first time in a long time. He was not a stupid man. He knew that he had made some awful choices in the past, and had followed even more horrific orders. But sleeping with Phryne Fisher when the woman was in shock was by far the most deplorable thing he had ever done; it was an utter betrayal of his morals, of her trust, and of the last few remnants of his marriage.

(At night, in his own silent house, he relived it. How scared she had been in the restaurant, a kiss meant to calm her—already questionable, already wrong, but he had not thought before acting, he had not had time to think—becoming something more. Her fierceness, her courage. His fear, not quite able to be suppressed. Taking her home and finding her house empty, finding that she was somehow alone despite the people she surrounded herself with. Needing to get back to the station but unwilling to leave her until he was satisfied that she was alright. That first kiss in her parlour, so gentle. They way she had smelled, the way she had tasted, the softness of her skin against his hand. The way he could feel her request to stay humming through his veins before she ever gave it voice.)

He managed to avoid her in the initial aftermath—he was on another case when she came into the station to make a statement and retrieve Pierre Sarcelle's painting (he had, unfortunately, been the one to catalogue it as evidence; the image was burned in his mind), and she made no attempt to contact him either. It was a far better response than his behaviour had deserved. Deplorable. Cowardly. Despicable.

Unfortunately, only three days later he was at the scene of a murder when he heard familiar footsteps and caught a whiff of distinctive perfume.

"Miss Fisher," he acknowledged, looking up to find himself eye level with her belt.

"Hello Jack," she said, perfectly cheerful.

He took the opportunity to look at her; she was somehow completely unchanged, as if everything that happened had not had the audacity to harm her permanently. Even the bruises that should have shown above her low neckline—he was certain he had memorised the location of every one without meaning to—were absent, presumably covered with make-up.

"Do you often barge in on the crime scenes of other policemen, or is it a pleasure you reserve specifically for me?" he asked before he could bite his tongue, shame making him caustic.

"I'm not one for fidelity, Jack," she said, sitting on the edge of Miss Lavender’s desk. "But you are by far the most competent of the policemen I harass."

"A particularly kind distinction," he said dryly, then continued his investigations of the Women's
"You are dull today," she said. "That new furrow in your brow wouldn't have anything to do with the other day, would it?"

He sighed; he could not avoid the issue forever. He would not, in good conscience, do so.

"I owe you a sincere apology for my transgressions, but this is hardly an appropriate place for the conversation."

"Oh, for heaven's sake Jack! Is that why you've been avoiding me? Some sort of self-flagellation? There's nothing wrong with gaining comfort from a friend on a bad day," she said sternly.

Somehow the dismissive tone made it worse.

"A marriage is still a marriage, Miss Fisher," he said, a mantra that no longer held true.

"And you are still an honourable man."

Before he could argue the point—there were certain things an honourable man did not do, and have sex with vulnerable women was high on that list—Regina Charlesworth burst into the room.

"Phryne!"

Was there any person in this town that Miss Fisher was not acquainted with?

"Both of you out," Jack ordered, then added at her hurt glance. "Please."

When the case was resolved and John Bell in gaol, Miss Fisher sat on the edge of his desk with her legs swinging very lightly. He couldn't figure out why she was even there, but she was chatting away about Miss Charlesworth's plans for the magazine while he attempted to fill in reports.

"I believe Dot is very excited about her new position," she said conversationally. "With the Blue Fairies triumphant over Melvin or Marvin or whoever he is, the magazine was in dire need of a new serial."

Jack just shook his head, aware that even if he didn't ask Miss Fisher was going to tell him, in detail, all about the new story. Probably pixies or unicorns or angels from upon high.

"It's all very Sherlock Holmes," she said, leaning in. It gave him an excellent view of her décolletage; apparently his guilty conscience was not nearly as guilty as it should have been. "The Casefiles of Miss Psyche Baker, Private Detective, as told by her loyal assistant."

"I cannot imagine where she got the idea," he said.

And if he happened to pick up a copy of the magazine when the first story was printed, he could hardly be blamed; it was keeping an eye on the competition, really. Besides, the police foils were barely recognisable caricatures.

A week later, Jack was sitting in his office when he heard a commotion in the reception area.

"Is Inspector Robinson here?" came a familiar voice.
He was never going to escape her. He felt the shame he had almost forgotten rise again.

"Miss!" said the horrified constable on desk duty. "You can't just waltz in there!"

It was the only warning he had before the door opened and she entered, dropping dramatically into a chair.

"Hullo, Jack," she said. "I'm afraid I have a complaint to file."

She gestured towards the door, and through it Jack saw her two red ragger friends holding onto a roughed up George Fletcher.

"That man out there has been providing abortions."

"I am aware," he said tersely. He had an entire file of names and dates of cases he could potentially trace back to Butcher George, if only there was evidence. "But as I have no proof and no witnesses, I'm not entirely sure what you expect me to do about it."

"Actually, it's about what I can do for you. You see, as a recently widowed woman I found myself in desperate circumstances in need of a remedy."

"You're not...?" he asked, horrified. He desperately went back to the afternoon, trying to remember if he had used anything; he vaguely remembered a French letter, but over time the whole thing had become a blur of adrenaline and guilt and he could not be certain.

"No," she reassured him, quietly enough that nobody outside the room could overhear. "Not really. But I gave him the impression I was. It will be easy enough to tell the prosecutor that I changed my mind and he tried to force it; it was only through the quick intervention of friends that I was rescued. And I've got another witness who was subjected to the same horror."

Jack was speechless. Genuinely, irrationally speechless and absolutely furious.

"I have been gathering evidence on him for years," he hissed.

"And I took care of it for you," she shrugged in response.

Infuriating.

"And it's no good to me, Miss Fisher. I cannot charge him on the basis of testimony that I know to be falsified."

"Alice's is completely true," she countered.

"Right, and you think that she'll actually testify? Face the charges?"

"She's strong," argued Miss Fisher. "She agreed before we started; she's young and there's a good chance she and Cec will never have children because of George Fletcher. And it's not like she wanted to go through with it, so she shouldn't be charged at all by rights. He's quite a brute."

Jack had his doubts about Alice's change of heart as well, but at least he could claim genuine ignorance about that one.

"And if the Crown decided to prosecute you as well?" he challenged.

"Then I'll serve the time."
"It's ten to fifteen years, Phryne!"

"Yes," she said, completely unperturbed. "But Jack, I need a favour."

He pinched the bridge of his nose. Exhaled loudly.

"What?"

Perhaps there was some method to her madness. Unlikely, but given the rage pounding through his head he could only hope.

"Murdoch Foyle. The one who took Janey. He's eligible for parole in just over a month, and there's no reason for it to be denied."

He knew that. He'd spoken to some of his contacts at the gaol in his initial digging into the case; he hadn't made much progress yet, the files were a mess and he had no official reason to reopen the inquiry. That did not explain why Phryne had essentially presented a completely unrelated criminal to him the way a cat brought home a bird to their people.

"Why?"

"I've exhausted every legal recourse I have."

Like she was saying 'I went to the shop and bought a new hat'. The woman was madness personified.

"You could have just asked; you didn't need to put yourself in that kind of danger!" he exclaimed, completely exasperated.

"No, I couldn't," she said. "I was already perilously close to owing you."

"For what?" he asked. Even if her flippant attitude towards his behaviour was genuine—which was, he suspected, a distinct possibility—he had done nothing to indebted her to him. "For doing my job?"

"No! Well, yes! I mean—"

He stood up, heading towards the door. He signalled for the constable to take Fletcher down to the cells and shut the door to continue the conversation in private.

"Miss Fisher," he began. "Am I to understand that you arranged a completely unofficial sting to capture a rogue abortionist in an attempt to buy police resources?"

She looked chastised for just a moment before forging on ahead.

"You make it sound so gaudy, Jack. I merely helped you close one case and thought that perhaps it would allow me a teensy-weeny peek at some of the case files as an interested party."

The anger was quite literally clouding his vision. Jack strode back to his desk, unlocking one of the drawers. He tossed the file at Phryne.

"Just ask, Miss Fisher. You have ten minutes while I make telephone calls to try and straighten this mess out."

She opened the folder, then looked up at him quizzically. "This is your writing."

He nodded. "It will be faster than you going to the primary sources."
"No, I mean—"

"Ten minutes, Miss Fisher," he said, then picked up the telephone.

He was going to have to call in favours if he wanted to salvage this arrest.
Chapter 11

Phryne drove up to the house of Caroline Harold, current organiser of the Procession of the Flower Maidens and good friend of her Aunt Prudence.

"Remember, Jane," she told her young ward. "Caroline might be an utter simpleton, but it's the sort of good graces that will get you further ahead. So no arguing with the other 'flower maidens' and try not to entertain yourself by disappearing into her library. Even if the collection is far more interesting than the hostess."

"Yes, Miss Phryne," Jane agreed with a grin.

Phryne walked her to the door, where she found the house in chaos.

"Oh, Mrs. Freeman!" exclaimed Miss Harold. Phryne tried not to rankle at the name, even if Caroline was the sort to use it deliberately. "I'm so sorry you did not get the message. I've had to cancel; Marie is here and Rose has just arrived after missing her tram, but there's still no hint of Kitty."

Phryne looked over at Rose Weston, who had always struck her as a rather soppy young woman convinced of her own cleverness.

"Did your tram go past the foreshore, Rose?" she asked archly, noting the sand on her shoes.

"I was supposed to meet Kitty by the bathing boxes this morning but she never arrived," the girl lied.

A revelation that seemed to send Caroline Harold into an even bigger flap. Phryne sighed; it wasn't even a particularly good half-truth. Jane was the only one who had taken the news with any degree of levelheadedness, even though she seemed slightly worried.

"Well then, a trip to the foreshore is in order!" she said. "We'll retrieve our wayward maiden and then Miss Harold can have her way with you. I suspect she'll need all the time she can get."

The discovery of Kitty's body on the edge of the water rather put paid to the idea of an afternoon filled with social niceties.

"Dot, call the police. Jane, I need you to take Marie and Rose over to the bathing sheds and sit still."

Both young women complied. Thank goodness some people were sensible; as they walked away Phryne could already hear Marie postulating appropriately tragic events that could have led to Kitty's suicide. Phryne did not believe in banning books, but she was occasionally inclined to restrict the availability of novels to silly sorts of girls.

It was Hugh and Jack that responded to the call ("I knew the station, miss," was Dot's later explanation. "All the others went straight out of my head in the shock.")", and whatever discomfort there was between Phryne and Jack was put on hold in light of such a death.

"Miss Fisher," he said, bending down to examine the body. "I'll take it from here."

"I should go keep the girls out of trouble," Phryne replied. "You'll want to talk to Rose in particular, as she claims she was supposed to meet Kitty here."
"You have your doubts?" he asked, one eyebrow raised.

"Let's just say that I was a very convincing liar myself."

Jack nodded.

"Can you take them somewhere?" he asked. "They don't need to see this and we'll be awhile."

"We were supposed to meet back at Caroline Harold's house, but I think the bungalow is a little closer. If that's alright, inspector?"

He nodded, his mind already back on the scene. He really was a good policeman, Phryne thought; between the two of them they would be able to find the answers.

When Jack arrived at the bungalow, Phryne filled him in on what she had gathered about the flower maidens from conversations with Jane. He was evasive about his own opinions, but it was not the reluctance that usually accompanied his attempts to keep her from his cases. Or even, she suspected, his irritation at their last exchange.

"You don't need to spare me, Jack," she said. "I can draw the same conclusions as you did, seeing her in last night's clothing and knowing what goes on at the foreshore at night."

He shifted on his feet, so slightly she would not have noticed if she hadn't become so accustomed to his tiny tells.

"Well," he said, clearing his throat. "I could use your help interviewing the girls."

"Are you actually inviting me, inspector?" she asked coyly; she had attempted to put a moratorium to her flirtation since the incident after Café Réplique, in deference to Jack’s apparent feelings on the matter, but it was too good a chance to pass up.

"I am quite happy to face wharfies and thugs, but wayward teenage girls are your expertise, I believe."

It was almost a smile, or what passed as a smile by Jack standards; a tiny little upcurl of his lips, as if he was the keeper of some amusing secret. She was glad to see it.

"You have no idea, Jack. You have no idea."

They interviewed the girls together; Marie was her usual... imaginative self, complete with nimble fingers filching Jack's pen, and Rose was recalcitrant and sullen. Only Jane produced information of use, and even that was simply that Kitty had nearly fainted the week before. The inspector offered to drive Rose home, and Phryne took charge of Marie. As he left, he gave Phryne a stiff nod and said that he would see her at the station in the morning; a quiet acknowledgement that she was part of the investigation.

That evening, Dot came into Phryne's bedroom with two mugs of cocoa.

"It's Jane, miss," she said, passing one mug to Phryne. "She seems worried about something."

"I would imagine that Kitty's death would do that, Dot."

"I think it's more than that. She was talking about how she's been so happy here and how glad she is to have had her time with us."
"It's never easy to face your own mortality."

"Perhaps that's all it is, miss."

Phryne laid her hand on Dot's.

"Thank you. Even if it's nothing, she's very lucky to have you looking out for her."

Dot blushed as she stood and left the room, and Phryne ruminated on the strange twists her life had taken in recent months. New friends, the odd state of widowhood, a new ward—really, her curiosity had been piqued by the reticent inspector's description; and once she'd met the girl she could not condemn her to a life in an orphanage—and a new line of work. Funny, the turns one's life could take. It took her another hour before she could fall asleep.

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Kitty Pace's death did not have a pleasant resolution; a life with no family, used by men, and murdered for falling pregnant. A life so unvalued that there was nobody to claim the body. Phryne shook her head sadly; she'd known so many girls like that in Collingwood. She might have been one, if not for the support of other women: Mac, several years older and fearlessly blazing a trail; Miss Charlesworth and her fight to keep Phryne in school when her father had wanted to take her out; her mother fostering her natural vivacity despite their drab surroundings; the memory of Janey pushing her towards justice and a better life.

It was at moments like this that Phryne found appreciation for her Aunt Prudence's charitable works; if Prudence was made aware of the issue, there would no doubt be fundraisers and options available within a week, and no end of other girls in need of the same with too few resources to go around. Still, it was better than sitting still. Phryne had never been able to abide sitting still.

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The other events of those few days had much further reaching implications for the Fisher household. The sudden appearance of Anna Ross surprised Phryne with the depths of her sadness at losing Jane. Of course returning her to her family was the right course of action. Of course it was.

Only, Phryne realised, the girl had quickly become part of hers. And when she realised that Jane was missing, that need to protect her own was almost feral.

She went looking for Rose Weston, also absent from school that day, and instead found Jack. The Phryne of a few months earlier would have found a way to use his presence, donned whatever role would ensure her own ends without a second thought. But it was too raw, too close, and Jack was too intertwined in her life; a fact she would regret when the moment passed. But in that instant she was grateful for the fact that he was never more than two steps behind without crowding, for keeping a cooler head when panic overwhelmed her—it was a gross parody of Janey's disappearance; rationality was too much to expect of herself—and for the fact that he worried, his face saying everything that his words glossed over.

She found herself grateful for the fact that he was a good man.

The call from a police station in Carlton was the lead they needed; he offered to let her drive, but she didn't know the road. They climbed the stairs together. Entered the room together. Worked in tandem to rescue Jane from the roof, Phryne wrapping her arms around her daughter as they both sobbed.

"You're safe," she whispered to Jane. And Phryne realised that her own heart, so carefully guarded, no longer resided only in her own chest. "It's okay. You're safe now. You're safe now."
"Jack, I'm afraid I'm going to have to impose on you," Phryne said.

She was perched on his desk again, impervious to his deliberate aloofness.

"What's that? Asking for a favour?" he shot back. Clearly whatever truce they had between them during the investigation was gone. The fact left her with a hollow feeling she chose to ignore. "Aren't you worried you might owe me?"

Really, he'd blown the whole thing out of proportion. And fine, it had been a painfully obvious ploy and she probably should have just talked to him, but it was hardly an insult to his character specifically. More just a general distrust and a lesson hard-learnt. Alright, she hadn't been completely faultless. But she could be the bigger person, at least.

"Jane wants to thank you for your..." she tried to find the word that would cover Jack's actions at the boarding house. "Your act of heroism last night. She's throwing a party in your honour this evening."

"I'm not sure that's wise."

"Jack, she's a fourteen year old girl and was scared out of her wits. Let her cook dinner and be thankful that she had people she could rely on for the first time in her life. I'm sure you can repress your loathing of my very presence for a few hours even outside of a professional setting."

"I have paperwork to finish—which you are helpfully distracting me from, by the way—and 'loathing your very presence' is not the issue."

"Just come, please."

"Why do I have a distinct feeling that this was never an invitation?" he asked in resignation.

"Because it wasn't, Jack. We eat at seven."
Chapter 12

The Fisher residence was well-lit and music came through the windows as Jack arrived that evening. He parked his car and knocked on the door; Jane opened it, blushing slightly when she saw who it was.

"Thank you for coming, inspector," she said.

There was a hint of Miss Fisher in her mannerisms, and Jack wasn't certain if the girl was genuinely grateful or just trying to direct the conversation. He'd say this for his acquaintance with Phryne Fisher—he had descended into previously unfathomable levels of cynicism in the intervening months.

A cynicism that was backed up by the day’s case; all he wanted to do was go home and try to forget. Instead he was at a party where he had to fake social niceties until he could engineer an escape, and he wasn’t entirely certain why.

Everyone he had begun to think of as members of the Fisher family was there: Jane and Dot, Bert and Cec, even Hugh. Bobby Sullivan made a brief appearance, but retreated quickly; his connection had no doubt been Charlie, and without him he was adrift. Doctor MacMillan came in just after Jack, announcing that she had found a temporary solution to Anna Ross's care.

"It's not much," the doctor said, helping herself to a drink. "But a friend had a spot at a hospital open. She'll be a cleaner in exchange for food, board and treatment."

"Thank you, Mac," said Phryne, looking towards the kitchen where her foster daughter was cooking. "I'm sure it will be a great comfort for Jane."

One thing he admired about the Fisher family was their loyalty to each other.

Jane called them all for dinner a few minutes later. The meal was simple but surprisingly good given the girl had not had many excuses to cook before coming to the Fisher household.

"Excellent job, Jane," Phryne smiled at her. "I do believe you have already outstripped my culinary skills."

"That's not hard, Miss Phryne," she replied cheekily, and the entire table laughed.

When the meal was finished people retired back to the parlour, for more music and dancing and lively conversation.

Jack hung at the outside of the crowd as he often did, allowing it to wash over him. It reminded him of his own family gatherings, when siblings and cousins and uncles and aunts all descended in a chaotic whirlpool of noise. Before the war he still hadn't been in the centre, but had dipped his toe in from time to time; after the war it was too easy to notice the voices missing from the cacophony. He avoided those gatherings nowadays.

Nobody seemed to be interested in drawing him out, but all of them—including Albert Johnson, who was mumbling about enemies of the people—would speak to him then retreat, as if testing his boundaries. Doctor MacMillan ended up being his favourite; her dry humour was very similar to his own, and she wasn't particularly brash. Or perhaps she was—he couldn't imagine one of Miss Fisher's friends as anything else—but deployed it sparingly.

"You all seem very close," Jack said to her, several hours into the evening.
Doctor MacMillan nodded a little too enthusiastically; at some point during the night she had had one drink too many. "Phryne collects people. Once you save a member of the circle, you become part of it."

Jack nodded non-committally.

"Phryne and I have saved each other a ridiculous amount of times. Phryne saved Dot. Cec saved Bert and Bert saved Phryne, although I don’t know the whole story there. Hugh gets in on the strength of his devotion to Dot. You saved Jane’s mother. Welcome to the family, inspector," the doctor slurred, then turned to shout into the kitchen. "Phryne! I just told your inspector friend that he's stuck with us!"

From the kitchen he heard Miss Fisher laughing.

"Sorry Jack," she called out. "Mac's an overly friendly drunk. She once brought home two kittens and a wombat. In the middle of London."

"Phryne found the wombat," Mac said in the sort of loud whisper that drunk people thought was subtle. "I merely freed her from her captivity and set her free to be free with freedom."

"I suppose freedom is important," he said, for a lack of anything better to say, and took another sip of his whiskey.

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He hadn't meant to stay, but time passed and he realised that he was the only guest left. He must have drifted off on the couch. Phryne sat next to him, her partying demeanour replaced with something far more contemplative. She startled when she noticed him watching her.

"Are you well Jack?"

"Tired," Jack answered honestly, feeling ever so slightly bleary.

"Lack of sleep or the job?"

"Both, I think."

She nodded. "I keep thinking about poor Kitty. And Rose, and all the girls like them. How easily Jane could have been one of them."

Her hand came to rest on his thigh.

"Miss Fisher?"

"Do you ever wish you could forget, just for a minute?" she asked, hand trailing upwards slowly. "To feel the good instead of the bad? To fly away, leave the weight of the world behind?"

He closed his eyes and took a shuddering breath.

"What are you doing, Miss Fisher?"

Her hand was at his waist now, resting quietly.

"I'm waiting for your answer," she said. "Say no and I go no further. Say yes and we take comfort in each other, no strings or commitments."
He closed his eyes again, leaning back into the chaise, and groaned. She maneuvered her body so it was flush against his and her mouth was by his ear.

"Sometimes it's hard to say the words," Phryne whispered. "To admit that you want something. Need something. So why don't we play a game? If you want me to stop, say wombat."

He opened his eyes suddenly. "Why wombat?"

"Freedom," she shrugged.

She was ridiculous. But with her breath in his ear, he found he didn't care. He nodded slowly.

"Good."

She undid the buttons on his braces and slipped her hand beneath the band of his trousers, giving an appreciative moan when she found him responsive. Jack found he was utterly incapable of making any sound at all.

She shifted his trousers down far enough to extract his half-hard cock, then began a steady stroking as her other hand slipped beneath the cloth to cup him gently. Her hands were warm and self-assured as she moved.

"Do you want...?" he managed, flustered, as he felt the beginnings of an orgasm building, realising that he had not touched her yet.

It would be ungentlemanly to take without reciprocation, which was a completely absurd thought when someone was massaging him like that.

She shook her head. "This is enough tonight. Allow me?"

She picked up the speed slightly, and Jack gave an involuntary thrust against her palm. She moaned in response, a deep, throaty sound that conjured up all sorts of images even filthier than what they were actually doing. Jack bit his lip, trying to keep control.

"Let go, Jack," she whispered into his ear. "Just let go."

It was enough; he came with a guttural groan, thighs shaking. She continued her ministrations through the aftershocks, drawing every ounce of pleasure from him.

"Good boy," she purred.

She removed her hand, wiping it clean on a handkerchief that she primly placed into his trouser pocket, then tucking him in and refastening his braces. Jack waited for the first strong sensations to pass, catching his breath. You could barely tell he had been completely undone only moments earlier.

The haze of sex and alcohol cleared, and Jack felt a sinking sensation of shame drop in his gut.

"We can never do this again," he said, standing quite suddenly. Utter humiliation at his lack of self-control burned through him. "Good night, Miss Fisher."

And he beat a hasty retreat, not even pausing to put on his hat and coat before leaving the house. He was gone so quickly he didn't even notice that the handkerchief in his pocket was one of hers.
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

Death by Miss Adventure this time, and Mac is sorely underutilised. I could not capture her heartbreak. So I will break my "let story stand on its own" rule to say that that wonderful exchange between Mac and Phryne in the cells did occur. Some things do not need to be said, and the love between Mac and Phryne is one of them.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

A week after the party, Phryne was roused from her bed at an ungodly hour by a frantic knocking at the door. She heard someone—Dot probably, Jane had said she was heading in to school early that day—open the door.

"Doctor MacMillan!"

Mmm, definitely Dot. But if Mac was there, something must have happened. Phryne rolled out of bed, rubbing the sleep from her eyes and tying her robe around her. Mac wouldn't care what she was wearing; she'd certainly seen Phryne in worse.

"Miss Phryne!" Dot called through the door. Despite her best efforts to just be Phryne, Dot had insisted on Miss for as long as Phryne was her unofficial landlady.

"Coming, Dot," Phryne replied. "Could you put the kettle on?"

"Of course, miss."

In the parlour, Mac sat on the chaise staring at nothing.

"Mac?"

The doctor turned silently; Phryne hadn't seen her look that numb since the war. Something medicinal then; Phryne went to the sideboard and poured a generous measure of whiskey.

"What happened, darling?" she asked, pressing the glass into her friend's hand.

"Roderick Gaskin," said Mac. "Runs one of the factories down..." her hand waved vaguely. "I've been visiting him there as part of my rounds. There was a death this morning."

"One of the workers?"

Mac nodded. "Daisy Miller."

It was not like Mac to be shaken so easily.

"What happened?"

"Caught in the machinery, supposedly."

"And you don't believe that?"
Mac shook her head. "It's not like Daisy to be careless, and the conditions at that factory...that man would sell his own mother if he thought it would make him more profit. He and the foreman were skulking around before I even got there."

"I know the type," said Phryne. "How can I help?"

"I still can't believe you bought a car," said Mac as they pulled up to the factory. "Here I was thinking I would never be subjected to that particular terror again."

"Think of it as a welcome distraction, Mac!" she said cheerfully. "So what's the cover story?"

"If anyone asks, you're my nurse. But I'd rather get in and out before that happens," Mac said as they strode towards the factory.

Inside, Phryne was surprised to find Hugh Collins looking terribly green.

"Miss Fisher! You can't be here! There's been a gruesome accident—"

"Yes, yes, I know," said Phryne curtly. "Caught in the machinery, great tragedy. Where's the inspector?"

She stepped past Hugh, eyes already on the man behind him. Gaskin, judging by the way he held himself. She would have to invoke Aunt Prudence again; they were both on the board of the women's hospital.

"The inspector's not here, miss," said Hugh, oblivious to her disinterest. "It seems to be pretty straightforward. The machines fired up at eight. A girl's hair—" Hugh's stomach revolted at the thought, and Phryne waited for the moment to pass. She had seen much worse too many times to be bothered herself, but there was an awful amount of splatter and the whole area stunk with the heavy scent of copper. "Her hair got caught in the cogs."

It would seem straightforward, but she trusted Mac's intuition and there was something off about the scene. She touched the nearest blood splatter, finding it dry.

"Are you sure it was eight?" she asked.

Roderick Gaskin huffed. "Of course. Machines don't go on until then. It couldn't be any earlier."

"See?" said Hugh. "Straightforward."

Phryne had her doubts, but voicing them in the factory seemed like a bad idea. She'd just have to go over Hugh's head, for Mac's sake.

Strictly speaking, Phryne had not seen Jack since he had fled her bungalow as if the hounds of hell were at his heels. Which had not quite been her intention. She had been a little tipsy, he had stayed, and both of them had been vaguely out of sorts; a little bit of physical release had seemed the natural conclusion.

Somehow she had forgotten that Jack did not see the act in quite the same light.

"Morning Jack," she said as she came into his office.
She hadn't knocked; she wasn't entirely certain he wouldn't have made his escape through a window if she had. He looked up. Flinched. Oh, this was unfortunate. There was a reason she didn't usually blur the divide between friend and lover.

"Miss Fisher," he said. His tone was overly polite.

"What's going on with the death at Roderick Gaskin's factory?"

"I'm pleased to see you too."

"Don't be smart, Jack. You and I both know you'd rather I never grace your presence again; can't say I particularly like the idea—we do work well together—but you are allowed to set your own limits. However, Hugh seems convinced it was an accident—"

"I've read the report. It seems thorough."

"Hugh was in no shape to be investigating that scene. He looked ready to lose his breakfast."

"Be that as it may, Miss Fisher..."

"Did he mention the blood was dry?"

"As I said, it was a thorough report."

"But I was there by half past nine! There's no way it should have been dry by then."

"I am aware, Miss Fisher," he said dryly.

He indicated the file on his desk, and she picked it up. He'd made notes and queries about the situation, not signed off as she had expected. When would she learn not to doubt first and question later?

"How is it that you are so often ahead of me?" she asked, figuring a little flattery wouldn't hurt. He was at least keeping pace, most of the time.

He gestured around to his office.

"It's almost as if I achieved the rank of Detective Inspector without your assistance, Miss Fisher."

"Hmm," she said. "Almost. Shall I drive?"

———

Jack made an absolutely terrible passenger, full of commands to slow down (she was barely doing forty-five miles an hour; even the old jalopy could handle that) and to keep her eyes on the road (they were, just not the parts he thought they should be) and threats to arrest her for a variety of road infractions. It was almost a relief to arrive at the factory; it was definitely a relief to use Jack's badge as entrance into the Gaskin offices.

She used her unceremonious dismissal from the Gaskin offices as an excuse to re-examine the scene; it did result in threats of trespass charges ("For heaven's sake, Miss Fisher," Jack had hissed into her ear, hand on her upper arm. "Make nice and get out of here before I have no choice but to arrest you.") ), but it had allowed her the opportunity to notice the lack of blood on the safety guard. Too bad Jack unilaterally declared that she was off the case just because Gaskin was blustering; as if she would allow something like that to stop her.
Mac's revelation that Daisy had been investigating something illegal at the Gaskin factory illuminated the matter more. Phryne ignored the tiny voice in her head that suggested Jack should be made aware of the development; if he knew then he'd realise she was still investigating, and that wouldn't do. Still, they were stymied; Phryne had no access and Mac was practically an enemy of the state with no hope of uncovering anything.

"Dot!" Phryne called out. "How would Psyche Baker's assistant like an assignment of her own?"

The undercover assignment ended up being more perilous than Phryne would have liked—she certainly hadn’t anticipated Roderick Gaskin falling out a window directly in front of her friend—but Dot proved herself more than capable. She was prepared for Jack's censure when he emerged from the factory afterwards; one thing she had learnt quickly in their acquaintance was that he had little patience for careless disregard towards people under your care.

"How was she?" Phryne asked as he left the factory property and came towards her car. "I'm prepared to get her out immediately, of course."

He gave her an amused sort of look. "Cool as a cucumber. She appears to have done an excellent job at infiltration."

"She had an excellent teacher," Phryne said.

Jack gave her the sort of look that she would call an eye roll in a more expressive man.

"There are more pressing matters," he said. "Have you seen Doctor MacMillan today?"

"Mac? No, not today. Why?"

"It seems she was the last one to see Gaskin alive."

"Hmm," said Phryne. Probably a complete coincidence. Definitely a complete coincidence. Best to clear the matter up quickly. "Meet you at the hospital?"

"I'd tell you not to drive like an utter maniac, but there's little hope of that. However," and here his voice dropped dangerously, "if you speak to her before I get there, I will arrest you, Miss Fisher."

Phryne had sat down with a glass of whiskey and a novel, determined to forget the events of the day. She could figure out her plan of action in the morning. Afternoon. Whenever she decided to rise from her bed; she had no pressing commitments.

She had just gotten to a particularly salacious part when there was a pounding, then her Aunt Prudence's voice shouting through the door. Phryne leapt up and answered it; only a dire emergency could bring Aunt P into her part of town, especially at this time of night. She couldn't even begin to fathom what would leave the woman abandoning good decorum to shout through a door.

"Aunt P!" she said as the door swung open. "Come in! Dot's made biscuits."

The older woman clutched her handbag to her chest as if she expected to be set upon by ruffians and barged into the house.

"Tea! And yes, biscuits. Then you and I need to have a talk about the company you keep, Phryne
And she threw herself into the nearest armchair.

"What company would that be?" Phryne asked as she headed into the kitchen. "The butcher? The baker? You don't even know about the candlestick maker, though he was particularly delightful."

"This is serious, girl! You know I'm not one to gossip, and what your Doctor MacMillan does behind closed doors is between her and her maker. But I draw the line at murder, and so does the rest of the hospital board."

"Is this about Gaskin's death?" Phryne asked, measuring out tea leaves for the pot as she waited for the kettle to boil. "Mac was never really a suspect, you know. Inspector Robinson was just being thorough."

"Then why, pray tell, did that inspector arrest her?"

Phryne dropped the spoon into the teapot and headed back to the parlour.

"What? When?"

"Just now! Marched her straight out the front door of the hospital. I've come from an emergency board meeting."

Phryne didn't even notice the kettle had begun to whistle as she left the house.

City South police station was quiet. Phryne didn't recognise the constable on the desk, but she waved and kept walking. If you didn't want people to stop you, it was best to never give them the impression it was a possibility. She knocked forcefully on Jack's door, somehow not doubting that he was still in although it was nearly 11 pm.

"Yes?"

She went inside.

"What the hell is going on?"

"Good evening, Miss Fisher."

"Of all the lazy, incompetent idiocy of the Victorian Constabulary, Jack Robinson, I never expected to find you behind it."

"Is this about Doctor MacMillan?"

"Of course it's about Mac! Arresting her—for your own convenience, one presumes—when you know full well she has an alibi!"

His jaw clenched, and Phryne found herself pausing for the first time since she'd heard the news from Aunt Prudence. Examining the circumstances instead of reacting to them. None of it made any sense. It was made worse by Jack's voice, sad and distant, as he looked at her with uncharacteristically open honesty.

"When your head did but ache, I knit my handercher about your brows…"
"Jack?"

He sighed. "I have lied for you because I believed it to be right. I have ignored your more... unconventional methods of uncovering the truth. I have granted you far more access to police reports and crime scenes than I really ought to. And I have investigated Murdoch Foyle, because I had faith in your intuition."

"Jack—" she knew with sudden clarity that she had been wrong—not in her anger, still justifiably rankling at the implication of her oldest friend, but in her assumptions—and wanted to apologise.

"No, Phryne," he said, cutting her off. She could never recall seeing him as hurt as he was that moment; not when they had had sex, not when she had played for his loyalty instead of asking for help, never. "Do you really have so little faith in me that you think I would let an innocent woman hang?"

She crossed the office and collapsed into her chair.

"I suppose not," she managed. "So will you please explain to me why a woman we had already cleared is sitting in your cells?"

He scrubbed his face with his hand, re-donning his mask of indifference. Then he handed her the coroner's report and waited in stony silence for her to read it. It was damning. She closed the file and looked up at him.

"I couldn't be seen doing nothing," he said.

"But you don't believe she did it?" Phryne realised.

"I can't be certain of anything," he said. "But no, I'm not particularly inclined to think her guilty. Evidence must be investigated and protocols followed regardless of gut feelings however. Unlike you, I do not have the luxury of ignoring whether evidence is admissible in court."

"Can I see her at least?" Phryne asked.

Jack nodded. "I'll take you down. I intended to check on her before heading home anyway."

———

Mac was cleared and Roderick Gaskin's sister under questioning for his death, but the death of Daisy Miller was still unsolved. Until a sudden clarity came upon them and Phryne raced back to the factory just in time to find Dot being forced towards the operating machinery.

In the split second she had, the only option Phryne could see was an axe directly to the power source; it was over in a matter of seconds. Later she couldn't even remember exactly what happened.

"Phryne!"

From her position on the floor, she heard the scramble of feet and Jack's face came into view. His fingers found her pulse on her neck.

"Am I dead yet?" she said.

He gave a harsh barking laugh; it wasn't a sound she had ever heard from him.

"Not yet. Need a hand up?"
She rolled over and got to her feet without help; her legs were trembling and she was a little breathless, but she was fine.

Hugh was restraining the murderous Hetty—workplace snitch and thwarted lover—and Dot was trying to catch her breath after her near miss.

"Well," said Phryne with far more alacrity than she felt. "This should make an excellent climax to your next story, Dot."

———

That night they were in Phryne's parlour again; it had become an oddly familiar routine, like her dinners with Mac or her discussions with Dot about the latest cinema star, and she was glad that it was not lost.

"I'm sorry for my misstep," she said.

"Which one?"

His lips quirked slightly, and Phryne found herself remembering how soft they had been the afternoon she had kissed him. *Not the thought to be having*, she scolded herself.

"The other week. I'm sorry. You made your comfort level clear and I pushed beyond that."

"Yes, well, neither of us was at our best," he said. "I wasn't—the other day you said that I'd rather never see you again. It's not true. I just needed time to clear my head; you are a freight train, and I didn't even have the track."

It was a far more honest discussion than they had ever managed.

"Do you now?" she asked.

"Not really," he admitted. "But since not even that seems to stop you, I've come to realise I should just accept my inevitable fate."

They shared a small smile.

"A game of draughts, Miss Fisher?"

"I thought you'd never ask, inspector."

For the moment, she allowed herself to forget about the letter she had received the day before, Foyle informing her that his parole hearing had been delayed six months, and the very heavy price it asked of her. Perhaps it was time to ask Jack for his help—truly ask, not establish it as a favour to be repaid—as she should have weeks before.

Chapter End Notes

Not the first or (spoiler) last time Phryne's trust issues raise their head. In calling out Phryne's doubt, Jack's quoting King John again. Arthur's monologue in Act 4, Scene 1.

Have you the heart? When your head did but ache,
I knit my handkercher about your brows,
The best I had, a princess wrought it me,
And I did never ask it you again;
And with my hand at midnight held your head,
And like the watchful minutes to the hour,
Still and anon cheer'd up the heavy time,
Saying, 'What lack you?' and 'Where lies your grief?'
Or 'What good love may I perform for you?'
Many a poor man's son would have lien still
And ne'er have spoke a loving word to you;
But you at your sick service had a prince.
Nay, you may think my love was crafty love
And call it cunning: do, an if you will:
If heaven be pleased that you must use me ill,
Why then you must. Will you put out mine eyes?
These eyes that never did nor never shall
So much as frown on you.
"Ja-ack," sang a far too innocent voice over the telephone line. Miss Fisher. "Would you please come around for lunch today?"

"Why?

He already knew he wouldn’t like the answer.

"Twelve sharp, Inspector Robinson."

She ended the call without another word, and Jack stared at the telephone in bemusement. He probably shouldn't go. He was not her personal policeman after all.

At twelve o'clock sharp he was standing in front of her house. She opened the door before he had a chance to knock (or, equally likely, chicken out) and gave him a smile.

"Hello Jack," she said. "Thank you for coming."

He stepped into her hall, placing his hat and coat on the rack by the door as she headed towards the kitchen.

"Care to explain why you summoned me in the middle of a work day?" he called out after her.

"Because Jane's at school and Dot is at the magazine right now," she said over her shoulder. “Which means we can talk in private."

"I believe I have an office for that sort of thing, Miss Fisher."

"No. This requires more... delicate handling," she said. Then, as if realising what it sounded like, she laughed; he knew her well enough to know that it was not sincere. "Not that sort of handling, Jack. I will keep my hands off your personage as requested."

She had laid out a veritable feast on the kitchen table and Jack eyed it hungrily. And with the tiniest shred of suspicion; it was not likely that the gift came without strings. Still, food was food and it smelt amazing. He helped himself to a plateful, then sat down.

"So what situation is so delicate that it warranted a lunch?" he asked.

Phryne took a deep breath—steeling herself, he realised—and produced an envelope.

"Murdoch Foyle wrote to me," she said, pushing it over to him. "He thinks I'm responsible for having his parole date pushed back."

"Why?" Jack asked, carefully opening the letter.

"Because I managed it before, I suppose," she said, her voice. "But I couldn't this time. It seems to be simple bureaucracy. But he's offered... Just read the letter. Please."

He did. The man was articulate and somehow chilling even through the page, offering to tell Miss Fisher the truth in exchange for the withdrawal of her parole objection. There was nothing Jack wasn't already aware of though.

"I won't ask what you plan to do," he said. The lunch was forgotten. "I had a call yesterday, from a
friend at the gaol."

"You are well-connected, inspector," she said. It was a half-hearted flirtation; he was far more concerned about the glimmer of tears in her eyes.

"What do you want me to do?" he asked.

His investigation, if it could even be called that, had not been productive. There were no witnesses he could re-interview without tipping his hand. His next step had been to see if there were any other disappearances of young girls in the time frame, but without an official inquiry he had no real freedom; what he needed was a valid reason to formally reopen the investigation.

"Tell me what to do, Jack," she pleaded. She sounded utterly hopeless, and his heart squeezed in response; he had nothing of use to offer. "Tell me not to place myself above the law."

"You never listen to me anyway," he said, his tone letting her know if was not a recrimination. His own moral compass had been wildly off-kilter as of late.

She smiled slightly in acknowledgement.

"You know what to do," he said, handing her back the envelope. It had to be her choice alone; if he, or anyone else, intervened she would resent it. He trusted her to do the right thing though; she always had before, regardless of the legalities.

She stood quite suddenly, strode over to the woodstove, and shoved the envelope inside before she could second guess herself. She stayed with her back turned for a moment, probably to regain control of her emotions. When she came back to the table, she was her usual collected self.

"So, Inspector Robinson, what is the next step?"

"Is there any particular reason you felt the need to set up camp here?" Jack asked, watching Miss Fisher rearranging the furniture in his guest bedroom. He'd always intended to turn it into a study—there was already a desk in one corner and more than a few bookshelves—but he'd kept it as it was in the hopes that Rosie would return. Since she had requested the divorce, he hadn't had the time. He was still not completely certain why Phryne felt the need to move things around; she'd just declared that they would need more space and set to work.

"Because all the rooms in my house are full—partially due to your influence, I may add—and setting up at the station is a bad idea?"

"Ah."

His plans for a lazy Saturday of puttering in the garden had been hijacked when Miss Fisher had knocked on his door at a quarter past eight in the morning, a box full of papers in her arms. He hadn't even known she knew where he lived. Her presence was so unexpected that he had stepped aside to motion her in without a second thought, a concession he was regretting very much now.

"You could help, you know," she said, pausing to look at him.

"You could ask, you know."

"For help? I just did."
"No, for permission to take over my house."

"It's not a take over. It's friendly neighbour relationships."

Jack just sighed. "Tea?"

"Please," said Phryne, nodding. "And do you have a second chair we could use? Otherwise one of us will end up sitting on the bed."

"I'll get the kettle on and bring one in," he said.

She was already back to her own task. He watched her work for a moment; she'd dressed down in trousers and a simple dove grey blouse, none of the usual frippery she favoured in sight. Even her makeup was subdued. She was fond of telling him that a person's clothing choices said a lot about them, and her outfit clearly stated that she was single-mindedly pursuing her goal. The only concession to vanity—well, not vanity, but her usual aesthetic preferences—was her hair, plaited and secured with a mother-of-pearl fascinator. He wished that she didn't look quite so at ease in his home.

Once in the kitchen, he put the water on the stove to boil, laid out some scones he'd baked the night before on a tray, and prepared the teapot and cups. Then he headed into the parlour, clearing his spare armchair of its pile of books and papers; Rosie had always teased him that he was awfully messy for such a fastidious man. She hadn't found it as entertaining near the end. Jack heard a noise at the door and turned, expecting to see Miss Fisher impatiently seeking out the promised chair.

It was his wife.

"Rosie?" he said, half-convinced that he had conjured her with his thoughts alone.

She held tightly onto her hat, uncertain where to put it. The old rack by the door had broken, he remembered suddenly, and he hadn't fixed it yet.

"Hello Jack," she said; her voice was brittle and stiff, lacking all the warmth of the woman he had fallen in love with. It was, perhaps, the hardest part of the whole situation, knowing he had effected such a change.

"What are you doing here?"

Her mouth opened and closed, as if she wasn't quite certain of the answer herself. From the kitchen he heard the kettle boil.

"I'll get tea," he said. "Please, sit."

She moved delicately, as if afraid to disturb unwelcome memories in what had once been their marital home, and took a seat. Jack retreated to the kitchen, pouring the water into the teapot and fussing over the tray. He poured milk into a small creamer, remembering that Rosie always took it in her tea. When he came back into the parlour, she was sitting stiffly in the chair as she looked around to the small changes he had made—moving the armchairs so his favourite was in a better position for reading, a new racing trophy on the mantelpiece.

"It looks nice," she said.

"It's the same as it's always been, Rosie."

"That's right," she said with a small, sad smile. "Nothing ever changes for Jack Robinson."
"Did you need something?" he asked. "Only I'm rather in the middle of something..."

"I thought it would be a good time to talk," she said.

He placed the tea tray on the table before speaking.

"What is there left to talk about? You don't want the house, you don't want financial support, everything of value to you was removed years ago."

It wasn’t a new argument, but it didn’t stop him from starting it anyway.

"Jack, like it or not you are still my husband."

"As I recall, you were the one who initiated proceedings. What I liked or wanted hardly entered into it."

It was an unfair accusation, he knew that; the truth was the request for a divorce had been a relief.

"Neither one of us was happy, Jack," she pleaded, twisting the damn hat in her hands.

"Which leads me to ask you—again—why you are here today."

"Joan had her little one."

And just like that, the argument was done. Rosie's sister Joan had had three little ones in the years since John. The news never got any easier.

"Boy or girl?" he asked quietly.

"Little girl," she smiled, eyes damp with tears. "Called her Lily, after Mother."

"That's nice," he said. He poured Rosie's tea and handed it to her. "Both are well?"

He suddenly did not want to be having this conversation, to ask vague questions in an effort to appear the dutifully interested uncle, however briefly the connection lasted. It was selfish, he knew, but it was one matter he allowed himself to be selfish. The nice thing was that, despite the vast chasms between them, Rosie knew it and just gave him a small smile.

"I just...I needed someone who remembered."

He nodded and they sat in silence for a few minutes. It was not an uncomfortable silence despite its heaviness; it was nearly two decades of history resting on their shoulders, both comforting and heavy.

He had almost forgotten the fact that Phryne was there, a fact that pushed itself to the forefront of his mind as he heard her footsteps.

"Jack?" she called. "Did you need help with the chair?"

Horrified, his eyes shot straight to Rosie. She sat frozen in the chair, pained disbelief writ across her face.

"Oh, hello!" said Phryne as she entered the room.

Jack turned to her, hoping that she would have the sense to...actually, he had no idea how the situation could possibly be salvaged or his wife's pain ameliorated. Phryne seemed to however; in a
split second she seemed smaller, less confident. Less of a threat, he realised. Rosie continued to stare.

"You must be Mrs. Robinson," said Miss Fisher. "Inspector Robinson has told me about you."

"Funny, I don't recall him ever mentioning you," Rosie said.

"Mrs. Freeman," Phryne introduced herself, and Jack nearly choked on his tea. "Jack—that is, Inspector Robinson investigated my husband's death recently, and has very kindly offered to help me with another matter."

"I'm sure he has," said Rosie, voice as imperious as she could manage.

There was the tiniest flash of irritation on Miss Fisher's face, but she schooled her features. "I'm a private detective investigating the disappearance of a young girl, Mrs. Robinson. There's nothing the police can do in an official capacity, but Jack has kindly offered his aid."

"I am not a fool, Mrs. Freeman," said Rosie. "And I'd rather not be treated like one."

Rosie stood, placing her teacup back on the tray.

"Jack," she said, utterly calm. "If you had told me about this earlier, the divorce petition would have been far easier."

"It's a professional matter, Rosie," he said. Even he didn't believe it.

"Of course it is. You always did bring your work home."

And with that, she swept from the room and towards the door.

"I'm sorry, Jack," Phryne said once the front door closed. "I believe your wife was rather left with the impression that we are sleeping together."

"Well," sighed Jack, lowering his head into his hands. He suddenly wanted nothing more than a stiff drink or three, and to go back to bed until Monday. "She isn't exactly wrong, now is she?"
Phryne was headed to an appointment with her accountant, to discuss the final financial details of Charlie's passing, when someone knocked on the door. From the kitchen she could hear Dot and Jane baking biscuits of some sort, laughing and talking. She'd have to answer it herself.

When she saw who it was, her heart lurched into her throat. She hadn't seen him since...

"Samson," she said. Her voice caught when she tried to say any more and she motioned him inside; it gave her a moment to recover. "It's been a long time."

He gave her a familiar rueful smile. "Four years, I think."

Almost to the day. She had gone back to the circus then, trying to find a lead on Murdoch Foyle to keep him in gaol; she had been obsessed, desperate to find any evidence of Janey and to defer his parole. The deferment had eventually come through legal channels, but answers were far harder to achieve. It had been a dark time; her reconnection with the gentle circus strongman was the only moment she remembered with any fondness.

"Come into the parlour," she said. "Tell me why you are here."

Samson ducked his head as he passed through the door frame; her doors were tall enough to accommodate him, but it was a habit for him to take up as little space as possible. It always surprised her, the things she remembered about her lovers and the things she did not.

Safely seated in the parlour, he told her why he had come; a murder of a carnival worker—body displayed horrifically and for maximum shock value—and an unsatisfactory police investigation.

"But I've heard of Psyche Baker," he said, a gentle sort of teasing in his voice. "And I thought you might introduce me."

"I..." She meant to say yes. Samson had helped her when she had run into her own incompetent investigators, had provided a steadying influence when she felt most adrift. But the idea of going back to the circus again... she’d had nightmares every day for months the first time. Of losing Janey, first at the circus and then at every other horror of her life in the intervening years: battlefields and muddy trenches and in the church where she had been married because it was the best (only) option in front of her. "I can't."

And Sam just nodded. "I understand. I'm sorry for dredging up old memories."

"Believe me," she said, sounding far calmer than she felt. "The memories are never far away. Would you like a drink?"

He nodded, an agreement to stay. As Phryne headed to the kitchen, she sought a solution that would
satisfy them both. By the time she had finished brewing the tea, she was fairly certain she had one.

"Jack, I told Samson you could help!"

Bloody impossible man.

"The case has been assigned to another policeman."

"What, Senior Sergeant Grossmith?" Phryne asked, unable to keep the derision from her voice.

"He came around last time we were in town," Samson said. "Mr. Jones asked him to sort out a couple of thugs who'd been causing us strife. He closed down a two-up game and went on his way."

Senior Sergeant Grossmith was exactly the type of policeman that had led to Phryne's dislike of the lot; at that particular moment in time, Jack was not helping their case either.

"He hardly seems the most diligent member of the police force."

"His results seem perfectly satisfactory, Miss Fisher."

Some days she really wished that Jack was more easily led; she usually managed to get him to see things her way eventually, but it would be much simpler if she could just flirt a little and have it sorted immediately. An appeal to his sense of duty then.

"I told Samson that you don't just provide justice for those who can afford to pay," she said. He was utterly unmoved. Obstinate man. He was in charge of the station, he could investigate whatever he liked.

"I generally leave those cases to people like you," he said archly. Which wasn't even true; he was diligent with every case he worked no matter his personal feelings for those involved. She wouldn't have trusted him with Janey's case otherwise. "Why aren't you investigating, as a matter of interest?"

"It's Farrell's Circus," Phryne said, and saw the comprehension dawn in his eyes.

"I'm sorry that I can't help you."

It was almost a relief that he had not taken it on after that particular revelation; it would have felt too much like pity. She would not be deterred that easily though. There was still the option of blunt truth.

"Sam, can you head to the car? I'll join you in just a moment."

Sam, bless him, took his leave without complaint. He really was a dear man; their brief affair had ended amicably. His travel and her nature had precluded any real relationship, but it had been a lovely time she wouldn't mind revisiting at a later date. Lost in thought, she almost missed the sound of the door shutting. Clearly Samson knew the conversation would be delicate.

"Jack," she scolded once Samson had left the room. "Is this about the other day?"

Really, she had thought better of him than to sacrifice justice over a bit of shame. Meeting his wife under those circumstances had been awkward, but no real harm had been done. She'd been practically angelic, and had even left immediately afterwards in deference to his feelings on the matter. They weren't doing anything nowadays anyway; Jack's limits had been well established.
"Miss Fisher, despite popular belief my entire life does not revolve around you. I have more cases than I can possibly solve, another that is occupying what was once my spare time, and enough paperwork to fell a forest. I cannot take over another officer's investigation just because you asked me to. Even if I could, it would set a terrible precedent."

"Very well then, Jack, I will have to investigate myself."

She bloody well would have to, fears be damned.

"I look forward to the results," he said mildly. "Goodbye, Miss Fisher."

And the bloody man turned back to his paperwork. She was almost at the door when she heard his voice again.

"I really am sorry, Phryne."

She turned; he was still intently focused on the file in front of him as if he hadn't said a word. She made sure she was quiet as she opened the door, and left it slightly ajar behind her.

———

"Well, that was a disappointment. I was so sure Jack would help," Phryne said with forced alacrity as she rejoined Samson outside the station. "Though I imagine your next trick will be to bend me like you bend an iron bar?"

Samson chuckled. "You always could see right through me. I can understand why you don't want to go back..."

Phryne laid a hand on his forearm. "Of course I'll help you, Sam, no bending required. I wouldn't leave you in the lurch. Not you, and not Miss Christopher, though I never knew her. Let's go back to my place and see if we can rustle up a costume."

Back at the house, Phryne rifled through her wardrobe. All of it was practical; she had always chosen clothes that would last as long as possible. The combination of Charlie's life insurance and the lack of his impudent spending had translated itself into a sudden windfall, placing her into financially comfortable territory (her accountant's words, not hers; she wasn't sure she would ever have enough money to feel truly secure), but she had not altered her habits yet.

Still, the money was there and there were worse things to spend it on. It might even be fun to indulge her flair for the dramatic.

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The dress was incredible: nearly sheer in places, with sequins and a metallic thread. And the slits up the sides! Oh, it made the dress twirl with the most delightful freedom. Perfection. It was also, strictly speaking, designed for a fancy dress party. The circus was practically the same thing though.

"Wow!" said Sam.

"Think Fern'll do?" she asked, allowing a broader twang to her accent; she had always tried to sound as refined as possible, aware that it influenced how people treated her. Looking for a job in the circus required more Collingwood than Upper Crust.

"Oh, you'll do," said Sam with a grin, and she preened.
She *did* look fantastic; Dot was even appropriately scandalised, and it took more and more to perturb her friend's Catholic sensibilities. She covered up the ensemble with a trench coat; it was almost a waste, but there did have to be limits and this should provide an extra incentive if Mr. Jones was reluctant.

They took the tram towards the circus, getting off a stop early to walk the rest of the way. Sam took the extra time to fill her in on the main players in the circus: Mr. Jones the boss, the magician Mr. Sheridan, the magician's assistant Amelia Parkes, and Doreen the owner of the snake found wrapped around Miss Christopher.

Phryne paused for a moment when she saw the tent; it was not the same tent she and Janey had snuck under all those years ago, but she could still remember the feel of the canvas in her hand and the joy as they hid beneath the bleachers with the best view of the stage.

"Ready to meet the boss?" Sam asked, breaking her from her melancholic reverie.

Mr. Jones turned out to be a plump and greying man; she hadn't seen him during her last visit, and he was very different than the man who had caught her and Janey and laughed at their antics. He offered her a job; rather, he offered Amelia Parkes a choice between two jobs (magic show or peep show) and gave the other to Fern. The subterfuge had worked, although it was a near thing.

"You come from carnival people?" he asked.

"Not in this lifetime."

"Really? 'Cos you look familiar."

"People say that. Must have a common kind of face," she said casually, hoping he would accept it.

Jones nodded. "Samson here'll show you the ropes."

Her investigation was fruitful, but left Phryne with more questions than answers. Why was Miss Christopher making payments to a Doctor Septimus, even going so far as to borrow money from Amelia Parkes? Where had the one-off payment several weeks earlier come from and why? What exactly was going on between Doreen and Sheridan, and Miss Christopher and Sheridan for that matter? Was Mr. Jones hiding something? Samson had been quick to reassure her that it wasn't possible—the hermaphroditic Miss Christopher too valuable and Mr. Jones too much a father figure. But, Phryne pointed out with intimate knowledge, not all fathers were kind to their children.

She was glad for Samson's presence, a reassuring buffer against the petty othering and providing an investigative partner in areas that would have otherwise been blocked to her; it was clear that "Fern" was not part of the circus family, and never would be if other people had their way.

Much to her surprise, she saw Hugh—his face registered his own shock—and she shook her head very slightly to signal to him to carry on. He approached Amelia Parkes, Sergeant Grossmith behind him all the way. She hated that man, so indolent and crass; when Amelia rose from her bench and stretched out her hands in tired resignation, Phryne was shocked.

"Didn't you read about it? It was in all the newspapers," asked Samson. "Amelia was arrested for killing her husband last year. I'm sure I can find the details."

He did; there was an old newspaper lining the bottom of a trunk proclaiming "Carnival Killer: Trapeze Wife Allows Husband to Fall to His Death" and he filled Phryne in on the uncovered
Phryne could feel herself rankling at the news. That's what Jack considered satisfactory, was it? An epileptic woman who hardly looked like she could withstand a stiff breeze manhandling a body into a straight jacket, then creating the tableau? It beggared belief.

She had to give begrudging credit where credit was due; Jack did listen to her derisive deconstruction of events with an open mind.

"And I presume you have a theory about who did the deed?" he asked.

She did, in fact, have many theories. None of them with much evidential support. She followed him into his office.

"Two frontrunners," she said, outlining what she knew.

Mr. Sheridan the lover and magician, somewhat unlikely given his fainting spell at the discovery of the body.

"A good faint, like just about anything, can be faked," he said. He was riffling through papers as they spoke, but he was listening. It was an improvement over earlier, at least.

"Then there's Doreen, proud owner of the python found with the body," Phryne continued, moving closer. She perched on the edge of the desk, running through the rest of her deductions: imagined romance between snake charmer and magician, a boss known to have argued with the victim over an attempt to leave the circus.

"All very interesting. Let me know when you narrow down the suspects," he said, and Phryne changed her mind. This was not an improvement over earlier; if anything she was more irritated than before.

And she was close enough to him that she could smell him, which was damn distracting.

"I want to see Miss Parkes," she said, standing up. The gall of him, to still fail to investigate when she presented a perfectly plausible case. Even if it was based on conjecture. So was Grossmith's case. Probably.

"To what purpose, Miss Fisher?"

"To check that her basic visiting rights are being respected," she said tartly. She undid her coat and flashed him her costume beneath. "I am a workmate, after all."

For a man who had shared her bed, however briefly, he seemed to blush awfully red and look anywhere but at her directly. She gave a victorious smile and headed towards the cells.

Miss Parkes was sitting on the bed when Phryne came into the room, staring at the wall. Phryne donned the Fern persona, allowing the last bits of Miss Fisher to fall to the wayside. The conversation went well; with careful prodding she discovered that Doctor Septimus was prepared to relieve Miss Christopher of her additional appendage for a hefty fee; it explained the savings and the borrowed money, though not the one-off payment. Perhaps, as Samson had conjectured, it was a bonus for the peep show.
When the conversation was over, Phryne prepared to head back to Jack's office. She paused when she heard someone calling for him and Hugh trying to placate the caller.

"I want some blooming justice from you lot!" the woman was yelling.

Curious, Phryne slipped from the cell and padded upstairs just in time to see Jack joining Hugh and the woman at the front desk.

"Elsie!"

"Jack Robinson! He's the nicest cop this side of the river," the woman, Elsie, asserted to Hugh. "I was his first arrest, did you know that? Remember that, Jack?"

The sudden image of a Constable Robinson occurred to Phryne and she smiled; far more easily flustered, she imagined, but probably still noble. He'd made an impression on Elsie, at least, and she knew the type; it took a hell of a lot to impress a woman like that.

"You never let me forget, Else," Jack replied. "Now what seems to be the problem?"

As she watched the exchange—something about a stash and a heist—Phryne couldn't help but feel a little guilty for her earlier irritation. The truth was, she was so used to seeing Jack investigating that she had forgotten that he had an entire station to run. He couldn't personally handle every case that crossed his desk. And he had set Hugh on it; the fact that his constable was easily led wasn't really his fault, though he seemed quite annoyed nonetheless.

"Things will seem a lot clearer once you go home and have a sleep," Jack said to the upset woman. "In fact, Constable Collins here will escort you home right now." Hugh shot him a horrified look. "Unless, of course, you are finally ready to interview Miss Parkes."

"Sergeant Grossmith says he wants her to sweat it out more," said Hugh. "He says sweat..."

Hefaltered just for a moment; obviously so keen to impress his boss, he hadn't actually thought about what he was parroting back.

"He says sweat what?" Jack asked, so composed that Phryne was very glad she was not on the other end of it.

"He says that sweat, um, greases the wheels on the fast track to a confession."

"Dizzying insight, constable," he said dryly. "Don't let him intimidate you on the way home, Else."

She had to give Jack credit; he had allowed Hugh to see how ridiculous the notion was for himself and expressed his displeasure at the same time. Not for the first time, Phryne was pleased to realise that he was a good police officer. Not just in his considerable diligence or his impressive investigative skills, but in how he balanced all the accompanying annoyances. Or perhaps it was that he was a good man.

"Just how many women have you doing their bidding?" she asked when he headed towards his office and spotted her lurking by the door.

"Too many," he replied with a wry half-smile. "Lady Justice worst of all."

"I was unfair, Jack, and I'm sorry."

"You were," he acknowledged. "Though you might have been right about Senior Sergeant
Grossmith. I'm going to have to go back through his cases now, see how many times he's taken a shortcut to the wrong destination."

"Don't you have someone else to do that?"

"My station, Miss Fisher, and my mess," he said with resignation. "Now, did you learn anything of interest?"

She dithered; he had enough on his plate without being dragged into this case. But she missed talking her cases through; she'd grown accustomed to his presence. And, well, a trip to the morgue was practically a holiday compared to the pile of papers she had seen on his desk.

"I found out why Miss Christopher needed the money," she said.

"Are you going to tell me?" asked Jack expectantly.

"I think it's something that's better seen with your own eyes," she said with a playful curl of her lips.

One of the advantages to having Jack on her side was that it gained her access to the morgue; much nicer than having to pick the lock, and less likely to lead to her arrest. She had, perhaps, become too dependent on the access; still, their ends were so often in sync that there was no harm in it. Not really. And if she was glad to have someone there to discuss the autopsy report with, well, two heads were better than one.

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Back at the circus to prepare for her debut and alone for the first time, Phryne stumbled across the magician's disappearing box. She opened it slowly, as if expecting her past to tumble out; when it did not she stepped in herself, found the hidden exit and made her escape. There was an eerie sort of feeling to it, as if she had followed a path to another life. Everything seemed slightly different in the room; surely that mirror had been on the other side, and the pile of costumes had been inside an open chest instead of laid on top. It was a world, very briefly, where she could find Janey or where she had never disappeared at all. She felt tears prick her eyes, and took a steadying breath. Wished Samson (or Jack, steady Jack who had promised progress before they had parted that evening, or Dot with her sensible approach to everything) was there with her. When had she become such a sentimental fool? When had she allowed herself this weakness?

It wouldn't do.

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The revelation that Mr. Sheridan and Miss Christopher were lovers did not seem to surprise Samson when she told him that evening, both of them back at her house after her debut as a magician's assistant.

"Did you know?" she asked, feeling as if it was something she should have been told. It was hard to deduce motive without being aware of connections.

"No," Sam shook his head. "But we're all outcasts of one type or another there. It's not a surprise."

She admired his practical and unjudging approach; they were, perhaps, kindred souls in that regard. Phryne had long felt that love was love, regardless of who was involved, and that sex without love was an equally valid choice. It was her preference, in fact; love came with commitments, and she was exhausted by the commitments already weighing on her and their failures. Protect Charlie. Watch Janey. Keep her father out of gaol. Keep Foyle in gaol. It was too much; she wanted freedom.
She had found freedom in some ways; Jane a responsibility willingly shouldered (she had thought herself mad when she offered to take the girl home, but her ward's presence had been a wonderful thing); money was no longer a frequent concern, she made investments and purchases that secured her position and brought her joy; she had found a profession where she excelled and was satisfied. She still contemplated flying away from it all from time to time; she hadn't flown a plane since they'd had to sell Charlie's, and she found the sensation a manifestation of all that she missed.

It was a dreary line of thought, and did not resolve the situation at hand. She shook it off as she always did, turning back to Samson.

"Jones had the most to lose," she said, feeling slightly guilty at the deduction. Samson had made his feelings about the possibility clear, but it had to be said. "If Miss Christopher went through with the surgery he would lose his star attraction. How would I get myself into a position to take a peek through Jones's papers?"

"No," Samson replied firmly. "The boss is as straight as an arrow."

"Then he'll have nothing to hide!" said Phryne, knowing Sam would go along with her eventually. "But if, hypothetically, we were to take a look, how would we do it?"

"Anything important is kept in the strongbox."

And here she had the strongman; what a helpful coincidence.

"Could you get into it for me?"

"He's a good man, Phryne."

"I know it's hard," she said. "But good people—the very best of people—can still be compromised."

The look he gave her said everything his words had not. She wouldn't ask it of him again, not unless she had no other choice; there was a difference between knowing that anyone's morals could be compromised and asking someone to compromise theirs.

The conversation was interrupted by a ringing, then Dot answering the telephone. A minute later she came into the parlour, pale and shaken and standing completely upright.

"Hugh's been shot, Miss. I'll need a ride to the station."

Back at the circus the next morning, assured that Hugh's injury was nothing more than a flesh wound, Phryne secured the lockbox and had it brought back to Sam's tent. Inside she found a vial of liquid—some sort of medication, most likely—and serialized bank notes; the former was not unheard of given the animals that had been at the circus through the years, and the latter tickled a memory. Hadn't the woman at the police station been talking about someone's stash going missing?

Time to talk to Jack again then, but she had other things to do.

"I need you to take these to Jack Robinson for me," she told Samson, handing over the newfound evidence.

Sam gave her a doubtful look.

"Trust me," she said.
Because damn it all, she trusted Jack.

The bank notes were from the robbery Matthew Tizzard had been convicted for, Jack informed her that afternoon. She was back at the house for lunch and a break, and trying with some difficulty to forget the unpleasant exchange she had had with Sergeant Grossmith. 'You already have one cop by the short and curlies' he had said, and considering Jack had come to her instead of straight to the circus in search of Matthias the Ghoul, she wasn't entirely sure he was wrong. It was not a comfortable feeling.

She looked at the proffered locket.

"I've seen him around a few times," Phryne said. "Strange thing is that he's always wearing his makeup."

That clearly meant something to Jack.

"White make-up?" he asked. She nodded and he looked shamefaced. "Greaspeaint. I should have recognised the smell of the stuff."

"Do you mind telling me how our bank robber went from dead and buried to running around the circus?" she asked, not terribly interested in his self-castigation.

He reached into his jacket, pulling out the bottle of liquid she had found.

"Lab tested this: animal tranquilizer. Potentially fatal for humans, but if you survive the main side effects are suppression of the pulse and breathing."

"They would appear dead."

It was surprisingly brilliant.

"So he has the tranquilizer smuggled in, and then our bank robber comes over all Romeo and Juliet after a fight with another inmate," she extrapolated.

"Henceforth he's dispatched to the undertakers, and then the cemetery."

"Now we must to the monument?"

"We? The friar goes alone, I believe."

"God no, Jack. This is just getting interesting."

The discovery of an empty coffin with a trick latch was enough to confirm their suspicions, and Phryne headed back to the circus; no point in delaying, which was inevitably what Jack would do as he gathered more information. She parked the car and ensured she had her pistol; it didn't seem right to approach a fugitive without one.

He was lurking behind one of the caravans.

"Matthew Tizzard," she said.

"What do you want?"
"I see the reports of your death are greatly exaggerated," Phryne said dryly.

"It wasn't my idea!" Matthew blurted. Criminal genius he was not. "He was the brains; said he thought of a way to get out. I just went along with it."

"Who?"

"Another inmate," he said. Phryne moved her gun slightly, to encourage his forthrightness. "Name of Foyle. He worked it all out; said he knew about the drug. Bought it from the circus years ago. Then the magician built the coffins and... poof!"

It was a hundred, a thousand times worse than she could have imagined.

"Foyle? He broke out?" she demanded. "Where is he?"

"I don't know! We were supposed to meet here and he never showed."

She doubted he was lying; of course Foyle would not do as he said he would. Still, it was best to be thorough. She pressed the gun hard into Matthew's back.

"Where is he?"

There was the click of a gun behind her; for a split second she thought it was Foyle, come back to take her the way he took Janey. But it was Sergeant Grossmith's voice.

"Put the gun down, girlie."

She lowered hers, trying to think her way through the situation. Grossmith was corrupt, not just incompetent. Compliance would buy time. He ordered her to move and she did, as slowly as possible without angering him. There was nothing she could use as an improvised weapon, exposed as they were and moving further from the circus, and two (three, she amended when Jones joined the group) men against her. If she could find a way to signal Samson, she thought, but he could be anywhere; nobody else from the circus would intervene for an outsider. Which only left those outside the circus... Jack! Jack was supposed to be joining her. Right. She could work with that; she just needed more time.

"What did Miss Christopher do?" she asked.

*Keep them talking*, she told herself. The longer they talked the less likely they were to shoot.

"Go and dig the lady's grave over by that tree," said Grossmith to Matthew, before turning his attentions to her. "The freak got greedy. One payment wasn't enough. She wanted more to keep quiet."

"It was my fault," said Jones. "I should never have asked her to help. I wish I'd never listened to you."

"He could always dig two holes," countered Grossmith.

Dissent within the ranks. That was exploitable. And she could almost taste the answers hovering just out of reach.

"Where's Foyle now?" she asked.

It was a misstep, too early a reminder that she was there, a problem to be dealt with.
"On your knees, Miss Fisher."

From behind Grossmith she saw Samson overpower Matthew and take the shovel. Keep calm. Do not show your hand. The variable was Jones, but he remained silent. Distract.

"What, Foyle double-crossed you? He didn't pay up?" she asked. She wanted answers, possibly even more than she wanted to survive this encounter. She was aware that a modicum of desperation had entered her voice. "Where is he? You're going to kill me anyhow, why not tell me where he is?"

Grossmith wouldn't rise to the bait.

"On your knees, now."

It was over in a matter of seconds; Jones panicked and tried to intervene. A gunshot and Samson fell down, losing the shovel. In the distance she heard a car, then Jack yelling at Grossmith to drop it. Phryne grabbed the shovel, knocking him to the ground with a swift hit to the back of the legs just as someone (Hugh, she later realised) pulled up alongside her with his gun drawn.

"You wouldn't shoot a fellow copper now, would you, Constable?" said Grossmith, pleading and yet somehow still smug.

"I'd shoot a crooked one."

God bless Hugh.

She took Sam back to her house; the wound was little more than a graze, thankfully, but she thought it best to keep an eye on him. To ensure his safety as she had not ensured Janey's; it was absurd, of course, but she extended the invitation nonetheless. Dot was planning to visit her mother and Jane was spending the night with a friend, so Phryne would be alone once more. She didn't like to think that that factor came into play.

She opened a bottle of wine and poured two glasses, handing it to Samson with a flirtatious smile. They both knew there was no intent in it. They sat on opposite ends of her chaise lounge and talked, about Janey and the circus as it was and how it had been, and what would become of it now. It was the only family some of them had; a solution would present itself.

In the midst of their reminiscences there was a knock at the door; Phryne saw Dot head towards it, already dressed for her overnight visit, then the door opening and two quiet voices—one obviously Dot and the other Jack. She didn't care to examine when his voice had entered into her litany of familiarity. A moment later he was knocking on the open door and Phryne turned. He was standing there, looking exactly as she knew he would, and somehow it was a balm.

"I'm sorry, Miss Fisher, I did not realise you had company."

"Sam and I were just talking," Phryne said, airily waving her hand as if to clear the air of sombre thoughts.

At the mention of his name, the strongman stood and took his hat from the table beside him.

"I should go. See how Miss Parkes is."

"You always did have a soft spot for maidens in distress, Sam," she smiled.
He smiled back, shifting his hat in his hands. "Not quite, Phryne; it's the resilience I admire."

Phryne raised her half-empty glass in a toast; he was a good man.

"Take care, will you Sam?"

He and Jack passed in the door; her friendship from the past leaving and her present...colleague? friend?—she had trouble defining their nebulous connection beyond the fact that he was Jack and she was Miss Fisher and the line between them had not been drawn by her—coming in. Jack looked uncomfortable for once; usually he slipped into her household with his quiet confidence, a counterweight to the loud revelling of its occupants. The source of his discomfort was discovered when he turned to look back at the door.

"I'm sorry if I..."

"Interrupted? No. Nothing was going to happen tonight. There reaches a point where people know each other too well and see too much for it to be a game. I may enjoy playing, but I'm never intentionally cruel about it."

"No, I can't imagine you would be," he said with a gentle half-smile. "It must be lonely though."

"What is?"

"Never being seen."

"Nobody wants to see the girl who lost her sister, Jack. Even if they think they do."

He hesitated for a moment, clearly torn, before taking a seat in the armchair next to the chaise.

"You didn't lose her."

"I did. I was watching the magician's performance instead of Janey, and by the time I realised she was gone it was too late. I lost her, Jack."

"No, Phryne," his voice was smooth and quiet and firm. "Foyle took your sister. You were a child."

She gave him an incredulous look, but he didn't waver.

"I dismiss the charges."

"You can't."

"I can, I have, and one day you will too. I'm only sorry to say that the bastard's dead before you could have your answers."

Grossmith had talked then, she presumed.

"I've always known what happened."

"That's not quite the same as answers though, is it?" he asked, and she nodded.

They continued to sit in the parlour until the fire began to die; neither one spoke. There was no need.

Chapter End Notes
'Now we must to the monument' is a paraphrased Romeo and Juliet reference. The friar actually says "Now must I to the monument alone. Within this three hours will fair Juliet wake."
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

We've gotten to the gaudy night. It goes as well as can be expected...

(Okay, this is the main reason I changed the Ruddy Gore exchange to one from King John. I could not ruin the hotness that was Antony and Cleopatra. Eleanor of Aquitane was a powerful woman, and also the mother of the aforementioned King John; I figured it worked as well as anything.)

When Jack received a telephone call informing him of a suspicious death at Prudence Stanley's house, he briefly considered assigning someone else to the case. He was not feeling particularly inclined to involve himself in the nonsense that followed Miss Fisher, not with everything else facing him at that moment. Still, he would inevitably be drawn into it by Phryne at some point; it was best to get it over with. At least this way he stood half a chance of keeping up.

As he arrived at the Stanley estate and approached the pool, he almost didn't recognise the woman bending over the corpse. If he'd seen her in any other context he doubted he would have, from behind.

"Good morning, Miss Fisher. You made it here in an alarmingly short time."

She looked up at him, the drastically short bob swinging as she moved.

"I know a shortcut."

Either that or she drove like a madwoman; good money was on the latter.

"You've cut your hair," he observed.

Her hand went up to touch her hair; it probably felt strange.

"Yes," she said with an almost self-conscious smile. "I've always intended to, but couldn't justify the time or expense of maintenance. My hair grows extremely fast."

"It's very flattering," he said. It suddenly occurred to him that they were having this exchange over a dead body and chided himself before crouching down beside her. "So what do you think?"

He only half listened as she talked about ligature marks and suspicions, the rest of his mind on the upcoming court date. And, he would admit, about the way that her new hairstyle accentuated her cheekbones. When she was done—he had paid enough attention to know that she had been thorough and most likely correct—he stood again and looked over at the witnesses.

"Who found the body?"

"I did, inspector," said Mrs. Stanley. "I came this way around nine to look at the roses and saw nothing then."

"And who pulled her out of the water?"
"That was me," said the thin man beside her. "I had a mad hope she might still be alive."

"And you are?" he asked, mostly for the sake of Collins's notes.

"Jack, this is my cousin Guy," Phryne said, standing to make introductions. "He and his fiancée are in town for their engagement party. Guy, this is Detective Inspector Jack Robinson."

Phryne's cousin nodded to him, then took Mrs. Stanley by the shoulder.

"Let's go inside, Mother," he said. "I'm sure the inspector will join us when he's ready."

When the two headed indoors, he turned to Phryne again. She quickly went over the details she knew—the girl was Marigold Brown, the stablemaster's daughter who had recently been employed as a chamber maid. She also went over the list of people present at the house; Aunt Prudence, Guy, Guy's fiancée Isabella, her cousin Arthur, and a long list of hired help.

"I'm not completely certain about the staff numbers, actually; the numbers tend to fluctuate. And there might be more than usual, with the engagement party coming up."

Jack arranged for a constable to stay with the body until it could be removed, then they headed inside. In the parlour they found Mrs. Stanley; Guy was nowhere in sight.

"Murdered?" she said when Phryne voiced her suspicions.

"When was she last seen, Mrs. Stanley?" asked Jack.

"I'm not sure. I'd have to ask my housekeeper, Mrs. Truebody."

"I'll ring the bell, Aunt Prudence," Phryne offered.

Just after she left, a man came through the door.

"I told you to stay in your bedroom," scolded Mrs. Stanley.

"I want to play with Marigold," stuttered the man. "Where is she?"

Prudence Stanley's face softened considerably. "She's sleeping, my dear boy."

That must be Arthur; Phryne hadn't mentioned his situation, but there was no mistaking a mother's love. Even if the mother closely resembled a dragon most of the time.

"Oh!" Mrs. Stanley said with false cheer. "Look who's just arrived!"

Miss Fisher had returned, meeting her cousin at the doorway with a hug. There was a warmth and affection Jack had rarely seen from Phryne, but that he'd come to realise she saved for those she loved most. He smiled; her cousin Arthur was clearly among them.

"And look what I've brought," Miss Fisher said to her cousin in a tone that Jack had learnt usually meant trouble. "Gobstoppers! They're enormous!"

"You can only have them if you go back to your room!" added Mrs. Stanley.

Arthur complied, clutching his bag of sweets with a smile. Mrs. Stanley must have seen Jack watching, and she drew herself up to her full height as if daring him to comment.

"As you can see, Detective Inspector, my son's faculties are limited," she said. It was no doubt a
battle she had fought many times since he was born, and Jack had to admire her for it.

"We'll need to speak to all the members of the household all the same, including Arthur," he said.

She seemed surprised by his approach; he imagined that she was more used to negative comments or people simply ignoring his existence entirely.

"Of course."

"Now, where can we find the girl's father?" he asked.

"Herbert Brown? He lodges behind the stable house," she said. Then she sighed in irritation. "Now where is Mrs. Truebody?"

The interviews began to sketch out the last few hours of Marigold Brown's life and the movements of the main players. Her father hadn't seen her since she'd said good night the night before. Guy had lazed around all morning with his fiancée, the times vague but with enough probable witnesses to make murder difficult. His fiancée Isabella had been with him; she was also an incorrigible flirt who showed up in her nightgown, and Jack—purely as a matter of professional interest—couldn't help but compare her blatancy with Miss Fisher's subtle attentions. Student versus master.

The only two points of interest were the sudden departure of Mrs. Stanley's housekeeper ("Second one in a month, Jack," Phryne had said. "It's odd even by Aunt Prudence's high standards.") and Guy's alibi that he had been at the stables to go riding when Phryne swore he hadn't touched a horse in years.

Glancing at the time, Jack realised that both would have to wait. He had his final meeting with the barrister before the court date in two days.

"We're just about done with the household, aren't we, Collins? Apart from the housekeeper?" he asked, mind already on the next task.

"Yes, sir," Hugh said, consulting his notes. "Mrs. Truebody lived in, so there's no home address, but I have the name of the agency she was registered with."

"Good. Let's get back to the station. We can track it down," Jack said, beginning to move.

"What about the discrepancy between Guy and Herbert's evidence?" asked Miss Fisher, annoyed to be excluded.

"We're pursuing it."

"I'd say a poorly thought-out collusion," she asserted.

"Possibly," he agreed. "But right now, I'm late for another appointment."

"Who's your appointment with?" she called, but he kept walking. She had no doubt realised that he was in the midst of a divorce, but he did not particularly want his failures dragged out for discussion and debate. Especially not in front of his constable.


"Get moving, Collins!" Jack called back, to bring the man to heel.
"Please tell me you didn't bring ants in with you," Jack said dryly, looking at Miss Fisher.

The woman had literally walked into his office without knocking and dropped a half-eaten candy apple on his desk. She hadn't even bothered with a perfunctory hello.

"I'm not sure what it means, but I found it under the hedge after you rushed off for more urgent matters," she said, dropping into her chair with an indolent air. "How did you go with your barrister? Tricky case coming up?"

He gave her his most chastising look; she didn't actually notice, as far as he could tell, but it felt good to have done it. She certainly didn't pay it any heed if she had. He sighed. Best give her what she wanted and send her on her way. He was too tired to cross swords with her tonight.

"My most challenging yet. But not one that concerns you."

Which was, of course, absolute bollocks. At the very least she could have been called in as a witness to infidelity; thankfully they had filed the petition under other grounds. She suddenly seemed to connect the dots.

"Your divorce?" she asked.

He clenched his jaw and nodded slightly. Then he pulled a file from the desk and held it out; she sensed the change of subject, as she leaned forward to grab it with false alacrity.

"For me, Jack? You shouldn't have!" she said, giving the paperwork a brief perusal. Her tone was more serious when she spoke again. "You really shouldn't have. 'Minor abrasion to forehead, severe bruising to neck and windpipe, inflicted prior to immersion. Most likely cause of death was asphyxiation due to strangulation.' No surprises there."

"Read on," he directed. It got worse.

"Welt marks to the upper back?" she read.

"Someone was belting her."

"No evidence of forced sexual penetration, however deceased was not a virgin."

"And the toxicology report says she consumed copious amounts of alcohol the night before she died."

"She didn't lead a sheltered life, then," said Phryne. "And there could be a boyfriend we should be suspecting somewhere if we dig a little deeper."

"Mmm," agreed Jack, taking back the report. "Digging will have to wait until it's light out however. I'll see you tomorrow, Miss Fisher."

She stood, then seemed to hesitate.

"Jack, if you ever need..."

He looked up at her, aware that he was fiddling with the pen in his hand. God, he was tired.

"Need what, Phryne?" he asked, voice far hoarser than he had intended. He had a pretty good inclination of what she was offering, and he didn't want to examine how tempting it really was.
She picked at the edge of her coat; it was a nervous tell he had never seen from her before.

"If you ever need a friendly ear," she said. "It's not the same, but I've had a marriage that didn't...live up to expectations."

"I think the last thing I need is to be discussing the failure of my marriage with the woman I broke my vows with."

It should have been curt or scathing or somehow indicative of how abhorrent he had found his behaviour. It should have insulted her—he didn't intend to insult her, but he had thought she would take it a such—but she just looked at him.

"There is no shame in living, Jack, and paperwork isn't what makes—or ends—a marriage. I hope you learn to appreciate the distinction some day."

———

The next day, Jack met Miss Fisher at the Stanley estate. She did not, mercifully, make any allusion to their conversation the previous night, instead treating their investigation with her usual light-hearted and determined manner. She practically trilled like a satisfied canary when she managed to inveigle the location of Mrs. Truebody's location from the household staff.

"Sea Breeze Holiday Cottages, Inverloch," she said, her bright red lips emphasising every word and her new bob swinging as she sashayed out of the room.

The confident, flirtatious woman was nowhere in sight a few hours later as she paced around her parlour, telling him of the developments at the Stanley estate after he had left.

"And then Arthur insisted that he'd seen the man who took Janey."

"Miss Fisher!" Jack said, trying to catch her attention. They'd get nowhere until she regained control.

"There was a toffee apple left behind when Janey disappeared," she said, growing even more agitated. "I've tried to dismiss it as coincidence."

"That's all it is," he said confidently. "Murdoch Foyle died in prison. He tried to be clever and it failed, all for the sake of a few months delay."

"But what if he's duped us all?" she asked, nearing hysteria. "With trickery, or he paid people to help feign his death so that we all think he's gone but he's just biding his time, waiting to strike."

Personal bogeysmen didn't have to make sense—they usually didn't, in his experience—but she was imbuing the man with almost supernatural levels of intellect and cunning. He was a man, one who had been lucky until he wasn't any more, and a dead man at that.

"Strike whom?" he asked, hoping she would hear the absurdity of her proposition.

"Me!"

"So why would he kill Marigold?" Jack pointed out, rather reasonably.

"It's a game! Cat and mouse!"

She took a gulp of her whiskey; her pacing had grown more frantic, like a bird caught in netting.

"Foyle's dead, Phryne."
She paused at the use of her name for a moment, but placed her drink on the table and moved onto the next thought.

"But Arthur said.... He identified him in a police lineup as the man he saw following us in the days leading up to Janey's disappearance. He still has nightmares about it, Jack! It's not as if he's likely to forget what the woodcutter looked like."

She was actually wringing her hands.

"With all due respect to your cousin, he can't tell the difference between fairytales and reality," Jack said, hoping the calm voice would reach her. "Marigold's death reminded him of Janey's and whoever he saw, he decided it was the same bogeyman. The so-called woodcutter. It's not as if witnesses with their full faculties are reliable this many years later, Phryne."

She stopped pacing, looking at him with crossed arms.

"Well, if it wasn't Murdoch Foyle, who was it?" she asked; her chin was raised defiantly, but she was listening for the first time that evening.

"The housekeeper saw Marigold with someone before she left," Jack said, remembering the reason he had stopped by her house in the first place.

"Who?"

There was a glimmer of interest in her eyes; good. The promise of a mystery always did seem to ground her.

"She's on her way back to Melbourne by train—compliments of the Victorian Police Force—to tell us in person."

The fight left her; Jack wasn't entirely sure if it was because she felt reassured or if she had just run out of steam.

"So there's nothing else to be done tonight?" she asked.

"Get some rest," he said. "You've been running full pelt between the investigation and helping your aunt with the party. We'll have some answers tomorrow."

She picked up her drink and drained the remaining liquid, her blue eyes watching him over the rim of the glass.

"You are far too practical for your own good, did you know that Jack?" she said when she'd lowered her drink.

"Probably," he acknowledged with a smile. "But you are far too impulsive for your own safety, so it balances out nicely."

She gave a short laugh. "So I'll see you in the morning?"

"I'm in and out of the station all day; why don't I telephone you when Mrs. Truebody arrives? Save you from coming down when you could be... hanging banners or whatever the upper class do for parties."

He should know that; he'd been to enough of them with Rosie. But that had been years ago, and they were never quite the Bright Young Things like Isabella and Guy. It hardly mattered now.
"Only if you agree to telephone immediately. No head start on eking out information, Jack," she mock-scolded, sounding much more like herself.

"On my honour, Miss Fisher," he promised, meeting her playfulness with his own. It was easier that way, pretending not to worry.

He rose and headed towards the door, aware that it was getting late and he had a long day ahead of him; he had just taken his coat off the hook when she called for him. He turned.

"Your invitation to Guy and Isabella's party," she said, offering out an envelope. Then she felt the need to clarify, as she added. "As my partner."

He shook his head in reflex. Every self-preservation instinct he had ever had—and given his time at war, there were many—screamed out at her words.

"No. Miss Fisher, I really don't think..."

"You still have a murder case to solve and what better way to gather information than to mingle with the crowd?" She pointed out, and it was perfectly reasonable coming from her. He searched her face for signs of duplicity, never quite certain. She neatly vaulted his defenses with a serious smile and a quiet voice as she stepped closer. "Besides...I need you to remind me not to be afraid of shadows."

He nodded his acceptance without consciously making the decision, aware that some part of him was already determined to be there for her whenever she asked. She was going to ruin him.

———

Rosie was standing outside the courtroom, wrapped firmly in her battle armour; he'd learnt a long time earlier that full furs was Rosie's attempt to keep herself warm when she intended to be cold. Especially in mid-summer. He wondered, very briefly, whether she would be quite so entrenched if she hadn't seen Phryne the month before. Probably not; they had tried so hard to remain cordial.

"Hello Jack," she said, and he nodded to her.

His suit felt uncomfortable; it was one he only wore for weddings and funerals (and divorce cases, apparently), and it never seemed to fit just right. Too loose or too tight, depending on how well he had been eating. It was decidedly tight today.

He took a seat on the bench outside of the courtroom. Neither barrister was there yet, and Rosie hadn't brought Joan like he had expected. Probably too busy with the new babe, he remembered. It was just him, Rosie, and the shadows of a former life. After a moment, Rosie sat beside him.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"But not enough to call this off?" he asked. He didn't know why; it was the best option for both of them.

"I meant about the other week. I was...hasty. I leaped to conclusions. But if you say that it wasn't...that, I'll believe you."

He felt immensely guilty. It had been that; not on that day, but he had broken his marriage vows and there was no excuse.

"Even if it was...that, Jack, it wasn't my business any more."
"I think it will always be your business, Rosie, at least a little. As a concerned friend, if nothing else."

"We have always been good friends, haven't we?"

They shared a small smile, and she patted his knee.

"Still, Jack, it was unfair to behave that way. It was just very..."

"Raw?" he offered, and Rosie nodded.

"And unexpected," she added. "You've always been a constant. An impossible one at times, and heaven knows we stopped working together like that a long time ago, but constant and steady nonetheless."

That's who he was though, wasn't it? The plodding policeman, diligent and thorough and occasionally bright, but never quite fulfilling the promises of his youth.

He looked down the corridor to avoid meeting Rosie's scrutiny, and saw their barristers. He glanced at his watch.

"Five minutes to go," he said, so that he had something to say.

Inside the courtroom, the barristers presented the case for desertion. It was a cruel term when he would have never abandoned her, would have stuck to his marriage vows to the bitter end. Although, he supposed, he had not despite his good intentions; he'd deserted her for a ship set for Europe many years before, and abandoned his clung-to vows more recently. It was their best of their limited options.

As he gave his own testimony, the process so familiar it was almost by rote, he couldn't help but think of what he should have been saying.

Infidelity, Your Honour. Sex with a terrified woman, because she asked me to and somehow I convinced myself that it would be the honourable thing to assuage her fears. Because she needed me and I am never needed. Because she smells like French perfume and laughs like everything in the world is funny and because she shines so brightly that sometimes I actually think she might be an angel.

God, he was getting melancholy.

"Yes, sir. June of 1925, sir. No reconciliation in that time, sir."

The divorce was granted, barring the legally required waiting period.

———

By the time Jack arrived at the Stanley household, the party was in full swing. He briefly considered leaving again before Miss Fisher found him, too exhausted to even contemplate investigations or social niceties. But the look in her eyes when she had asked him was enough to propel his feet towards the door.

She found him in the hall before he could even make it to the actual party, dressed in a rather-more-daring-than-period-accurate medieval gown.

"Jack! You made it."

"Good evening, Miss Fisher."
"No comment on my costume?" she asked, twirling to give him a full view. "Can you guess?"

If she was asking him to guess, there was likely some deliberateness to the choice. Of course; there was only one option.

"Eleanor of Aquitane?" he asked.

"Very good!" she said, moving close to him. "Queen to two kings, renowned beauty, and very powerful in her own right."

He gulped, tried to ignore her proximity. This close he could see the lightest smattering of freckles across her nose.

"I assume Hugh told you about our interview with Mrs. Truebody?" she asked.

As if he could focus on work. The woman was touching him, toying with the lapel of his suit like it was the most natural thing in the world.

"He did," Jack managed.

"Good! I can fill you in on the rest," she said. He managed a half-sigh of relief before Phryne added, "But first, you need a costume."

———

He followed her into one of the spare bedrooms, protesting all the way.

"How can you protest when you have no idea what I even have in mind?" she asked, digging through a pile of spare costumes.

"Because nine times out of ten what you have in mind gives me grief," he said. The other ten percent of the time was delightful and usually guilt-inducing. "There's nothing wrong with the way I'm dressed. I'm perfectly disguised as a police detective."

"You won't get much out of this crowd like that, Jack," she laughed. She'd clearly found what she'd been searching for, as she made a triumphant little hum and turned to him. "Here we are—a passable medieval king. Henry the second might work."

Right, Eleanor's second husband she had ultimately revolted against. That boded well.

"Oh, don't pull that face, Jack. I had to work with what was going spare, and people are far more likely to accept you if you're clearly with me."

"That is not reassuring, Miss Fisher."

"No-one will even know who you are," she argued.

"Except you."

The one person whose opinion mattered to him. The chafing of who he was, who he had proven himself to be—a soon-to-be-divorced philanderer who was so enthralled by her that he had lost all reason—laid too close to the surface.

“Jack…”

There was glint in her eye and a half-smile on her face as she took a step towards him. He would
have thought that she was merely flirting as she usually did, but her voice gave her away.

"Come on, Jack," she pleaded, moving close. Let me forget. Let us forget. She began to loosen his tie then moved to his shirt; he couldn't look away, watching the way her fingers nimbly undid his buttons. "Just one gaudy night."

She looked at him, meeting his eyes. He couldn't think, he couldn't breathe, for sheer want. Wanting to desire, to be desired, to feel something good for once, to forget who he was. Want careening headlong into need as his pulse thudded. He swallowed hard, wrestled for control.

"If you think that's best," he managed, barely recognising his own voice. "I can take it from here."

She watched him without a word; her eyes said everything. God, he wanted to kiss her. To be with her. To lose himself entirely. She broke their gaze to survey his body with a slow blink, and gave a tiny, satiated smile. Then she moved with a saunter towards the door, turning back to give him a languid, promising look before picking up an envelope.

When she was gone, he collapsed into a chair, utterly spent.

He couldn't. He pinched the bridge of his nose, tried to forget the way she had looked and the way she had moved and the way she had felt against him. He couldn't. But, oh, how he wanted to.

A moment later the door opened again, and he looked up, prepared to reassert the boundaries he knew he had to keep. The seductive vixen was nowhere in sight; Phryne looked pale and shaken.

"What is it?" he asked, rising from the chair to meet her.

"This was left for me," she said, holding something blue in her hand. A ribbon, he thought. "It was Janey's. She was wearing ribbons in her hair the day she disappeared. I have the other one."

"How?" he asked in bewilderment.

"I don't understand," she asserted, sounding close to tears. "It must be him."

It was impossible. There would be another explanation, of course. It would be his duty as a police officer to find it.

"Who else was there that day who could have found it?" he asked. "Apart from Foyle, anyone else?"

"The police were there, obviously," she said, trying to remember. "My parents. Aunt Prudence came to collect..." she turned towards the door as the memory came to her. "Arthur. No..."

By the time they made it to Arthur's bedroom, he was missing, along with his wolf costume.

"We need to find Jane," Phryne said, running towards the party. "Find her and get her away from here. Now."

None of it made any sense, but Jack was suddenly less than certain of Murdoch Foyle's death.

Jane was sent home with Bert and Cec who had, as far as Jack could tell, been roped into some sort of double duty at the party. Bert was grumbling about something like that at least, though he stopped the moment Miss Fisher entrusted Jane to his care.

"We'll get her home safe, Miss," Cec assured her.
"Dot will be there," said Phryne. "So see she gets indoors but you don't need to stay."

Once Jane's things were gathered and she was on her way, Jack and Phryne continued their search for Arthur. A commotion from the ballroom drew their attention, and Phryne raced ahead.

Jack heard Guy Stanley yelling, then Phryne pleading with him; by the time he arrived Guy was shouting about how his brother had ruined his life and belonged in an asylum, Phryne was trying to keep everyone calm, and Prudence Stanley was in tears.

Overwhelmed, Arthur launched himself at Guy; Jack intervened, pulling him off his brother and setting him in a chair while his brother stormed off.

"Whatever happened, Arthur... none of it's your fault," said Phryne gently, kneeling down to be on eye level with her cousin. "You can tell me. Please."

As Arthur started telling them about the man who had given him a toffee apple and stolen his costume, Miss Williams and Constable Collins came into the room.

"It wasn't him, Miss Phryne! Murdoch Foyle wasn't the one who was cremated. It was his foster mother."

"Dot, are you sure?" Her voice was sharp.

Collins piped up. "It's true, sir. It was Gertrude Clarke who entered into those flames."

"Oh God...Jane," said Phryne, the first to notice what Dot's presence meant. "Bert and Cec have just taken her back to the house. We thought you were at home! Oh God...."

Jack reached out and touched her arm, just lightly enough to get her attention.

"Jane's a clever girl. She's only, what, ten minutes ahead of us? We'll secure the scene, then you can go home."

"I'm not leaving this investigation," Phryne argued, but she was already facing the door.

Obstinate woman.

"Collins, call the station. Have men sent to Miss Fisher's house immediately, and more here to interview the guests," Jack ordered. "Miss Fisher, I'll drive."

They paused briefly at the guardhouse, where they were told a man in a wolf costume had been seen hailing a taxi. Jack was very glad to be in the police vehicle; it made it much easier to speed.

The car hadn't even stopped completely when she leapt out the door, running towards her bungalow shouting for Jane.

The girl met her at the door, and Jack saw the terror drain from Phryne so suddenly it was a miracle she stayed upright. She was hugging the girl and crying, then seemed to realise that they were still outside and therefore a potential target. She pushed Jane back through the door, shutting and locking it the moment Jack was in.

"What's wrong, Miss Phryne?" asked her ward.

"Murdoch Foyle is what's wrong," Phryne said. "I thought he might have come after you."
"Oh, no Miss. The only people I've seen were Cec and Bert and the nice professor they gave a ride home to. He came back to use the telephone—the professor, that is—because he lost his keys, and I gave him some biscuits."

"Jane!" Phryne scolded, her arms still firmly around the girl. "You cannot let strangers into the house."

"Why? You do all the time." For a streetwise young woman, she looked remarkably innocent as she looked at her guardian. Phryne hugged her even harder.

"Don't ever, ever do that again, Jane. Now what happened with this man?"

"The professor? We talked about history for a few minutes—he seemed to have a particular interest in Egypt, Miss, said he'd seen the pyramids—and then he suddenly had to go. That's when Constable McNair arrived; he's in the kitchen. I was just about to make him some tea when I heard your car."

"When was this?"

"Just a minute or two ago."

Jack was already at the door, Phryne at his heels. Foyle would be gone, he knew, but he still ran into the dark in the hopes of finding him nonetheless.

All they found in the cool night air was silence.

———

Back inside, Dot was making hot cocoa. Jack left Phryne and Jane in the kitchen with her, giving Miss Fisher a pointed look when she went to object, and secured the rest of the house. All the windows came with locks, thankfully, and he checked under beds and in wardrobes just in case. By the time he made it back to the kitchen, Constable McNair was preparing to leave and Dot and Jane had been informed of the evening's events and were ready to turn in for the night.

"Are you sure you'll be alright, miss?" asked a worried Dot, and Jane rather looked like she'd latch onto her guardian at the slightest hint of her need.

"I'll be fine, Dot," Phryne reassured her. "The inspector has already checked the house."

"That's not what I meant, miss," she said. Miss Williams’s firm gaze added the rest of that sentence: "And you know that full well."

"I can't say I'm jumping for joy at the revelation, but he's gone and you are both safe. I'll be fine."

The two young women gave Miss Fisher doubting looks, but didn't quibble. They headed towards their bedrooms, stopping to give Miss Fisher a kiss on the cheek before they left. After a moment, Phryne looked up from the kitchen table.

"Bring your cocoa, Jack," she said. "Come into the parlour."

He did, and they sat in silence for several minutes.

"I should check on Miss Williams and Jane," he said eventually. "Make sure they are settled. And call the station."

She nodded, still not ready to speak.
He finished his cocoa and placed the mug on the side table, then stood. Both bedrooms were quiet; Miss Williams's door was firmly closed, but Jane's was open slightly; Jack looked inside and found she had fallen asleep with a book in her hands. Remarkably resilient girl. He took the book, marked her place, and turned off the lamp before heading back. He paused in the hall to place a telephone call, unsure if he would get back to the station before the morning.

Phryne was curled on the chaise when Jack returned to the parlour, still in her costume.

"Will you stay tonight?" she asked, taking a sip of her cocoa. "I'd rest easier knowing you were here too."

"I can have some constables come by," he offered, and she shook her head.

"I'm asking you to stay, Jack. You can have my bed; I won't be sleeping in it tonight."

The idea of spending the night in her bed, even without her company, was... he didn't know. Tempting. Awful. Both at once.

"We can take turns on sentry duty," he said; he had no intention of sleeping, but she needed it. "I'll stay up first, wake you in a few hours."

She nodded her head numbly, her previous assertion she wouldn't sleep already forgotten. She took her mug and his, returning them to the kitchen. After a minute, Jack heard both mugs clatter in the sink and the sound of her crying.

"Phryne?" he said, moving towards the kitchen.

She was unlikely to want a witness, he knew that, but he was unable to resist the urge to seek her out.

She was standing by the sink, her back to him and her shoulders shaking. When she heard him she turned, wiping the tears from her face quickly.

"I can't get this costume off," she said. "There's buttons along the back and I've sent Dot off to bed..."

He couldn't bring back her sister or protect her from the existence of Murdoch Foyle, but he could do this.

"I can manage buttons," he offered.

"Would you? Please?"

He nodded, deliberately ignoring the small part of his brain that saw the upcoming danger and objected strenuously.

"Leave the washing up," he said.

They didn't touch as they walked to her bedroom. She stood in front of her dressing mirror, watching him in the reflection as she removed the hat and laid it on the chair. He stepped behind her. Traced the line of buttons from the nape of her neck to the small of her back and back up. Hesitated, hands hovering over the first. Unfastening the buttons on her costume, it struck him that it was a gross parody of their earlier exchange.

As he pushed the dress down her shoulder—he wondered why he took it that far, afterwards—the
curve of her neck was exposed. God, he was lonely. He hadn't realised how much until she had forced her way into his life. She smelt of perfume and champagne and her; he felt his resolve crumble into dust. He pressed a kiss against the milky white skin.

Her hand came up to rest on his, still resting on the edge of her dress.

"Jack?" she asked, and the quiet breath she exhaled was enough to blow the dust away.

"I'm not married," he said by way of an explanation, as if that was the only issue at play.

She squeezed his hand, turning beneath him so they were chest to chest.

"Good," she said quietly. "Because I don't want you to regret this."

He kissed her in reply, pouring out his own agony and fears and taking in hers. *One gaudy night*, he thought, remembering her earlier words. *Just one gaudy night.*
Phryne slept fitfully that night. She would drift off, unable to sustain the adrenaline-fuelled terror after days of fear, until the memory thudded through her dreams and she woke again. She suspected that Jack didn't sleep at all; at least, every time she stirred he was already there and would grasp her hand until the panic abated. Sometimes that was enough, and other times she would kiss him, seek comfort in his roaming hands and the way they moved together. He was a competent lover, attentive and quick and dependable. There weren't many men she had turned to with comfort instead of pleasure in mind, but she found she did not regret adding him to that list in the least.

He got out of the bed just before dawn. She hoped he hadn't regretted staying; it had been a welcome surprise for him to lay aside his boundaries in her hour of need. Or perhaps her words days before had been the absolution he sought and the boundaries were no longer relevant. That would be a pleasant development.

"Where are you going?" she asked, hating the weakness that led her to ask.

"I have to go home," he said quietly. He came back to the bed long enough to stroke his thumb across the back of her hand before moving away again. "Change my clothes and get to the station, see what my men shook out at your aunt's last night. Try to get some rest and don't leave the house, alright?"

"House arrest, Jack? Really?"

He was adjusting his tie in the mirror, which was rather ridiculous given the fact that nobody would see him before he went home and changed. Fastidious man. The thought made her smile just for a moment.

"Not house arrest," he was correcting her. "But until we have some answers, everyone in your household is going to be safer if you stay together. As soon as I know something I'll tell you."

"We'll stay safe," said Phryne.

Which was not the same as agreeing to stay home, even if Jack took it as such.

"Thank you."

By eight am, Phryne had gathered the troops. Dot was making breakfast while Phryne pumped Jane for any more information.

"Again Jane. I need to know what Foyle said to you. Everything he said to you, no matter how small."

"I've already told you and Inspector Robinson last night, miss. He said he needed to use the telephone because he'd left his house keys in the car, then he came in. We talked for...five minutes maybe? Long enough for him to mention the university and Egypt and the Pharaohs. Then he suddenly found the keys in his pocket after all—I think perhaps he heard Constable McNair's car, though I didn't—and left very quickly. The constable must have passed him on the pavement."

She'd have to ask Jack about McNair later. Dot placed a plate of toast on the table, and Jane helped herself.
"Are you sure there was nothing else at all?"

"I'm sure. He was perfectly charming."

"You have no idea what that man is capable of, Jane!" Phryne exclaimed, exasperated. Any calm she had managed in the early hours of the morning was long gone.

"I know he did something to your sister, and if he's escaped from gaol then it must be something serious."

Phryne sighed and continued pacing the floor, turning towards the door when she heard people enter. It was Cec and Bert; Cec looked horrified that he had left Jane alone under the circumstances, even if he couldn't have known. Bert looked ready to punch the man.

"Door-knocked for two blocks from where we left him last night," he reported with a surly tone. "No one’s heard of him."

"So he could be anywhere," Phryne said, resigned.

"I found this in the back of the cab," Cec offered, pulling a business card from his pocket. "Maybe he dropped it last night."

Phryne took the card, reading the name on it. An antiquities dealer; Foyle had run a shop like that before he was convicted. A quick conference with the telephone directory and she realised that it was likely the same shop; different name, same address.

"18 Somers Street, Abbotsford," she said aloud. "Bert and Cec, you stay here."

"No," said Bert. "It could be a trap. If this bloke's as dangerous as you say he is—"

"He is," Phryne cut him off. They'd made the mistake of underestimating him before, and Jane could have paid the price. "Which is why I need you two here with Jane. And call Inspector Robinson, ask him to meet me there."

She'd just have to deal with Jack's ire. He could hardly expect her to sit at home and wait though; everyone was safe and her promise kept. In the hall, she found Dot putting on her coat.

"Oh no, you need to stay here too."

Dot looked her straight in the eye. "No, Miss Phryne. Bert's right. If it's a trap you can't go alone. I won't allow you to go alone."

Phryne had the distinct feeling that even if she ultimately won the argument it would take more time than she had, so she simply nodded.

"Albert's Antiques and Curiosities," she declared as they arrived at the shop.

"It's closed, miss," said Dot. "It says he opens at eight and it's just gone nine; how peculiar. Should we knock?"

At that moment they heard a whining and a dog trotted into view inside, carrying something in its mouth.

"Poor thing is locked in!" Dot exclaimed. Her friend really was the softest person in the world,
thought Phryne; it was an excellent counterweight to her cynicism. "What's he got?"

The dog dropped the object on the floor and Phryne sighed.

"That would be a finger, Dot."

It was a good thing Jack was on his way. She quickly picked the lock and went inside, pulling her pistol from her handbag. She really did need to get a smaller one; she'd never felt the need before, but she was carrying it far more frequently nowadays. The shop had been ransacked, several display cabinets smashed. She'd have to see if anything was taken or if it was a cover for something else.

Murder specifically, she thought as she came across a man—presumably the Albert of the shop name; she recognised him as one of the character witnesses from the trial—dead in a bathtub. Too damn late. She should have started last night, not fallen into bed with Jack no matter how tired she'd been. Bloody hell, he was not good for her; he allowed her to be weak. Weak got people killed, she chastised herself, and tried not to think about the way she had sought him out or the way he'd chased the shadows.

"Miss Fisher," he said behind her; she'd been so distracted she hadn't noted his arrival.

She turned. Searched his face for disapproval, but instead found far more gentle understanding than she wanted to see; it was the look he gave victims, not other investigators. He moved towards her—no, towards the body—slowly, taking in the entire scene. His hat was in his hands; it was a strange detail to notice.

"You think Foyle is behind this?" he asked, reading her mind.

"It has to be. This used to be his shop, and Albert Monkton was a character witness at his trial."

"For the defence?" asked Jack. "I hate to think what he has in mind for the prosecution."

He was close enough that his arm brushed against hers; she wasn't certain if it was deliberate, but either way it screamed his unvoiced concerns.

"Foyle won't come back to the house," she said with more certainty than she felt. "Not with Cec and Bert there."

"The real question is why you aren't."

She gave him a look that she hoped conveyed the depths of her disinterest in waiting at home for disaster to fall onto her doorstep. She had to keep it away from her family.

"No, Jack, the real question is why Foyle came here. He would never do something without a reason; there had to be a purpose. For revenge, or to find something maybe."

He gave her a look in return, the set of his jawline and the concern in his eyes saying everything. *I used to be much better at deceiving people,* she thought cynically. She was getting soft.

"The shop has been secured, sir," said Hugh from the doorway before she could construct a plan of defense. "And the undertakers would like to come in and collect the body."

Jack nodded permission as he stepped back slightly from the tub.

"No obvious cause of death, aside from a bloodied nose. Call them in, and see what the coroner has to say."
"Yes, sir."

"What about the cabinet that was broken into?" Phryne asked. It was the next logical step in the investigation. "I need to look around."

"No, you don't," said Jack. Not unkindly, but that didn't reduce the gall; he should have known her well enough not to argue in the first place.

"Yes, I do."

"No," he repeated. "You don't. You're too involved with this case."

She had the foresight to check that Hugh had left the room to retrieve the coroner before moving close to him; it wouldn't do to be overheard. She laid one hand on his chest.

"Considering where you spent the night, so are you."

"Probably," he conceded wearily, and she suddenly remembered that he'd slept less than she had. "Would you like me to remove myself from the investigation as well?"

Oh God, the only thing worse than being blocked from Jack's investigation would be not having him on the case at all. The replacement would almost certainly be both less forthcoming and less competent. She'd have to capitulate, or at least appear to.

"No," she pouted. "Though if we were both off the case..."

"Nice try. You need to go home and get some sleep, Phryne," he said, looking at her so intently that she forgot her objections for a split second. Then he raised his voice. "Make sure she does, Miss Williams."

It was, she would later admit, a masterful example of misdirection.

"Come on, miss," said Dot.

"Oh, this is ridiculous!" Phryne exclaimed, throwing her hands up in the air.

He tilted his bloody head at her as if to acknowledge the ridiculousness without backing down. Stubborn fool. She'd have to go around him, of course, but hadn't they both learnt by now that it was easier to just forge ahead together?

As Dot pulled her by the arm, she grumbled loudly.

"If I could just have another look around..."

"Later, miss," said Dot quietly, leading her out a side door.

Not later! Murdoch Foyle had been in her house and threatening her family to toy with her, and she wasn't interested in manipulating the situation to her advantage when she could just go straight at it. She turned to head back into the shop, prepared to give Inspector Robinson a taste of her mind. A photograph on the back of the door stopped her short.

It was Murdoch Foyle and four younger people, presumably students. It was stuck to the door with some sort of instrument. She removed it from the door with a handkerchief from her pocket, then quickly tucked photo and tool into her handbag.

She'd just pop by to show Mac before turning it in as evidence. Not hiding, merely... delaying the
discovery. There was no harm in that.
Chapter 18

Sitting in his office, Jack took a moment to collect himself. He would need to keep his head if he wanted to make progress, but memories of the night before were insistently marching through his head. It had seemed so right in the moment, and so very wrong when the moment had passed. He wasn't that person. He didn't want to be that person. (But he would do it again in a heartbeat. The knowledge was almost worse than the guilt.) He was, to be perfectly honest if only to himself, compromised. Lustfully and emotionally. It was a very dangerous combination.

He gave himself a shake and focused on the case. When he had looked for an excuse to reopen the original investigation, he hadn't imagined that this would be the catalyst; an escaped convict hell-bent on revenge and targeting those responsible. Including Miss Fisher. But it was an investigation, and he knew how to run those. He even had a running start this time, having already discarded some of the simpler investigative threads. New leads first, before they turned cold, then back to trying to glean information from the mess of files that was the original investigation into Janey Fisher's disappearance.

Collins came in with a cup of tea, and he looked up.

"Did the cuts around the victim's nostrils remind you of anything, Constable?" Jack asked.

"Um... the body that was found in Northcote last week, sir. The coroner thought he was on dope, didn't he?" Collins replied, setting the drink down.

"Cocaine, if I recall," said Jack, digging through the pile of folders on his desk. He found the one he was searching for. "The coroner couldn't find any evidence of intoxication, apart from the damage to his nose. Here: 'Abrasions to the inside of both nostrils.'"

"Miss Fisher's convinced Murdoch Foyle's responsible. What do you think, sir?"

_I think Miss Fisher is very rarely wrong_, he thought. _And I don't think I've ever seen her so scared._

"We go through the evidence like we do with any case," he said.

"Of course, sir."

"Telephone the coroner's office to see if we can view Monkton's body," Jack added, taking out his pen so he could begin making notes. "And I want to see the Northcote murder victim as well. If Miss Fisher telephones, put her through to me."

"Yes, sir."

This was an investigation. Just another investigation.

He almost believed it.

———

Approaching the morgue, Jack heard the strenuous objections of Miss Fisher through the door. Naturally.

"Who will you call? The police?" She was asking. Well, if she gave him a cue he might as well use it; he opened the door. "Ah, look who's here."
"Miss Fisher."

"Hello, Jack," she said, irritation lacing her voice. "I tried to take a nap but wild horses couldn't make me."

There was no hint of the vulnerable Phryne from the night before; if he had not witnessed it himself he would have dismissed it entirely as an improbable work of fiction. Her chin was set and her eyes were stern.

"And I've explained to Miss Fisher that she has no right to be here," said the coroner.

"In that case," Jack said, aware that she would investigate even if he had her removed from the room. It was better, perhaps, to use the resources he had. "I deem Miss Fisher my honorary constable."

The coroner rolled his eyes and Phryne looked far too pleased, but it was done. Details were discussed, and it was discovered that the brains of both victims had been removed and small stones inscribed with hieroglyphics left in the nasal passages. From her purse Miss Fisher revealed the likely tool; he was no longer surprised by her ability to produce evidence from nowhere. It was going to get someone hurt, but that was an argument for another time and he let it pass.

"Honorary constable, Jack?" she asked later, as they left the morgue. There was a hint of a smile around the corners of her lips, as if she was determined to appear serious despite some great amusement.

"Don't make me regret it, Miss Fisher," he teased, hoping to nudge the smile into being.

"No regrets," she said firmly.

He wished, rather desperately, that he could say the same.

———

Back in the office, they discussed the current status of the case. Well, Phryne discussed it. He mostly sat and watched her with concern; subdued and determined and utterly beautiful. Had he ever stood a chance? She was reading the file on the Northcote victim, James Waters, looking for a connection to Foyle.

"Here it is," she said. "Educated Melbourne University. My guess is Ancient History. One of us needs to pay a visit to the Antiquities Department where Foyle used to lecture."

It was a good lead. Both stronger and less fraught than the one he intended to follow up himself.

"See if you can have these translated," he said, handing the envelope containing the inscribed stones. He looked up as Constable Collins came into the room.

"The file on Miss Hill, sir."

Damn it all to hell. He had hoped she would be gone before this came up. Phryne looked at the casefile, mouth twisting in a grimace. He wondered, fleetingly, whether she would flinch and shirk away if he rounded the desk and laid a hand on her shoulder. Probably; she hated to admit to any weakness. He stayed in his seat.

"Myrtle Hill," she said quietly. "She was the lucky girl who escaped his clutches."

"I'm going back through the case. See if anything points to where Foyle might be lying low,"
explained Jack.

There was also the hope that he would find something that had been overlooked during the initial investigation, however unlikely it was. She picked up her handbag, placed the envelope of evidence inside, closed it with a firm click, said a subdued goodbye, and walked out of his office.

He opened the folder and began to read. It was not particularly illuminating, but Jack had hopes that an interview with the woman herself could shed more light. It was arranged and several hours later Collins brought her through. Miss Hill was terrified, understandably, and her account of events reflected what was in the file. The only new information was a vague description of the woman who had rescued her.

"Would you recognise her if you met her again?" Jack asked.

"I could have imagined her," Miss Hill said. "Maybe she was more like an angel? She'd come to save me."

Jack nodded. Whoever had rescued Myrtle Hill had been no angel, but flesh and blood. And flesh and blood could be found, if you asked the right questions and followed the right leads.

"If you go with Constable Collins, we have some books we'd like you to go through," he said gently. "Any help you can give, Miss Hill, would be greatly appreciated."

The woman stood stiffly, clutching her handbag, and followed Collins out the door.

Phryne recognised the description when he later met her at her house, producing a photograph of Murdoch Foyle with his students in Egypt before the war. Jack didn't bother asking where she'd gotten it; the answer would no doubt frustrate him immensely.

"Teresa Cavalli," she said, pointing to the woman in the group. "Rhodes identified her as Foyle's lover."

"She could've been his accomplice," Collins suggested.

"Or tried to stop him," added Phryne.

"We'll get Myrtle Hill back in," Jack said, placing the photograph in his pocket. "See if Miss Hill recognises her as the angel."

"I'll meet you at the station," Phryne said, noticing the arrival of Miss Williams and Bert.

When they met at the station half an hour later, Jack didn't ask about her sudden company. The fact that Miss Fisher actually arrived at the station after them meant she'd found something (or rather, her friends had), but he waited for her to reveal the information in her own time. It was one of the concessions he had learnt to make in their investigations; it was a tedious habit at times and frustrating at others, but until it hindered an investigation he was happy to let it lie.

She leaned against the edge of his desk as they waited for Miss Hill to arrive, and Jack looked up at her. He really wished she had gotten some sleep, not quite able to forget the way she had grabbed his hand the night before. It seemed years ago now. He moved to open one of the files on his desk, brushing his fingers lightly against hers as he did so. Her fingers contracted reflexively, catching his hand in a squeeze for just a second.
"What's that?" she asked, twisting to see the papers. When she saw the name on the folder, she blanched.

"I thought it might be prudent to re-interview everyone involved in Janey's case," he said quietly.

"But my parents?"

"It's what I'd do for any other investigation."

She nodded, but didn't seem convinced.

"Can you leave it, just until we know for sure?"

As if there was any doubt left. But he tilted his head in silent agreement. There were stronger leads and precious little time.

"Uh, sir?" Collins said from the door. "Miss Hill has arrived."

Phryne rose from the desk and turned, face unreadable once more.

"Send her in, Collins," Jack said.

Phryne hung back as the witness nervously took her seat. Jack removed the photograph from his inner pocket and pushed it across the desk.

"That's her," said Myrtle Hill after a brief glance. "That's the woman who saved me."

Phryne moved forward slightly.

"What can you tell me about the church where she left you?" she asked.

"This is Miss Fisher," Jack introduced. "She's helping us with the investigation."

"Murdoch Foyle abducted my sister as well."

"Two weeks after you escaped him, Miss Hill," he added.

"Did she escape?"

Jack's eyes darted to Phryne. She merely smiled, gracious and sad. He didn't know how she managed it.

"I'm afraid not."

"Oh, I'm so sorry. I... I wish I could help more. I wish I could remember more."

"You're the reason Murdoch Foyle's been locked up all this time," Phryne said sincerely. "You've been brave enough."

The witness stood.

"I'm scared witless, to tell you the truth, now that he's out there again," she confessed. "Maybe I should go to my nan's in Sydney." Phryne nodded to her, and the woman continued as she prepared to leave. "I hope you nab him."

Then Myrtle Hill left, Phryne watching her exit contemplatively.
"I'll pay her train fare," she said after a moment. "if you can put her on it."

"Of course," Jack nodded. His mind was already back on the investigation, prioritising leads. Two came to mind, one perfectly suited to Miss Fisher's investigative skills. The other he hoped she'd never have to see, that it was a suspicion without merit. But first, to direct her to her investigative route. "Teresa Cavalli. Italian. I assume she was Catholic?"

"Correct deduction."

"You might also like to know the church Miss Hill was left in was walking distance from Richmond Police Station."

It was enough for her to pick it up, an understanding forged through months of association.

"Thank you," she said quietly.

He stepped around his desk, watching her leave the station from the doorway of his office.

"Collins!" he said when she was gone. "I need you to find me a ream of butcher's paper."

Four girls. They'd found four girls, including Janey Fisher, who had disappeared in the time leading up to Murdoch Foyle's arrest. He couldn't find another connection—the girls disappeared under different circumstances, they came from different parts of town and from different social classes, their paths had never seemed to cross—and in the early hours he had to concede to exhaustion. He drove home carefully, caught a few hours sleep, and was back at the station by seven. He was in the interrogation room looking over the facts again, as if a connection would leap from the pages if he stared for long enough, when he heard her arrive at the station in a flurry of commotion.

"Where is Inspector Robinson?" she shouted, then saw him come around the corner. "Jack!"

She looked utterly frantic. He tilted his head towards his office and she met him at the door.

"Miss Fisher?"

"Foyle has Jane," she said. Her eyes darted around as if the man was lurking in the shadows. Jack opened the door, letting his hand briefly rest against the small of her back as he ushered her into the office.

"Start at the beginning, Phryne," he said as calmly as he could manage.

"I was visiting Rhodes when something he said made me realise that Foyle would go back to the house. I couldn't get an answer on the telephone, and when I got home Bert and Cec and Dot were..." her hands flailed through the air.

"Paralyzed?" he guessed, remembering the effects of Foyle's drug on Monkton and Waters.

"Yes, just coming out of it. It was the milk, I think. And Jane was gone. He came into my house and took my daughter, Jack," she said, her eyes blazing.

Two nights earlier—had it only been two nights?—he had thought that Phryne would collapse as they frantically made their way to Jane. The girl had been safe then, but now... now she was in danger, and Phryne Fisher showed nothing but frantic determination and steel resolve. He never should have expected anything else.
He crossed the room to his desk, pulling out a glass and a bottle from a drawer. He poured a half measure into the tumbler and handed it over.

"Fortifying," he explained to her skeptical face. "I'd have one myself if I wasn't on duty. Sit down, catch your breath while I make some calls."

She perched on a chair for a moment before leaping up to circle the room; he wondered if he should catch her hand and pull her close to still her pacing, but he suspected that doing so would be for his own reassurance rather than hers and he let her move.

"I want more cars out there," he barked into the phone during his last call. He could feel a headache building; he had needed to explain the situation at the outset of every call, he hadn't had proper sleep in days, and he had no idea how much time they had. "The man's a lunatic. I don't care what you have to do to stop him."

He hung up the receiver, and Phryne came over to him.

"He must have tampered with the milk bottles after they were delivered this morning," she said.

He nodded. It seemed the most likely explanation. He had men on the street; the best thing they could do was continue investigating. "Let's go through the facts calmly."

He went to reach for her elbow as he said so, but she had already spun away to move around the room again.

"How can I be calm? The fact is, we haven't the faintest idea where Foyle's taken her!"

Some of the anger in her voice had abated in favour of fear, and it hit him in the gut so suddenly that he knew: he was too close. Far too close. He was saved from examining the thought thoroughly by the arrival of Constable Collins at the door.

"Inspector," he said. "I've just had a call from Our Lady of Sorrows."

Teresa Cavalli, once Foyle's lover and Myrtle Hill's flesh-and-blood angel lately known as Sister Bernice, was found dead in front of the altar of Our Lady of Sorrows. Jack examined the body, desperately trying not to imagine Jane in her position. Or Phryne. He had known better than to let it get personal, but he hadn't stood a chance. He looked up; Phryne stood several steps back, a look of shock on her face.

"What are his plans for Jane?" she asked, so quietly he almost didn't hear her.

He stood, passing the scene off to an arriving sergeant with a nod of acknowledgement. Eddie was one of his men, and he'd handle it well. Jack had to get back to the station; they were running out of time.

"Come along Miss Fisher," he said, and she silently complied. It was unsettling.

Once outside, he opened the passenger door to the police car and Phryne climbed took her seat. He got in the other side and began to drive.

"I should have made her leave yesterday," she said halfway to the station.

He placed his hand on her knee and gave it a squeeze without taking his eyes off the road.
"You can't hold yourself responsible," he said.

"I don't," she replied. It was so convincing he almost believed her; most people would have. "It's still not fair."

"No, it's not. But we'll find him. We'll find Jane."

"The question is whether we'll find her in time," she said.

Her tone was weary and resigned, as if Foyle had already won.

"We will," Jack promised, hoping he wouldn't regret it.

The rest of the drive was silent. Phryne stared at her lap, folding and unfolding her hands; Jack wished that he could reach across the divide and calm them—calm her—with a touch. They arrived at the station before he had worked up the courage to try, so he settled for a small, tight smile as he parked.

"I have half a lead," he said. "I could use your insight."

She nodded and adjusted her hat before exiting the car; he had to scramble to keep up. She was headed to his office, but he redirected her with a hand to her upper arm towards the interview room he had set up.

Her eyes grew wide as she saw the walls, covered in the cases of other missing girls. He had hoped there would be none to find, that he could discard the possibility without Phryne ever hearing about it.

"Oh Jack," she whispered, and her eyes shone with unshed tears for the first time.

"These are all the girls, including Myrtle and Janey, who disappeared in the area around the university over the three years Foyle was teaching there," he explained as she examined the nearest file.

She looked up, counting the cluster of cases. Five files, one escaped girl.

"The four goddesses," she said. "Foyle believed he needed four goddesses to protect his journey to the afterlife."

"I'm struggling to make any similarities. Their paths never crossed, their ages varied, different social classes, different circumstances..."

He felt helpless; the answers may very well be in the papers in front of him, but it was also the reasoning of a madman.

"Birthday," Phryne read from one of the cards. "Why is this written here?"

"He told Myrtle his daughter's birthday was close to hers. Of course he doesn't have a daughter."

"But Foyle's own birthday was the same day as King Memses, the 21st day of Proyet. What is that?"

Jack pulled Foyle's casefile from the table and flipped it open.

"Foyle's date of birth was December 21st, 1880."

Her lips tightened.
"What about these other girls? What are their birthdates?" she asked, moving to read another girl's information. "Joan Rosen, 21st of December 1904."

"Deidre Kelly, 21st of December 1903."

"Iris Fulton, 21st of December 1901."

"If you add your sister's name, he already has his four goddesses," Jack said.

"But my sister's birthday wasn't December 21st; it was September 21st."

"What?" He'd read the casefile often enough to be sure that was wrong. "I thought..."

"My father was drunk when he registered Janey's birth, and he put the wrong date on the certificate," she explained. "It should have been me Foyle took instead of Janey. It's my birthday, Jack. Midsummer's Eve, same as the others. I'm Foyle's fourth goddess. That's why he's after me."

Well, wasn't that bloody fantastic.

"So all he needs now for his ascension into the afterlife is you."

"And the ring," she said.

"What ring?"

"A silver stirrup ring. It belonged to King Memses. But Teresa Cavalli gave it to me."

"More evidence?" he asked, exasperated. He had known she was holding something back; Hell would freeze over before she actually told him everything, but this was a particularly egregious exclusion.

"I took it to Professor Rhodes at the university," she said almost flippantly. The tone sent warning bells off in his head. "Foyle can have me, if he lets Jane go."

Jack cut her off at the door.

"You can't go and offer yourself!"

"Rhodes is the last one on Foyle's list, and he has the ring," she said, ducking beneath his arm. "I need to go back there."

He caught her arm; she shook his hand off, but it gave him a chance to get ahead of her again. He blocked the gate.

"I won't let you," he said. She tried to push past; he caught her shoulders. "You're under arrest."

"What?"

"For your own safety."

_Just cooperate for once_, he thought. _Please._

"Don't be absurd," she yelled, struggling against him. "You have no grounds for holding me."

A swift kick to the shin almost caused him to release her.

"That's it!" he shouted. "You're officially charged with assaulting a police officer, and withholding
evidence. Constable, remove Miss Fisher's gun from her handbag, and escort her to the lock up.”

Collins grabbed her around the middle and lifted her up. Jack rubbed his shin; she'd done a good job on it.

"I'm sorry, miss. I'm sorry, miss. I'm sorry, miss... " Collins was saying as he headed towards the cells.

"You can't do this!" she hollered in response.

He could and he bloody well would. Nobody else was going to die. Except possibly him, when Miss Fisher was released.

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The door to Rhodes's office was open, so Jack knocked on the doorframe.

"Professor Rhodes?" he said, and the man turned towards him. "I'm Detective Inspector Jack Robinson."

"Inspector. Come in."

"Thank you," Jack said as he stepped inside.

"I heard about Mr. Monkton and Mr. Waters," the professor said, shaking his head. "Terrible news."

"And Miss Cavalli's body was found earlier today."

The image still gave him an internal shudder; between war and the job it had been a long time since a body had been enough to rattle him. But it was not the body, not really; it was the knowledge that it was a very personal vendetta with Miss Fisher as the target, and Jane already in Foyle’s grasp.

"Oh no," Rhodes said, shaking his head again. "I'd hoped she was somewhere safe from him."

"She had a ring that Foyle was after. I believe Miss Fisher left it with you?"

"Yes," said Rhodes, moving some papers around on his desk. He was remarkably calm given the fact a murderous madman was after him. Academics were a species unto themselves. "A rare artefact from the Fifth Dynasty. The reign of King Memses."

"Given it's part of our investigation, we'll have to take it into police custody."

"Yes, of course. Miss Fisher left in a hurry, but I kept it safe for her, with the rest of the antiquities collection, downstairs."

Jack followed the man down to the storage rooms, full of boxes and crates and dark corners. It was enough to send a shiver up his back.

"Here," said Rhodes eventually, stopping. He held up some goblets, almost reverentially. "These are from King Memses' tomb as well. They were ceremonial. The engravings tell the story of Memses' ascension on Midsummer's Eve."

"Impressive," Jack said, a memory tickling the back of his mind. Hadn’t Miss Hill said something about goblets?

"They're part of my personal collection," the man shrugged, "but I'll bequeath them to the museum
eventually."

"So where's the ring, Professor?" Jack asked.

There was a noise behind him, and it all went black.
Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

Due to real life, updates will resume on Monday. :) Then it's a straight shot to the end, in theory.

Pacing the cell, Phryne had no choice but to think. It wasn't the time to think; Jane was in danger because of her. Janey had died because of a paperwork error. There had to be an angle to work, somewhere, she was just too blind to see it. She never should have tipped her hand to Jack.

"Blithering idiot," she muttered under her breath.

She wasn't sure if she meant Jack or herself. She kicked at the bars; they made an unsatisfyingly dull thud.

Eventually Dot arrived, carrying a hamper of food.

"Please tell me you've baked a file into the cake," Phryne said when she saw her.

"Afraid not, miss. Just lunch."

"Well, that's no help," said Phryne, continuing to pace. "This is all my fault."

"No, miss. Don't say that," said Dot, as steadfastly loyal as ever. "Cec and Bert are doing what they can and the police are looking. Please just try to eat something."

Phryne shook her head.

"I failed Janey and now I've failed Jane."

"No."

"Can you imagine how terrified that poor child must be?" she asked, near tears. "And I'm stuck in this wretched cell!"

"But it won't help Jane if Foyle gets his hands on you too," said Dot.

As if any of this could be approached with reason. Logic, perhaps, but not reason. There was no reason in Murdoch Foyle, aside from his delusions of grandeur.

"He has to go after Rhodes at some point," she said, far more frantically than she needed to given the fact that the police were already on the way to him. "It's just a matter of waiting for him. Unless..."

With a sudden insight Phryne recognised what had been bothering her, making her unable to accept that the police—no, she corrected herself, that Jack was on the case.

"What?"

"Somebody told Foyle about that stirrup ring when he was in prison. "
"Who else would know?"

"Rhodes," she said slowly, the truth coming too late. "That's why he's last on the list to be killed."

Which meant... Oh God. Nonono. Not him too. She stopped her pacing, rushing instead towards the door as if it would magically disappear in her hour of need.

"You have to get Hugh to let me out of here, Dot! Jack's in danger!"

Somehow, Dorothy Williams, the woman who was too scared to use a telephone six months earlier, found the leverage to have her released. Phryne spared the briefest thought to hope that she had not destroyed her relationship with Hugh Collins in the process.

She found herself in the basement of the university, carrying her gun and trying to run through every possible eventuality in her mind. It was, perhaps, why Foyle managed to get far too close before she noticed him.

"Well done, Phryne Fisher," he said, his voice smooth and charming as he emerged from around a corner. "Did you like my trail of crumbs?"

She raised her gun, wondering if shooting him dead without pretext would be the best option, even if it came at the cost of answers—real, solid answers—about Janey.

"You can kill me now," he said, sensing her hesitance. "but you'll never see your daughter or policeman alive."

She couldn't, _wouldn't_ risk Jane or Jack's lives for anything. Foyle had the upper hand, but only for the moment. _There was always an angle_, she thought; she tried to quash Jack's dry voice adding, _And I have no doubt you find it every time._

"My fourth goddess," Foyle continued, stepping closer and taking the gun from her trembling hands. "Your glorious destiny. If you choose to accept it willingly."

She needed time and she needed to get closer.

"I would've willingly given my life for my sister's," she said, and it wasn't a lie. She also had no intention of lying down to die without a fight. "And now I willingly offer it for the sake of two others, if you let them go unharmed."

The imperious formality in her words seemed to convince Foyle, because he motioned her down the corridor with her own gun. He had set up an altar. In a storeroom in the basement of the university. _He really was deluded_, thought a tiny and truly vicious part of Phryne's mind that she had assumed she'd left behind in Collingwood years before.

She was forced onto a chair, and saw Rhodes—that _bastard_—preparing goblets. She managed to get both men talking, looking for answers and for weaknesses to exploit. They told her so easily how they had found the girls, the reasons for killing, how Rhodes had found a way to justify his inaction which had led directly to the death of Teresa Cavalli. It was illuminating in an unpleasant sort of way, but it failed to give her the leverage she needed. When Rhodes turned to her, practically purring as he explained that Foyle's plans to kill himself—and take her with him!—would resolve the matter, she lost the thin veneer of control she had maintained.

"This time you're an accomplice," she spat out. "Unless you're planning on killing Inspector
Robinson yourself, he'll make sure you hang for it."

If the worst came to pass and she didn't manage to engineer her escape, she had no doubt that Jack would ensure justice. He might even be able to recover Janey so they could rest together. Not that she had any intention of dying. But if, if, the worst happened she knew she could count on Jack. The reliance did not seem such a weakness, under the circumstances.

Murdoch Foyle came back into her view, bearing a filled cup.

"When we drink from these sacred cups, you and I will leave this mortal life in peace and full knowledge," he said, lifting the cup to her lips. His voice was deceptively calming. "First you, Miss Fisher. Your limbs will grow heavy but your mind will calm. And I will help you cross over to the other side as swiftly as I can."

The drink was bitter, but she had no choice but to take a small sip. She had gambled, and unless a solution presented itself in the next few minutes, she had lost. The best she could hope for was answers and the secured release of Jane and Jack.

"Did my sister die in pain?" she asked, nearly breaking at the thought. She had imagined Janey's death a thousand times in a thousand ways. She had been certain that there was nothing worse than what she had imagined; sitting and facing her own death, she found that was not true. Because this was real.

"No," Foyle said, leaning in to whisper his words of consolation against her ear. His hot breath felt wet against her skin. "Not for a moment, no. She... She died gloriously. Without pain or fear. And I laid her to rest with great care."

He sounded as if he truly believed it; Phryne was less certain. But there were answers, so tantalizingly close. She just needed to reach out.

"Where is she?"

"With the others. I buried her soul in the Field of Reeds. I buried them all in the grove of weeping willows at the head of the river, each place marked in order. And you too will lie beside your sister, for all time."

Perhaps it was the reminder of her earlier musings on justice or perhaps it was clarity of mind now that answers had been given, but Phryne saw the chance that had dangled just beyond reach swing towards her.

"How do I know you'll let them go?" She asked. The tears that came were real, but she didn't stop them. She doubted she could have if she had wanted to, but they served a purpose so she let them fall freely. "Jack and Jane, after I'm gone?"

"I'll release them," said Rhodes, and it was exactly what she needed. "Before I follow you both to the afterlife."

"No," she argued, hoping the facade of willing goddess would give her words weight. "I don't trust him. I believe your word but not his. He isn't your loyal servant."

"Make her drink," Rhodes demanded, sounding desperate. He turned to her directly, waving her gun. "Drink it or I'll shoot you now. All of it!"

She drank from the goblet; she would only have a couple of minutes once it was gone, but a couple of minutes would be all she needed. It was longer than she had if she didn't drink, at least.
"I meant what I said," she said, looking directly at Foyle. Rhodes was not worthy of her attention. "Rhodes is not one of your faithful. He won't follow you to the afterlife or anywhere else—"

"Quiet!"

"He's waiting you out for the sake of the treasure. He'll claim the discovery of King Memses' tomb for his own glory."

The true beauty of this plan was that it was the truth. And as she watched the dissent she had sown collapse the tentative allegiance, she felt a small thrill of victory.

"Give me the gun," Foyle commanded, moving towards them.

"None of it's true!" shouted Rhodes.

"I know, because the plan was always that you would precede me to the afterlife for your own loyalty. Give me the gun."

"No."

It was enough. A struggle. A chance. She lunged from the chair towards them, her limbs already heavy. The gun went off—one, twice—and Rhodes reeled away. Dead or unconscious Phryne was uncertain, but he was incidental in her focus. Foyle had slumped to the ground by the altar. He looked up at her for aid, and saw the unbridled hatred on her face.

"B-but... but you came willingly!"

He sounded genuinely betrayed, as if he could not fathom her rejection.

"I came willingly to find out what happened to my sister," she spat. "And to rescue Jane and Jack. I didn't come for you."

"I only tried to lead the way."

"You led the way to hell!"

He tried to scramble up, to grab the knife and complete the ceremony that would grant him eternal life. She stopped him, seizing the knife before he could.

"Please!"

"No," she said, aware that this was the harshest sentence she could pass. She did so with pleasure. "You're not headed for eternal life. You're going back to gaol so you can hang."

She turned from Foyle. Saw Jack, and behind him Jane stood in the doorway. Clever girl, Phryne thought. It wasn't your burden to bear, but my wonderful, clever girl.

"Oh, Jane. I'm so sorry."

The room swam and her vision grew dark; she stumbled towards them, Jack and Jane and home, but she didn't get far before her legs gave out entirely. Her last memories were the cold comfort that Foyle's drugs rendered the girls unconscious, and the sound of Jack's voice whispering her name as he caught her.
She woke up in the hospital, her memory foggy. She saw Jane sitting in a chair by her bed and reached out for her.

"Miss Phryne?" asked the girl, who had clearly been crying.

"Are you alright, Jane?"

"Of course I am," said Jane with bravado. "It was practically an adventure."

"Oh Jane," she said, at a loss of anything else to say. "Come here, darling."

Her ward launched herself the few feet between them and hugged Phryne tightly. She didn't let go until Mac came into the room several minutes later.

"Sleeping Beauty awakens," said Mac; coming from her that was practically a heartfelt confession of worry.

"No prince involved," Phryne replied.

"Don't know about that," replied Mac. "If I have to field any more questions from that inspector friend of yours I may arrange the coronation myself."

"Jack? Is he here?"

Mac had crossed the room and was taking her pulse. She nodded curtly.

"Currently guarding Murdoch Foyle's room until they move him to the prison infirmary, though I suspect he might be lured away when I tell him you're awake. Foyle's not going anywhere and there are three other officers, but he's rather like a dog with a bone right now."

Phryne surprised herself by laughing.

"He can be," she said. "Actually had me arrested. It didn’t last, and thank heavens for that, but he's tenacious."

"The only one that had half a chance of keeping you alive," scolded Mac. "Seeing as how you didn't fill me in on what was going on."

"That's because you would have stopped me."

Mac rolled her eyes. "How are you feeling?"

"Like I was drugged by a madman."

"Good," said Mac. "Perhaps next time you'll think before you act."

"Unlikely."

"Mmm, pigs may fly first," huffed Mac, making a note on her chart. Phryne wasn't dying then. Looking up, Mac gave her an exasperated smile. "Should I go fetch your pet bulldog?"

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They stood in silence, the only sound the thunk of shovel against soil as the constable dug for Janey. For Janey's remains, she corrected herself. It was not her sister in the ground. Bones were just bones, she repeated in a mantra; it almost worked until the constable stopped his digging.
She went from numb to keenly aware of every detail in her surroundings: the slight wind through the trees; the sound of the river; the breathing of Hugh and Dot and Jack, who motioned slightly to the constable as if to say 'enough'; the smell of freshly turned soil. Jack's hand on her shoulder as she swayed, her whole world somehow, terrifyingly, exactly as she knew it was.

She moved towards the hole, spying for the first time the hint of light amongst the dirt—a skull, Janey's skull—and facing the reality of her sister being nothing more than bones. Her legs were not enough to hold her anymore and she fell, felt the tears come. Silent, because no noise could encapsulate her grief. Janey. Janey, Janey, Janey. Found but not returned to her.

As she looked down, Phryne thought how easily she could fall into the hole after her. There was nothing left but dirt and bone in her world; it would be so easy to fall. She wanted to fall, to tumble down the rabbit hole like Alice, to find a world that was strange and different and not completely logical. The logical world had led her to this moment, after all. A world where she was someone else, or nobody at all, seemed much preferable.

As the dirt swam in her vision, threatening to engulf her, the tiny voice that had pushed her forward through Janey's death, and the war, and a life of poverty and grief, the tiny voice that had allowed her to survive—no, to thrive on her own terms even if it required compromise—refused to give in. Refused to let Murdoch Foyle win one last victory.

She reached out, grasping blindly towards the world she knew still existed; she felt Jack's hand, gentle but firm, grab her wrist. He never would have let her fall.

—–

Hugh drove them back to St. Kilda; Phryne didn't remember climbing into the car, but she found herself nestled between Dot (who handed her a handkerchief, which she was grateful for) and Jack (who kept his hand on the small of her back without a word, which she also appreciated) as they made the seemingly endless journey back to reality. When they eventually arrived at the bungalow, Dot popped ahead to put the kettle on.

"I'll have to telephone my parents," said Phryne.

"The police can make the call," Jack pointed out as he helped her climb down; her legs were still weak from grief. He said something quietly to Hugh, who nodded and drove the car away.

"I wouldn't want...No, I have to," she said, walking towards the house. If it was slightly more wobbly than her usual stride, Jack had the decency to say nothing.

"No, you don't," he said from beside her. "If you want to be the one than I can hold off the official notification, but it's not your responsibility."

"Of course it's my responsibility, Jack," she said, more sharply than she intended in her haze. "It was my birthday. I should have been the one."

When they reached the stairs she reached for his arm, aware it would be there and embarrassed that she needed it unless she wanted to fall flat on her face. Jack didn't say anything else until he had brought her inside and seated her on the chaise.

"Nobody should have been the one," he said simply. "I'll go check on Miss Williams and the drinks."

Without thinking, Phryne reached up and grabbed his hand.

"Stay here?"
His nod came slowly, but it came. He took a seat next to her and she settled against his arm. Not in his arms—he didn't offer and she didn't ask—but there was something reassuring about pressing against the pillar of his limb. She stirred slightly when Dot came in with the tea, long enough to pick up her cup before returning to her position.

"It's late, miss," said Dot eventually, even though it was nothing of the sort. "I'm going to retire for the evening, but if the inspector needs to take your statement...?"

She had a newfound appreciation for Jack's hatred of paperwork.

"Thank you, Dot," she said.

On her way out of the room, Dot leaned over and pressed a kiss to Phryne's forehead.

"Get some rest, miss. Good night."

When she was gone, Jack shifted slightly; she felt the absence of his warmth keenly.

"Your statement can wait until tomorrow," he said, and the gentleness in his voice almost broke her again.

"No, I should do it tonight."

"Not to be funny, Phryne, but you look as if a slight wind could knock you over. If I want a decent retelling it's going to have to wait until you've slept."

"I'm not tired," she said.

"No, but you are emotionally stretched so far it's a miracle you're still upright."

"I'm not," she said, then clarified. "I'm not upright. You just make a good pillar."

"All the more reason to leave it. I can be a pillar or I can be a policeman, but I can't be both."

"And what about just a man?" she asked.

She'd shifted so she was against him again, and she felt his breath hitch.

"I can't," he said, and the anguish in his voice ached almost as much as the rejection. "If I make love to you today..."

She understood. His words weren't quite the same as a declaration of love, but it was more than either one of them intended. Emotional entanglements became messy so easily. She shouldn't have asked.

"Pillar it is then," she said, curling her legs beneath her and pressing her head against his chest. She could hear his heart thumping, slow and steady, and she slipped her hand between his jacket and vest.

She didn't move until morning.

———

"So if that's a true statement of events as you recall them..." Inspector Robinson—for it was Inspector Robinson, she thought, remembering the pillar from the night before—said, passing her a witness statement to sign off on.
She signed the paperwork, then looked at him.

"Aunt Prudence has organised for my sister to be buried in the family plot," she said. "I've been..."

"Busy ensuring justice?" he offered, which was much kinder than her own impulse of 'too weak'.

"If you'd like. Mother's nerves are in no shape, and the last time we entrusted my father with official business he ended up getting drunk, messed up the paperwork, and Janey died instead of me."

"Two roads diverged in a yellow woods..." he quoted quietly.

She looked at him in surprise. "That's awfully modern of you."

"I prefer Shakespeare. That doesn't mean it's the only thing I read, Miss Fisher."

"Of course not," she smiled. "But I am almost certain the Bard's take on your meaning will come to you soon enough and you'll regret Frost."

"That may very well happen," he admitted, tucking the paperwork into his case. "But either would do me better than my own words."

"Excuse me, miss," said Dot, coming into the kitchen. "but the guests have begun to arrive."

"My birthday party," she explained. It would be an insult to Janey's memory to waste it in grief. She reached across the kitchen table, brushed his hand with her own. "Help me to celebrate, Jack."

His slight nod and slighter smile was exactly what she needed to see; an unspoken agreement not to let her fall. She took a breath and danced her way into the parlour.

"Champagne for everyone!" she cried as she put a record on, grateful for the case liberated from Guy and Isabella’s engagement party. It was an exceptionally good vintage.

She looked back to find Jack watching her from the doorway; she raised her glass in a toast. It was returned in kind, and Phryne had a sudden and strange feeling that in that moment he saw her as she truly was.

She wasn't entirely certain if the idea thrilled or terrified her.
One morning in mid-January, Rosie came to the police station. The timing of his emergence from the office was pure coincidence—he was seeking a cup of tea and hoping that the brew would at least be fresh, as he'd long given up on good—and he stopped short when he saw the woman standing by the gate. And while he knew, intellectually, his marriage had been over for a very long time, it hadn't truly sunk in until that moment. He cared for Rosie. He might even harbour some love for her, and certainly cherished their time together despite the outcome. But she had come into his station and nobody even knew who she was. How very different it was to the days when other men had teased a Constable Robinson about that blushing girl come to visit; he never quite had the heart to tell the other men that she was steeling herself for comments about the DI's daughter brought low (and, quite possibly, what they had been doing before he'd left for work that morning.) Or later, the deference given to her as the inspector's wife, before the fissure that appeared at his feet the moment he enlisted had become a gaping chasm and she no longer visited at all. It had been a long time since then.

"Rosie!"

"Jack," she said, and the sound of his name on her tongue sounded almost foreign. "It's father. He's in trouble."

Without hesitation he motioned her through to his office, then continued on his quest for tea. He brought in a tray with two cups, feeling the tiniest sliver of surprise when he realised that she had chosen Miss Fisher's chair. It was a silly notion that passed instantly, but clearly he had become used to the private detective's presence.

"What's happened, Rosie?" he asked.

She told him everything she knew—George Sanderson had been found unconscious in a locked study with a dead woman; a prostitute, it was assumed, though he could see Rosie rankle at the suggestion. She had always idolised her father, who had been a good friend and mentor to Jack even after the marriage itself had begun its slow implosion. He almost missed his father-in-law as much as he missed the comforts of marriage; it did not speak well of him that he missed both more than he missed Rosie herself, or at least the shadow of Rosie he had become with him.

He knew what she would ask before she did so. It was a skill that served him well as a policeman, giving him the chance to mull a situation over and adjust it as every new piece of information was added. George Sanderson would need an investigator who was unbiased; he'd stepped on more than a few toes, politically, over the years and there were people who would exploit this discovery. His fears were confirmed when he heard Sergeant Crossley had been assigned to the case—the man was...
an absolute moron who couldn't find his own arse once he decided it was somewhere else.

"Please Jack," Rosie said, sounding desperate and alone. As if he had ever stood a chance at saying no. "He needs your help."

———

As the police vehicle arrived at the Sanderson home, Hugh gave him an odd look.

"I thought Hawthorn were handling this case?" he said, with slight—well, not disapproval as such but with a slight feeling of reluctance.

"They were, but we're taking over," said Jack, getting out of the car.

He wasn't even at the gate before he heard a familiar voice call out from behind him.

"Hello Jack!"

He turned. Of course; what were the chances he'd escape this day without her on the case? He hadn't expected her quite this fast, however.

"Miss Fisher," he greeted.

"Oh, come on now, why the long face?" she said with a grin. "You'd be disappointed if I didn't show up."

"This is a police matter," he said, but there was no bite to his words.

"And I've been hired on behalf of the victim," she said, falling into step beside him.

"Impressive, since we haven't even identified the body yet."

"Well, that's no different than usual. You're usually two steps behind, aren't you?"

"I believe it's that you are usually two steps in front," he replied, aware that he was smiling for the first time since Rosie had entered his office.

Since the night of Phryne’s birthday party they had seen each other several times and had found a sort of happy middle ground; he had been concerned that his admission that he could not repeat their intimacy despite his instigation would deter her from continuing their friendship. It had turned out perfectly amicably though; she was more open—whether that was a result of the events or the lifting of a heavy burden he was not certain—and he felt more at ease with the lines he had drawn.

They reached the door, and he stopped for a second. He had not entered the house in several years. While he was debating whether he should warn Miss Fisher, the woman in question waltzed right through.

Well, that settled that.

He followed her in, noting with some amusement that she smiled and moved so quickly that she was past Crossley and into the study before the man had time to object.

"Inspector Robinson," scowled the officer in question, clearly ready to take his irritation out on Jack.

"Morning, Sergeant."
"Who'd have thought all that do-gooding trying to clean this town, and the Deputy Commissioner winds up drunk in the arms of a dead floozy. It's not looking too good, is it?"

"I'll let you know once I solve the case."

"I don't know who you think you are, Robinson, or why you think that woman of yours has any business being here."

"I'm the officer who outranks you, Crossley," Jack said coldly. "Take it up with Russell Street. I am sure they would be particularly pleased to hear how you gave access of a secured crime scene to a civilian."

"She arrived with you," Crossley countered, determined to keep the argument going.

"No, she arrived at the same time as me. You're the one who let her through. Ah, my photographs," Jack said, taking the envelope from the young officer carrying them. He turned to Crossley with a deliberate air and held out his hand. "And any relevant notes."

Crossley handed over the notebook reluctantly and Jack followed Miss Fisher into the study. She rather reminded him of a hunting hawk when investigating; she would do a preliminary sweep of the room, eyeing it all before darting towards some small detail. She had a particularly good sense for things that were out of place, so he waited for her to finish, motioning Hugh to do the same. Who knew what she would turn up, even if the scene had already been trampled? He enjoyed watching her work, loath as he was to admit it; it made her come alive in a way that left her the brightest thing in the room, her eyes as quick and lively as her mind. When she was done with her circuit of the room, she turned to him.

"Thoughts?" she asked.

He conferred with Crossley's notebook.

"According to these notes, the Deputy Commissioner was found in this chair with two glasses still on the table."

She picked up the decanter delicately with a handkerchief, opening the stopper and gave it a sniff before directing it towards him. He recognised the smell.

"Liquorice," he said.

"Aniseed," she confirmed.

"Hawthorn have already sent the glasses off for examination," Hugh added.

"I want the decanter tested, too."

"Yes, sir."

Hugh took the bottle awkwardly, then left to request the evidence's processing.

"Are you going to tell me how you ended up at my crime scene?"

"I already told you," she said, cocking her head impishly. "I was hired by a friend."

"A friend who knew the victim was dead before she was identified?"

She considered this for a minute.
"It is peculiar," she admitted. "But I suspect that the girls were used to looking out for one another. She was a hostess at the Imperial Club known as Lavinia; formerly Sarah Holloway of Bundaberg, Queensland. I've been retained by her colleague, Lola, who is also a close associate of Dot's." She leaned in far too close to him and looked up at him through dark eyelashes to whisper. "Her sister.

They shared a small smile, though Jack was not entirely certain why.

"Ahem!" Collins said from the door; they both turned to him. "Excuse me, sir. Your... The Deputy Commissioner's daughter has just arrived."

Before Jack could formulate a plan for handling the situation, Rosie entered the room. She startled when she saw Phryne, or perhaps at how closely they stood, but quickly turned on the charms she reserved when playing hostess.

"Miss Fisher!" she exclaimed; Jack wondered where she'd heard it was Phryne's preference; she had introduced herself as Mrs. Freeman the day Rosie had met her at the house. "Jack didn't mention that you were coming."

"Mrs. Robinson," Phryne greeted, shooting Jack an incredulous look. "I'm afraid Jack had no idea."

"Miss Sanderson is fine," Rosie said.

He saw the wheels turning, and he could tell the moment Phryne hit on the correct assumptions. Her eyes tightened slightly and her lips quirked into an almost indiscernible frown, but it was over in an instant.

"I am sorry," she said. "Jack has always spoken very highly of you when we've worked together."

Rosie nodded, no doubt used to hearing how sorry people were. Phryne had already turned away, looking at Jack appraisingly.

"So, the Deputy Commissioner is your former father-in-law?"

Jack swore that Rosie smirked at his discomfiture.

"Ah, yes. That's right."

"Hmm," was all Phryne said in reply, moving towards the mantelpiece to examine the photographs there.

Jack decided it was best to disavow all knowledge. He turned back to his wife. Ex-wife.

"Who else had access to your father's port, Rosie?"

"Only Mrs Blunt, but she's part of the family."

Mrs. Blunt had always disliked Jack. Still, she was loyal enough to George Sanderson that she'd probably cooperate.

"I'm afraid I'll need to question her all the same."

"I'll go and find her," Rosie said.

Once Rosie had left, Phryne sidled over to him. She was carrying a photo in a frame; a quick glance told Jack it was one from early in his marriage. He took it from her quickly, placing it facedown on the table.
"You should have told me it was that day," she scolded. "I feel like I took advantage of you now, making you come straight from court to a silly party."

It hadn’t been a silly party though. It had been her shadows, and she had asked.

"Yes, well, you had your own problems to deal with."

"Jack, as your friend I will be the first to tell you that's ridiculous."

"Miss Fisher..." he began, not entirely certain what he intended to say.

"Do you think your father-in-law was enjoying the privileges of his position a little too carnally?" she interrupted, the line of conversation already considered and discarded in her mind. He really could not keep up with her.

"Well, that's one theory."

"But you have another?"

"Cleaning up this city's not for the faint-hearted. Sanderson's made plenty of enemies and they're not confined to the streets."

"You're suggesting he was framed?"

Jack shrugged. "It's a possibility we have to consider."

"Then we'll consider it."

———

After interviewing Sanderson's housekeeper, Jack headed to the hospital to speak with George himself. He was accosted by reporters in the corridor, desperate for a story and already looking to cry cover-up. He brushed them off and reminded himself to set ground rules about talking to the press with his men; the last thing the case needed was a well-meaning constable saying the wrong thing.

George was awake when he arrived, and he gave his former father-in-law a small smile.

"Hello, George."

Even from a hospital bed George Sanderson gave the impression of authority.

"Jack," he said curtly.

"I'll need to take your statement."

George nodded.

"I don't know how much help I'll be. Mrs Blunt said goodbye; she was off to some nonsense at the pictures. I poured myself a nightcap, as I always do. That's all I can remember, till I woke up here and those idiots started blathering about a dead woman lying on my Persian rug."

Jack passed over some of the photographs from the scene.

"Her name was Lavinia, she worked the Imperial Club. Did you know her? In passing, perhaps?"
"No." He looked hurt at the accusation. "I've worked hard to try and stop these bludgers and criminals from living off the earnings of these unfortunate women. Do you really think that I would frequent places like that?"

Jack didn't, but as Phryne had reminded him before they parted he couldn't let his previous involvement cloud his judgement. It was why he had taken the case on, after all; to ensure justice instead of vindication.

"You ordered a raid there six months ago, along with raids on two other high-end brothels. A man was shot, wasn't he?"

"It was an armed raid. These things happen," said George dismissively. "Clearly I have been set up by someone. That's what you get when you ruffle feathers."

It was a reminder Jack had heard many times in the years he'd known Sanderson; there were always birds in the bush. He'd dealt with a few himself over the years, and it only got worse the higher you climbed up the political ladder.

"Mrs Blunt said the library door was locked when she came back to the house."

"Well, obviously someone locked it when they left," George said with disdain.

"It was bolted from the inside."

"That's impossible."

"She had to call for help to break the door down, George," said Jack, hoping to convey how very badly the situation looked from where he stood.

"So presumably I did it. After murdering a woman I've never met. This doesn't make any sense."

There was a pause, both of them uncertain what to say next. Rosie arrived at that moment, followed by a man who looked vaguely familiar to Jack.

"Father?" she asked, then spotted Jack. "Oh, is this a bad time?"

"No, we've just finished," said Jack, closing his notebook.

Rosie caught him looking at her guest and she turned.

"Jack, you remember Sidney Fletcher?"

Ah, yes. He recognised him now from occasional family parties.

"Yes, of course," said Jack, offering his hand. "You're Rosie's cousin."

"George's godson," corrected Sidney, shaking it. "We're not related by blood. Stroke of luck, as it turns out."

He flashed Rosie a smile that set Jack's teeth on edge. His Rosie never would have fallen for that slippery sort of charm, but she hadn't been his Rosie in years. It didn't sting quite as much as it had in the past.

"Rosie mentioned you were the last person to see George yesterday," he asked Fletcher, quietly enough that neither George or Rosie would hear. "How did he seem?"
"Well, uh... we attempted a round of golf, but now that I think about it, he wasn't himself at all. Triple bogeyed the ninth hole."

"I assume that's not a good thing," Jack said. He'd never really gotten on with golf; he'd much preferred tennis for a social sport, and cycling overall.

"No, no, it's not," Fletcher said with a condescending smile.

Jack could barely suppress the urge to roll his eyes. He had a sudden image of Sidney Fletcher meeting Phryne; he wasn't sure if she'd allow him to sweep her away—she really did have unpredictable taste in her dalliances—or if she'd see through him and enjoy making snide asides to Jack. Both, possibly.

"Thank you for your time," he said simply, taking his cue to leave.

In the corridor Rosie caught up him.

"Father's looking better," she said conversationally.

"I'm glad," said Jack.

Rosie smiled, then patted her hair nervously. Clearly she had something else she wished to say, but was hesitant to voice it. Jack waited.

"Jack...be careful. Please," she eventually said. "That woman has a reputation."

"I'm well aware of her reputation, Rosie, though I'm surprised you are. It's not—"

"I'm more worried about the fallout, honestly," Rosie said. "There's a poor girl dead, Father's neck is on the line, and your job will be too if you don't get to the bottom of this. She's not taking it seriously, and she's not the one that will pay the price for it."

"Rosie..." Jack tried to find an explanation that would soothe his former wife's fears. "This is how Miss Fisher takes things seriously. She charms and she flirts and before you know it she's worked it all out." Rosie didn't look convinced. "Honestly? If that was my father in there, she's the one I'd want on the case."

"And I wanted you," said Rosie quietly.

"You have me. Miss Fisher was hired on behalf of the victim."

"But you'll work together?" she asked.

"We generally do," said Jack.

Rosie looked at him quizzically.

"Are you in love with her?"

_I suspect I could be, if she let me. But no._

"No, no," said Jack, then gave a wry smile at her disbelieving look. "I do have some sense of self preservation, Rosie."

"Yes, I do believe I remember it well," His ex-wife agreed with a sad smile. "Be careful all the same."
With Chief Commissioner Hall and half of Melbourne breathing down his neck, Jack's afternoon was unproductive. The Imperial Club didn't open until the evening, so it became a waiting game; thankfully he was good at those. He reread witness statements, chased up the results on the decanter (twice) without success, and looked over the reports from the raid six months earlier. He even attempted to telephone Miss Fisher once, to see if she had made progress in her attempts to learn more about Lavinia, but Miss Williams answered the telephone and said she was unavailable.

Just before leaving the station he checked the status of the decanter's testing once more without luck. He drove to the high end brothel, Collins shifting uncomfortably in the seat beside him; probably terrified at Miss Williams's response if she heard how he was spending his evening. He had sympathy, remembering the first time he'd ever taken part in a brothel raid—Collins would have an easier time than he had, but he was also far more sheltered than Jack had been.

As he parked the car, he turned to his constable.

"Keep up, Collins," he directed. "The minute you hesitate is the minute you lose."

He strode quickly through the night towards the large stone building, the only indication of what lay inside a small brass plate by the door.

"Members?" asked a doorman, stepping to block their path.

"Ah, must have left it at home," Jack said, making a show of patting himself down, then pulled out his warrant card. "This do?"

The doorman inclined his head slightly and stepped aside, and Jack took the stairs two at a time up to the bar room. The room cleared of customers at his arrival, and one of the girls came over. She took great pleasure in flirting with Collins and introduced herself as Lola; Miss Williams's sister, if Jack was not mistaken. It seemed the sisters were remarkably similar in their tastes.

An elegant and well-dressed woman stepped forward, followed closely by the man who had let them in.

"How can I help you, gentlemen?"

"Ah, Madam Lyon, I assume. I'm Detective Inspector Jack Robinson."

The woman looked him over scathingly.

"Police officers tend to put our guests off their drinks," she said.

"It's murder I'm interested in, Madam, not vice," he said curtly. He turned to Collins and directed him to take a statement from the doorman, the refocused on Madam Lyon. "I need to ask some questions about the death of Miss Sarah Holloway. Lavinia."

"No one saw anything. We were very busy last night," Madam Lyon said.

The girls present murmured their agreement.

"I have a very complicated relationship with the police, Inspector," she continued archly.

"I'm sure you do."

"And I learned long ago that the only way to protect my business and keep my girls safe is to trust no
"Except you didn't keep Lavinia safe," Jack said, trying not to let the irritation show in his voice; it was all well and good to claim protection—the high end brothels usually did—but the reality was often far different. Madam Lyon did not rise to the bait.

"I can't help you, Inspector. But if you don't lock up the right person soon, you may come to regret it."

She raised an eyebrow to underscore her threat, then walked away. He sighed and headed towards the next room; it was clearly where shows were held, a series of small tables facing a stage. Collins joined him a moment later—the doorman's statement had been a bust—and a moment after that the man himself brought the club register over.

"Thank you. Please tell Madam Lyon we'll return it as soon as possible," Jack said, then turned to his constable. "Let's get that uniform out of here, Collins."

Collins moved towards the door, bumping into Lola.

"Ooh. Leaving already?" she said, looking the young man up and down.

As if summoned by some cosmic power with a sense of humour, Miss Williams emerged from somewhere backstage just in time to witness her sister's flirtation with her beau. She stopped in her tracks and stared, horrified. Before Jack could fully process her unexpected presence, Madam Lyon had taken the stage to announce the next performance.

"Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome to the stage, all the way from the Folies Bergère, Miss Lulu LaBelle."

Slow, sultry music began to play as a dancer emerged from behind a screen, carrying two large feathered fans. As the fans fluttered downwards and Jack saw the first glimpses of a familiar black bob, everything clicked into place. He leaned back slightly, to get the best view; this was going to be entertaining.

Her fan dance was sensuous and playful and had half the men in the room nearly out of their seats. Jack smiled as he watched it; he'd seen her flirtations often enough it was no surprise, but given the nature of their...dalliances he'd never witnessed it so overtly. She was having fun, smiling and playing the entire room as she shimmied and teased. This was Phryne, just as much as the sharp investigator and the draughts player and the vulnerable woman bravely facing down her sister's killer.

He couldn't look away.

He caught her heading towards the dressing room after the dance, a silk robe barely covering her costume. He looked around quickly to ensure nobody was around and moved in close.

"I take it that was your Parisian dancing story," he said quietly, once he was certain the coast was clear.

"I'm flattered you remembered, Jack." she said teasingly. "What did you think?"

"I think it's a miracle you didn't bring the house down."
"Yes," she sighed, rather too dramatically to be serious. "I do seem to be losing my touch."

Her dark red lips formed a perfect pout; he fought the urge to lean forward and catch her bottom lip between his teeth. When she looked up at him, eyes darker than usual—*it was the lighting,* he told himself later—he nearly lost the battle.

"You'll be careful?" he asked, aware that questioning the wisdom of her apparent undercover assignment would just lead to an argument.

"I'm always careful, Jack," she laughed. "But Lula LaBelle is here to whet appetites, not feed them."

"She makes hungry where most she satisfies," Jack quoted without thinking.

She ran her hand along his lapel and twisted her body closer.

"Careful, Inspector Robinson," she purred. "Point that wicked Shakespearean tongue at me and it might lead to the boudoir."

*What, with my tongue in your tail?* he thought. He was saved from replying—it was a terrible idea, really—by the arrival of another woman from the club. Phryne instantly became her character once more, a brash French woman with sparse English. Jack stepped away. As he watched her sashay down the corridor, talking with one of Madam Lyon's other girls—from their quiet words he gathered that they were discussing whether it was acceptable to take clients privately, and whether Lavinia might have done so—Jack shook his head.

He wanted Phryne Fisher. But that didn't make it a good idea.

He had to get back to work.

———

Phryne met him at the station later that night, a scandalous grin on her face.

"Evening, Miss Fisher," he said, looking up from the club register. "Or is it still Lulu?"

"Just me, I'm afraid," she trilled. "How goes the reading?"

"It's useless. The city's full of John Smiths."

"The doorman implied there's a second register," she said, perching on the edge of his desk. "He claims that's what the raid was all about, the police trying to get their hands on it."

Jack sighed.

"That would explain why this one's a waste of time," he said, shutting the book. He looked up at her, perhaps a little too fondly. "You made better headway than I did. Though I'm fairly convinced fan feathers wouldn't work for me."

"I'm not sure about that," she laughed, giving him a quick once over. "I can imagine it perfectly well, and I've no complaints." She picked the evening newspaper off his desk before he had a chance to respond; it was her favourite way to flirt. "Have you seen this? 'Police Protect Sanderson.' You even get a mention."

Jack had seen it; the mention had not been a positive one.

"Seems everyone wants Sanderson locked up, including the Commissioner."
"Mmm," she agreed, moving off the desk so she could search through his files. "What were the results on the decanter? Mac was saying it was laced with laudanum?"

"Both the decanter and the glass were adulterated," he said, handing her the right file; the report must have come in just after he'd left the station.

"But if he was trying to poison himself, surely he'd just put laudanum into his own glass?"

"Unless he was trying to poison Lavinia as well," Jack said, reluctant to even consider the idea.

"Do you know if she drank the port?"

"The coroner will let us know first thing in the morning."

"Good," she said, passing him back the coroner's report. "See you at the morgue. Night, Jack!"

And with that she was gone again. Jack picked up the newspaper, rereading the article for the third time; nothing new leapt out at him. He sighed. He would do just as well to finish up and head home; he was in the middle of a new book, and an hour to unwind before bed sounded heavenly. He tucked the files away, grabbed his hat and coat, and left the station.

Halfway to his car he heard a noise and felt something heavy hit the back of his head. The assailant ran to a waiting car that screeched as it drove away.

Hearing the commotion, Collins ran out of the station.

"Sir! Hey! You alright?"

"Rego, Collins - 847 121," Jack said, before he could forget. His head hurt, but he hadn't lost consciousness. Small mercies.

Well, there went his plans for a quiet evening.

———

Phryne beat him to the morgue the next day, and was already digging through the victim's possessions when he arrived.

"Good morning, Jack," she greeted him. "What happened to your trousers?"

Jack looked down; he hadn't realised that the dirt from the street was quite so obvious.

"Ah, fell over," he said.

She gave him a derisive look.

"Liar," she accused brusquely. "Hugh said someone tried to kill you."

"Rubbish. They drove around me after they tried to knock me out. It was only a warning."

"From whom?"

Which was a damned good question. Ruffled feathers and injured birds, he thought. It was almost enough to wish he hadn't gotten involved.

"I'm making a list."
Phryne rolled her eyes, but didn't say anything else. It was a welcome change to Rosie—not that the women were comparable, one a wife and the other a friend. Rosie had always fussed terribly if he came home with so much as a scratch; a policeman's daughter knew the dangers too well to accept them with any ease. Jack was fairly certain that Phryne relished them.

The autopsy report showed skin beneath Lavinia's fingernails; she had fought back against her attacker. He'd need another look at George's injuries; Phryne decided to follow up another lead. Just before they parted, she looked at him almost tenderly.

"Jack?"

"Yes, Miss Fisher?"

She worried her lip, as if uncertain what to say. Which might just be a first.

"I am glad you took over this case," she said quietly, then brightened. "And do try not to ruin your trousers."

"I'll do my best to keep it in mind," he replied.

The way her eyes sparkled was all he thought of as he made his way to George Sanderson's hospital bed; he wasn't sure if he was looking for a diversion or just that far gone. Neither boded well. As he approached the ward, however, the task facing him began to weigh; George Sanderson was someone that Jack respected. He had worked relentlessly to clean up Melbourne for all the years that Jack had known him, even missing family holidays at times. The idea that he could have killed a woman was unfathomable, yet Jack couldn't shake the sinking feeling in his stomach.

Jack asked a nurse to accompany him to George's room.

"Good morning, Jack," said his ex-father-in-law.

"Morning. I need to see your lacerations; Sister Madeleine here is going to remove the bandages."

George was silent as the nurse unwrapped the bandage on his forearm. After a moment, two distinctive gashes were revealed. Everyone in the room stared, aware of what they meant.

"Any idea how you got them?" Jack eventually asked.

"None whatsoever."

"George, there was skin found underneath the victim's nails."

"I did not kill that woman, Jack," George said adamantly. "It wasn't me."

"I'm sorry, George."

He couldn't believe it, warring intuition be damned. But he didn't have the luxury of ignoring it either.

"You just do your job," George said.

Jack wasn't sure if he was condemning him or forgiving him for what came next.

"George Sanderson, I'm arresting you for the murder of Sarah Holloway."
"Jack, it's me," came Miss Fisher's voice over the telephone that afternoon. She was whispering; he could only surmise that she was in peril of being overheard. At the Imperial, then. "It seems Lavinia only recently found God, by way of a Catholic priest called Blackburn. Meet me here this evening."

She hung up before he even had time to reply. It was a lead though; he began making telephone calls to the Catholic churches nearest the Imperial Club until he found the one where Father Blackburn preached and arranged a visit. The conversation provided a direction to follow; Lavinia had been planning to leave the life behind her.

"You're right about Father Blackburn," Jack told Phryne that night. He'd followed her into a private booth moments earlier. "He seems to have taken a very personal interest in Lavinia before her death."

"How personal?"

"Enough to convince her to mend her ways."

"You mean leave?"

"Mm," Jack murmured. "Do you think Madam Lyon knew?"

"She wouldn't have been impressed to lose Lavinia to the church on top of her moonlighting."

"I suspect Madam Lyon's the kind of woman who likes to settle a score."

"But with a double murder?" Phryne asked.

Jack shrugged. It wasn't the least likely explanation. A giggle came from outside the curtain, and before Jack could react Phryne was on his lap.

"Occupé!" she called out as the curtains were pulled open.

"Sorry!" giggled the woman, and her customer looked slightly ashamed.

When the intruders had gone, Phryne looked down at him.

"That was close," she smirked.

Her breasts were approximately a tongue's breadth away from his mouth, a fact he was adamantly trying to ignore.

"Still is," he managed to breathe.

She kissed him, deeply and thoroughly, then reached up to tousle his hair slightly.

"For verisimilitude," she explained. "Give me a good head start?"

Jack nodded; when wasn't she ahead of him?

"As always," he agreed.

She kissed him again, this time an affectionate peck on the lips; he'd seen her kiss friends like that more than once, but his body hadn't gotten the message; he flushed in embarrassment, aware that Phryne had no doubt noticed the response. She didn't tease him, however; she was never unkind about things like that. It was one of the many things he admired about her.
"Hugh said something about an electrical man on the telephone," Phryne said without preamble as she arrived in the Sanderson study the next afternoon. "I thought I best come and find out myself."

"A man the Melbourne Electric Supply Company have no record of was here shortly before the murder."

"You think he doctored the port?"

"Possibly," Jack said, looking around the room, "Then he came back here after it took effect that night, tried to murder two people and then disappeared like Houdini from a room with a locked window and a tiny chimney..."

It wasn't a great theory.

"Not even a secret bookcase?" Phryne asked, conducting her own examination of the room. She bent down to examine the bolt of the door. "This is iron, isn't it? Rather than brass?" She moved the door, examining the other side. "These scratches on the outside..."

"That could have been the maid, or the Constable who broke in," suggested Jack.

Phryne shook her head in disagreement.

"It's very faint, but it looks as if something flat has been dragged across it," she said. She pulled a pin from her hat and stuck it to the bolt. "The lock's been magnetised!"

"What?"

Jack stepped towards the door to examine it himself.

"This bolt on the inside could have been bolted from the outside using a very strong magnet. In fact..." she resecured her hat and turned to him with a grin. "I'm confident enough to say that it was."

"That's remarkable," said Jack, awed once again by her—well, by her.

"Thank you," she said pertly. "You should see what I can do with a garter."

He raised an eyebrow in response, and she laughed again.

"So who was it?" Phryne asked.

"Clearly someone who wanted Sanderson dead—"

"Or Lavinia—"

"Or both."

"Someone who might have a special mention in Madam Lyon's second register. Either way, I do believe you can release your father-in-law."

Phryne sat primly in her chair, looking at Jack from over his desk. She had just finished telling him how she had attempted to break into The Imperial Club to gain access to the second register, which was not a book but a box of items taken from the members. It was already stolen by Lavinia,
however, a fact she discovered when she had gotten into an altercation with Madam Lyon. Jack was speechless.

"How, exactly, did you manage to hide that damned pistol of yours as you scaled the building?" he asked.

It was not, strictly speaking, a relevant question. It was, however, the only question that sprang to mind.

"Well," she said, looking slightly embarrassed. "I bought myself a Christmas—"

"On second thought," said Jack. "I don't want to know. If I know, I'll probably have to arrest you."

"Probably," she agreed. "It's a darling little thing though; so much lighter than my old one."

"Miss Fisher..." he warned.

She laughed.

"You wouldn't arrest me, Jack. Not when there's so many other ways to use handcuffs."

He was a dead man. She was going to kill him. And if she kept laughing like that, he wouldn't even mind.

"Oh!" she said suddenly. "One of the girls, Lena, saw Blackburn at the club the night of Lavinia's death."

"Do you think you could convince her to come in and make a statement?" Jack asked.

"Leave it to Lulu," she replied, French accent already in place.

Lena's statement led them back to Father Blackburn, who confirmed that Lavinia had been in possession of the box. A note was found in Lavinia's possessions that told her to meet at George Sanderson's address at eleven, signed with an S. Jack was furious.

"I'm going to speak with George Sanderson," he announced.

Phryne looked at him. "Do you want me to come with you?"

"No, no. Stay here. Keep looking over the raid files, see if you can figure out why our dead doorman from six months ago looks familiar. I presume you never went to that particular club?"

"Women aren't really my thing, Jack, aside from aesthetic admiration. That's definitely not it."

Jack nodded curtly and left. As he drove to the Sanderson house, he mulled over the situation. He had been lied to at the very least. When he arrived, Jack was led through the house to meet with George in his study.

"We have the evidence, George. We know you were in contact with the murdered girl."

“Yes," he admitted. "She called me. I didn't go chasing after her, if that's what you think."

"Why didn't you tell me before?" asked Jack, trying not to let the betrayal through in his voice. George Sanderson was not an emotional man, and he wouldn't accept it from Jack. "I've been
fending off half this town to make sure you're treated justly, and you've been *keeping* that from me."

"She didn't leave a name, just told me that she had information that I might find interesting to help close down the brothels. She wanted money for it. I was waiting for her to call again."

Jack pulled the note from his pocket, studying George's face for some indication of truth or deceit. He had no idea what to think as he passed the paper over.

"I did not write that note," George asserted.

"You have to tell me *everything.*"

"I swear to you, Jack. I have not seen that before."

———

"Do you believe him?" Phryne asked, when he was back at the station.

Jack nodded.

"I've known the man for nearly twenty years," he said to Phryne and Collins. "Someone else must have known Lavinia had made an offer to Sanderson, and tried to murder them both. Perhaps someone whose reputation was at stake if their private affairs became public."

Phryne nodded in agreement, looking through the files once more.

"What time did Mrs Blunt return to the house?" she asked suddenly.

"She left Sanderson's at eight o'clock and returned just after eleven," Collins supplied.

"Lavinia disappeared from the club some time just before ten," Phryne read from a statement. "If Sanderson took his port at nine, he would have been well and truly out of by the time she arrived."

"So whoever killed Lavinia was there *waiting* for her," Jack observed.

"That's who he looks like!"

A sudden memory seemed to hit her, as she rifled quickly through the files on the desk until she came across the one she wanted; one of the raid reports. She held up the photo.

"The dead doorman?" Jack asked.

"Yes, but he looks like Maurie Burke, the doorman at the Imperial Club. Burke and Berkowicz. Don't they look alike to you?"

Jack nodded; he could see a resemblance.

"Dot's sister told me that Maurie lost a brother, and we know that Maurie left his station by the front door sometime between 9:30 and 10. Do you remember? Father Blackburn said that Maurie stopped him from entering earlier in the evening, but wasn't there on his second visit."

Jack grabbed his hat and coat quickly, and Phryne grabbed hers. On the way out he motioned for Hugh to join them and ordered another constable to telephone George Sanderson and tell him to get backup.

"I'll drive, Jack," she said as they walked out of the station, Hugh several steps behind.
"Absolutely not, Miss Fisher. Last time I rode in a car with you I nearly kissed the ground when I engineered my safe escape."

She gave him a look of amused derision.

"Spoilsport," she said. "At the very least we should race to see who gets there first."

"It's usually you," Jack said, opening her car door as they arrived.

"It's not about winning, Jack. It's the pleasure of the game."

"Somehow I don't think you'd say that if you lost."

She wrinkled her nose as she climbed into her seat.

"I never lose. But that's hardly the point."

She beat him to the club, then to the warehouse Dot's sister directed them to. When they arrived at the warehouse he saw Miss Fisher pull a snub-nosed revolver—*was it gold and mother of pearl? The woman was ridiculous*—out of her handbag and place it in her pocket.

"You didn't see that," she said with a grin, then strode towards the entrance.

In the end, Maurie Burke confessed to his crimes and was shot dead before he could be taken into custody.

"I thought he was armed," George Sanderson said, far too casually for Jack's comfort.

The explanation didn't sit quite right, but he had no reason to doubt the deputy commissioner. He caught Phryne's eye though, his own disbelief echoed in hers. *It is nice to have someone to work with, he thought. Partners as well as friends.*

"Are you coming for dinner tonight?"

"Was I invited?"

She was perched on his desk yet again. He was attempting to ignore her presence in favour of paperwork; it was never easy to write reports with police shots fired, especially when it resulted in a death. He loosened his tie slightly.

"It's an open offer, Jack; you know that," Phryne said, shifting slightly to read what he had written. He covered it with his hand quickly, more out of habit than a desire to keep her away. "Dot's making her cottage pie."

He nodded, removing his hand from the report. It was hardly likely to include things she didn't know.

"I'll try to make it," he said.

"Come by for a drink if you can't make dinner," she suggested. "No matter how late."

He looked at her carefully; she didn't usually push invitations. She'd flirt and she'd coax, but she always respected a decline.
"Dot's struggling with reconciling her sister's profession to her Christian values," she admitted with a wry smile. "I could do with more pleasant company."

Of course; the rift between sisters would still be a sore point, but Phryne was unlikely to say so. He nodded in agreement; she hopped off his desk in response, and at the same time he rose from the chair to see her out. It left them only a breath apart. He could feel the heat from her body, so close it was almost touching his. A half step forward, that was all it would take. The shifting of a foot, the stretch of an arm. If he could just—

There was a knock on the door and they pulled apart. Right. Bad idea.

"Oh, sorry!" came a voice from the doorway.

Jack turned, stomach sinking. "Rosie."

"I didn't mean to interrupt," she said.

"No, no, Not interrupting."

Phryne nodded agreement.

"Not at all, Miss Sanderson. I was just leaving; I got what I came for." She turned to Jack. "Remember: tonight. Regardless of time," purred Phryne, reaching up to adjust his tie. "There, now you're put to rights."

Then she winked at him and sashayed out of the room.

Rosie raised one eyebrow coolly as Jack touched the now-fixed tie and watch Phryne go.

"That—" he stuttered. What the hell was she doing?

"I don't want to know, Jack," Rosie said, primly taking a seat at his desk. "I'm just so relieved for Father. I don't know how to thank you."

"It was a joint effort," he said.

"Yes, I can see that," Rosie chuckled, a little hollowly. "I accused you once of a lack of ambition, but I can see what you like about where you are."

"Rosie—"

She laughed, genuinely this time. "I don't mean your Miss Fisher. You're a different man these days, Jack. You've got your fight back."

"Probably just that lack of ambition," he said self-deprecatingly.

"Or escaping a marriage that didn't suit you."

Did she really think that? He remembered George Sanderson's words when Jack had released him from custody. 'You're a good cop, Jack, and you were a good son-in-law.' He certainly hadn't been a good husband.

"It's war what didn't suit me," he assured her.

They were saved from more unhappy reminiscences by a knock on the door. It was Sidney Fletcher.
"Excuse me," he said. "You ready, my love?"

Rosie startled. "Ah, yes, I'm coming."

"No hurry."

Standing, Rosie tipped her head to Jack as he escorted her to the door. Once outside his office, she paused and looked at him.

"You know, I didn't get a chance to tell you amid all the fuss, but Sidney and I are engaged."

He was not surprised; Rosie had always been the one who believed in forgetting the past quickly in order to move on to better things. Jack was not quite as good at letting memories lie. It had been one of the biggest walls between them, in the end.

"Congratulations," he said.

"It's very different," she said softly. "The second time round."

"I wish you all the best," he sincerely replied.

"Take care, Jack. And do be careful."

And with that, Jack watched his former wife walk away. She was a very different woman to the one he had married. He hoped she was happy.

—

After dinner, Jack and Phryne retreated to the parlour. She poured two whiskies and curled onto the chaise. Jack chose to stand by the fireplace.

"There was at least £500 in Burke's pocket," he said, as a conversational gambit.

"Are you ever off duty, inspector?"

"You've been itching to discuss it as much as I have," he countered knowingly.

Her eyes were dark and sultry. "You know me so well. No doubt the money was payment he received for the box, which is still missing."

"I assume someone paid money for whatever was in it."

"Perhaps the same person who made you trip over and tear your trousers?"

"It wasn't a tear," Jack scolded, before turning back to the discussion. "Impressive that a man with as little education as Burke could concoct such an elaborate plan."

"Well, you can't assume education and intelligence go hand in hand," Phryne pointed out.

"No, of course not."

"Rosie's fiance, for example, Sidney Fletcher—highly educated. Also extremely good looking, very charming and admirably tall..." she smirked, the corners of her mouth twitching in the way they did when she was particularly amused.

Jack raised his glass to his lips and took a sip of whiskey.
"You're baiting me, Miss Fisher."

"Guilty," she admitted. "He's also an odious little weasel. I met him at one of Aunt P's luncheons once, and once was enough."

"Happily, he is Rosie's odious little weasel and not my responsibility."

"I'll drink to that," she said, raising her glass in a toast.
It was her Aunt Prudence's idea, the trip to Queenscliff. Prudence’s old school chum Hilly had invited her, and she thought that Phryne's household (especially Jane, who she was excessively fond of despite her protestations early on) would appreciate the time away. Phryne certainly couldn't argue with the logic, and so she found herself driving towards the resort town while Aunt Prudence grumbled about the speed in the passenger seat.

When they arrived at the McNasters’ house, they were met by a young man in an apron. Far too rough around the edges to be greeting company, Phryne thought, which was an oddity in and of itself.

"Sorry, but Mrs. McNaster is not home for company at the moment."

"Ah, what nonsense!" said Aunt Prudence peevishly. "We're expected. And we're not company, we're old friends."

Tactful as always.

"Perhaps you could ask Mrs. McNaster when she will be home," Phryne said, spotting the curtains in the window fluttering.

"Rightio," said the boy, turning back towards the house. Phryne was surprised that Aunt P didn't have a heart attack then and there.

"Come back here and fetch the baggage," her aunt demanded. "What are you doing, greeting visitors anyway? Where are the Johnsons?"

The front door opened and Phryne heard footsteps. A surprisingly delicate-looking woman—Hilly McNaster herself, Phryne presumed—came into view a moment later.

"Oh, Prudence, I'm so sorry! I tried to telephone you, but you'd already left."

"My dear Hilly, I thought we were expected. What on earth's the matter?"

"Well, I have no staff, my house is in an uproar," Mrs. McNaster said, hands flailing. "Mr. and Mrs. Johnson have taken a sudden and most inconvenient retirement."

"Retirement?"

Phryne was fairly certain that retirement was a dirty word in Aunt Prudence's world; in her view, servants didn't have a job, they had a calling, and they ought to treat it as such.
"And they've left me, yes!"

Ridiculous.

"If we don't stay here we'll just have to get a hotel," said Phryne. "And really, we're all capable of fending for ourselves for a day or two until you can get in touch with an agency and get new people in."

"I'm very happy to make myself useful," Dot added.

"Then there's the burglary, too," interjected the servant.

"Kip!" admonished Mrs. McNaster, no doubt horrified that her household's dirty laundry was being aired in public.

Phryne was immediately intrigued.

"What burglary?"

At that moment, two men came out of the house in deep discussion.

"Sergeant. Sergeant, why won't you take my word for it?" asked the first man. Tall, but not excessively so, and his clothes and the bluster of his manner suggested he was not a member of staff.

"You're not outback now, Mr. McNaster," the police officer replied. "We have rules. That coin was handed in, so unless you can prove ownership..."

"How can I prove anything if you won't let me see it?"

"I'm a very busy man, sir," said the sergeant in a tone that Phryne had long ago identified as polite disinterest and no investigation when it came to the constabulary. "So, in the absence of any evidence of a break-in, I'm afraid there's very little else I can do. Good day to you, sir."

Mrs. McNaster called the second man over and introduced him as her son Gerald. The name tickled Phryne's memory, though she couldn't immediately place it.

"Hilly, my dear, you need help, on all fronts," said Aunt Prudence in a tone that made it clear she'd hear no arguments. "You do realise that my niece is a private detective of the utmost discretion and capability?"

It was remarkable how much fonder Aunt P was of her job when it gave her what she wanted.

"Indeed," said Gerald McNaster, looking impressed.

Oh, she recognised his name now; he was an adventurer. Found all sorts of things on his journeys. Interesting man. Definitely worth a flirtation and a perusal of his collections at the very least. It had been awhile.

From behind her, Phryne heard the servant boy Kip asking if she was really a detective.

"Specialises in murders," replied Jane proudly. "But I'm sure she'll make do with a robbery."

"Oh, well, I suppose you'd better come in then," said Hilly McNaster with a laugh.

Well, that put their holiday off to an auspicious start. The temperance movement sign at the front door, however, put rather a damper on the whole thing.
Once inside, Gerald McNaster filled her in on the robbery; his entire coin box had disappeared, and he’d only been made aware of it when a Spanish doubloon washed ashore and was declared to be part of Bonito’s legendary treasure.

"Absolutely absurd, of course," he said, leading her into the study. "Still, I'll give Baxter credit for having imagination."

Clearly McNaster and the local sergeant didn't see eye to eye.

"This doubloon," said Phryne. "It's a souvenir of your London to Peru attempt?"

"Yes, the only one. We were flooded in. I had to abandon the Oldsmobile..."

"At the foot of the Cordilleras. Yes, I remember reading about it."

"Really?" he said, clearly intrigued. "You have an interest in exploration?"

"I'm an avid student on the subject," Phryne said. Gerald McNaster was definitely a promising proposition. "I'd love to dabble myself one day. Have you considered the theft might be linked to the Johnsons' sudden departure?"

"Well, I must admit, some things have been going missing lately," said Gerald. "Just small things. But the Johnsons have been devoted to us for years, especially Mother."

The implication to look elsewhere was clear, but Phryne generally found that implications could be steamrolled into submission like everything else.

"What kind of things?" she asked.

"Some pieces of silverware, some ornaments. Nothing like this."

"Well, you do have some tempting collections," Phryne said as she continued to examine the room, stopping in front of a cabinet with some weaponry.

"Do you like rocks, Miss Fisher?" asked Gerald. She turned to find him approaching, rock in hand and a smile intended to seduce on his face. "I found this on a beach in the Gulf of Carpentaria. It took thousands of years to create, and you can hold it in the palm of your hand."

He placed it on her outstretched palm, then folded his fingers over hers so they were both holding on. She didn't like his hands, actually, she thought, remembering another set of hands that she'd become very familiar with.

"Anything else missing?" she asked, irritated at her own sentimentality.

"Not that I've noticed. Although I move things around a bit while I'm cataloguing. Sometimes I lose track."

"Yes, I can see that," said Phryne. Suddenly the chaos of his collections seemed unappealing; a man really ought to have some semblance of order. "Shall we go back to the drawing room and speak with your mother again?"

Mrs. McNaster was scandalised by the suggestion that the Johnsons could have had anything to do
with the robbery.

"One must never entirely trust one's own staff, Hilly, no matter how loyal they may seem," said Aunt Prudence practically.

"Whether they had a reason to steal those coins or not, the police should still be informed of their departure," Phryne added.

"No, no, I can't believe it," argued Mrs. McNaster. "They took their leave and they went to the ferry. Now, what robber would use a getaway ferry?"

"And that Baxter will be no help finding them," piped in Gerald. "He's delighted to have my most valuable coin in his lost property box."

"What about your Inspector friend, Phryne?" asked Aunt P, clearly delighted with the solution. "He's supposed to be a servant of the people, especially the right people."

"Jack's supposed to be a servant of the law, Aunt Prudence," Phryne said dryly.

She wondered if she should object to the assertion that Jack was hers; it was the sort of ridiculous notion that annoyed her, people belonging to other people. And yet she had retreated to it herself, hadn’t she? Faced with Jack’s ex-wife running back to him with her problems, she had broken her cardinal rule and engaged in petty displays of possession. She was not proud of it, but she didn’t regret it either; not when it brought Jack Robinson to her parlour.

She was saved from examining the quandary too closely by the entrance of Kip and Jane.

"Excuse me? I think you should come and see something," said the servant.

Phryne followed him back to the kitchen, where she discovered the Johnsons’ dog had returned.

"The Johnsons wouldn't leave their dog. They're good people," said Kip.

"How long have you known them?" Phryne asked.

"Four years. They gave me work so I could look after my gran and the other kids," said the boy. "I could ask around and see if anyone knows where he's been?"

"Excellent idea, Kip."

"I'll go too?" asked Jane hopefully, and Phryne recognised the starry eyed look of a new love. She nodded her agreement.

"Excellent. Come on, boy. Let's go."

"Is that wise, miss?" asked Dot, who had witnessed the exchange as she'd peeled parsnips for dinner.

"Are you worried they'll stumble across a robber's lair, or is it the twinkle in Jane's eye that bothers you?" Phryne teased. "She's becoming a young woman, Dot. It will do her good."

"Will you at least chaperone them on the beach?" Dot asked.

"Fine. But I need to make a telephone call first."

In the hallway, Phryne debated internally. She could imagine how the conversation would go; she'd say something along the lines of 'Jack, I'm in desperate need of a numismatist.' and he would sigh
and respond with 'And I'm the only one you know?' before agreeing to come, and they'd probably find time for some absolutely marvellous distractions—platonically or physically, she really wasn't picky—before solving the case. But lately she had felt their connection had become untenable; she found her reliance on him to be unwelcome, a vague sense that the very inky essence of her had leaked through and stained him, so that whenever she looked at him she was seeing parts of herself. And that her own skin would, on close examination, show him just as much. It was a dependence she could not bear. She hesitated, then picked up the telephone.

"Hello. Could you put me through to the Maritime Museum please?"

No, she did not need Jack Robinson on this case.

Her resolve was soundly tested when they discovered a dead body on the beach and Sergeant Baxter proved to be a completely incompetent moron who trampled the crime scene. She got as far as picking up the telephone before putting it down again. No. She did not need him on this case and she most adamantly did not desire to see him. She called Cec and Bert instead; she'd send a letter of explanation along with the evidence she recovered to have it tested. Perfectly logical.

When Jack telephoned the next morning, she questioned that assertion.

"Murder, Miss Fisher?"

He was teasing, but he also sounded exhausted.

"You know me Jack; can't take me anywhere. Do you have my test results?"

"I do."

There was a prolonged rustling of papers over the telephone. How odd; his desk was usually tidier than that.

"Are you going to tell me?" she eventually asked.

"I could. It depends."

"On what?"

"How long you intend to be at Queenscliff."

"Jack Robinson! I certainly hope that you are not propositioning me over the telephone," she laughed, suddenly hoping so very much; she’d never been particularly good at denying herself pleasure.

He sounded very serious when he spoke again.

"I'd really like to see you, Phryne."

Ink staining skin. An irrevocable pull.

"It might be a couple more days," she said. "Sooner if I can inveigle test results from my reluctant source."

"Not reluctant, Miss Fisher. Busy. Ahh, there we are: bootleg rum, far more potent than standard. As I'm sure you suspected. Serious potential for alcohol poisoning for any sucker stupid enough to drink
"it," he summarised. "On that note, your friend Bert is currently in my cells for drunk and disorderly."

"Seems a bit early for that," Phryne replied.

"Apparently it fell off the back of a train."

"Hmm," she said, mulling it over. "I'd probably make more progress if I wasn't dealing with Sergeant Sitaround."

Jack sighed. "I'll send Collins. I'd feel better having someone I trust on the ground anyway."

"Jack! I'm hurt," she reprimanded. "You can trust me, absolutely."

"I meant someone in an official capacity, Miss Fisher. To get you out of whatever trouble you inevitably find yourself in; I wouldn't put it past you to kick Sergeant Sitaround in the unmentionables if he got in the way."

She laughed. "It's not my fault that I attract chaos."

"You are chaos, Miss Fisher. Gale force hurricane at the very least."

"You know, that might be the nicest thing anyone's ever said to me."

When the case was resolved, Phryne made her way back to Melbourne. She called Jack to let him know she'd be around in an hour or so, and he told her he'd leave the door unlocked and to let herself in.

When she arrived, he was cooking dinner. His suit jacket was laid over the back of a chair and his sleeves had been pushed far enough up his forearm not to be in the way. She watched him for a moment, appreciating the fluid motion of his movements; he was surprisingly confident in the kitchen.

"Smells delicious," she said to announce herself.

He turned and gave her a small smile.

"I wasn't sure if you'd eaten," he said, wiping his hands on his apron. "I made enough, or it'll keep if you aren't hungry."

"I'm famished," she said. "Wild horses couldn't keep me away. I'd guard your plate, to be honest, or I might filch yours as well."

"In here or the dining room?" he asked.

"Kitchen table is fine."

They sat and ate in a companionable silence, occasionally interjecting a comment on the food. As they were clearing the plates, Jack spoke up.

"I meant to ask. How was the great Gerald McNaster and his Spanish doubloon?"

"Murderer," said Phryne flippantly. "Rather thought he could sort me out with one of his daggers once he realised I was on to him, but soon remedied him of that notion."
"See," he said, managing a smile that was far too weak. "Hurricane."

"What's going on, Jack?"

His face was implacable, the only motion a slight cheek twitch.

"Long case," he said eventually.

She was about to tease him about being unable to solve anything without her, but thought better of it.

"Do you need my assistance?" she asked, more seriously than she had intended. For levity she shot him a grin. "Break into a building for a lead, perhaps?"

"Already solved," he said. "Murder-suicide. Just... not pleasant. The guy was in the cells for public drunkenness less than an hour earlier."

"And so you blame yourself."

"No, I blame him. I just wish that we'd had forewarning."

Phryne turned to watch him, recognising all the signs of pain she'd learnt to read on his face. Wondered if she could see the ink blossom across his cheek if she touched him, and decided it was better not to look closely and find out.

"Go set up the draughts board," she said instead. "I'll do the washing up."

He looked at her inscrutably, then opened his mouth as if to say something but was unable to find the words.

"Game first," she said, understanding. He was not ready to ask. "Bedroom after."
Chapter 22

The ringing telephone roused Jack from sleep. He blinked blearily, extracting himself from Phryne's arms before grabbing his robe and padding out to the hallway to answer the phone. There was only one type of call he'd get at—he glanced at the clock—half past two in the morning, and it wasn't the type that allowed him to go back to his warm bed when it was over.

"Inspector Robinson speaking," he said.

The sergeant on the phone apologised for the timing and told him what was going on—a seriously injured police officer and a dead gang member. Neither would, strictly speaking, be his cases, but it was the sort of escalation between the Woolpackers and Portsiders that meant all hands on deck. He'd already lost several of his constables, including Hugh Collins, to a secondment to the Police Special Powers Unit.

Jack ended the call and went back into the bedroom. In the two minutes he had been gone, Miss Fisher had sprawled over the entire bed. He didn't know what they were doing, a coy game of cat and mouse that seemed to end in her bed or his at least once a week. Sometimes because the case was hard, or because it was easy, or for no apparent reason at all.

"Mmm, Jack, come back to bed," she murmured. Her sleep-husky voice was quite possibly the most erotic sound he had ever heard.

"Can't. Called into work."

He began searching for his clothes in the dark; thankfully the moon was bright enough that he could manage.

"But it's early," she whined. "And your bed is so much nicer than mine."

"You only say that because sleeping in my bed means that I make breakfast," said Jack, pulling on his trousers.

"No, I have Dot to make breakfast. Your bed is nice."

He chuckled. "Just the bed?"

She opened one eye and glared at him.

"Just the bed. Company can be had anywhere," she sighed. "Although I will admit that present company is particularly delightful in the morning. It's the only way I can tolerate your abysmal early rising."

He had a sudden and painful awareness that he was in great danger of falling in love with Phryne Fisher.

"It's particularly abysmal today, I'm afraid. Do you still have the key I gave you?"

He'd had it cut after a particularly embarrassing incident with her and a set of lockpicks several weeks into their undefined arrangement. It was not, he had reassured her, indicative of anything else.

"Mmm," she replied.

"You can let yourself out then. No point both of us being roused from comfort."
"Clever man. Knew I liked you," she said, then promptly fell back asleep.

He was very careful not to disturb her as he left.

She left a note for him by the kettle, a flirtatious little aside that meant nothing substantial; he kept it anyway. He didn't see her for a week, too busy trying to run the station several men down, but within an hour of the investigation into the murder of gang leader Kevin Bradley she was on the scene.

"I gave Hugh a ride!" she said airily, gesturing to a wounded Collins. "He really shouldn't be riding the tram with a head injury."

And then she wandered away to investigate, steadfastly pretending not to be listening to his exchange with Hugh about possible police involvement; she was never quite as convincing as she thought she was.

The investigation progressed quickly, which was reassuring because Jack had already fielded two separate telephone calls from George Sanderson about the investigation. Miss Fisher, like Hugh, seemed quite focused on the possibility of police retaliation—the injured officer that had roused him from his bed a week earlier had succumbed to his injuries the night before. It was not a line of inquiry he wanted either one of them to go down. It was the sort of thing that resulted in good constables being dismissed and the silence of meddlesome outsiders conveniently bought. No, if that's where the investigation was headed he'd have to do it himself; no point in borrowing trouble, however, especially when the gangs had been fighting for weeks.

The next time he saw her, she was in the arms of a Greek boxer named Girogios. He suppressed the tiny sliver of irritation he felt at her flirtations; whatever disaster they were courting had hardly been declared exclusive. Who was he kidding? He was intensely jealous, a fact only magnified by the way she smiled as the boxer as he pressed something into her hand.

"I have something for you," said the man, with all the charm of a snake. Jack might have moved in slightly closer to hear with clarity. "Here, take this. Come tomorrow night. You will see more... of me."

"Much more, I hope," she purred.

Impossible woman. She was so distracted watching the retreating athlete that she nearly walked straight into him.

"Jack!" she laughed, quickly darting past him towards her latest aim. "You might want to look on the top right-hand corner of the green tent."

*Only Miss Fisher could find a murder weapon while flirting*, he thought with surprisingly little bitterness.

"Meet me at the morgue?" Jack asked over the telephone.

"You *do* know how to show a girl a good time," she replied. "Say, four o'clock?"

"It's a date."
She arrived at ten past four, nearly floating in on a cloud of perfume.

"I have a name for you, Jack. Reportedly vying to become top dog in the Woolpackers: Freckles Delahunty," she said, walking straight passed him. "Are Bradley's clothes in here?"

As she examined the dead boy's clothing for clues, Jack conferred with the coroner's report.

"How did you manage to get inside gossip from one of St Kilda's most notorious street gangs?" he asked as he read, not at all surprised by the development.

"The Portsider Hugh’s friendly with? Tom Derrimut? He told Hugh at the gymnasium," she said. "Also, this Freckles person works in a bakery."

Well, that would explain the flour on both Kevin Bradley and the unidentified boy from the week before. Yet more evidence for the gang retaliation theory. Jack held up the photo of the first victim, and she looked startled.

"Do you recognise him?" Jack asked.

"Yes," she said, still going through Bradley's clothing. "But I just can't remember where— Ow! A pin!"

Her hand pulled away sharply and she gave the jacket an offended look.

"I'll have it arrested immediately," Jack said.

It was a ridiculous joke. Her utterly unamused look was worth it.

After finding evidence that Kevin Bradley had been robbed, Jack and Phryne decided that the best course of action was to talk to Freckles Delahunty directly. They rode together to the foreshore, and Phryne somehow convinced him to stop for ice cream on the way to the rotunda. Watching her eat the cone convinced him that it was a terrible idea if he wanted to remain professional; seeing her smile convinced him that he didn’t care.

"Nothing better than an afternoon by the seaside," he remarked as they waited.

"Except for a thrilling ride on the scenic railway. Dot refuses to come with me."

"I don't blame her."

"Don't tell me you're scared too," Phryne scoffed, taking another lick of her ice cream.

Jack smiled. "Is that a challenge?"

"If it makes it more enticing," she said, moving slightly closer before pulling away with a flirtatious grin.

He briefly considered pulling her closer to him and kissing her in front of all and sundry, but Freckles Delahunty took that exact moment to arrive.

"Hey, Missus! That's my spot."

Duty called, often at the most inconvenient times.
"Freckles Delahunty?" he said, moving into view. "Inspector Jack Robinson. I think it's time we had a chat."

He just hoped Miss Fisher finished her ice cream before they reached the station. He wouldn't be able to focus otherwise.

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Delahunty's cooperation was minimal, but Miss Fisher's plan to call in Doctor MacMillan was both clever and productive.

"What did you say his background was?" the doctor asked, examining his brain.

"Kevin Bradley?" Jack asked. "Gang leader, fighter, thug."

"And boxer, I'd say. These kind of injuries are caused by repeated blows to the head."

It was enough to lead them back to Big Arthur's tent; Jack in an official and therefore unproductive capacity, and Phryne in a more successful endeavour, on which she happily filled him in over cocktails.

"Not only is there illegal betting going on, the boxing matches are fixed. Challengers make more money if they take a dive. And Dot spotted something suspicious too. Dot?"

Miss Williams quickly told him about the young pickpocket she had seen twice, even managing to produce a thorough written description. Miss Fisher had been working her magic on the girl in the months since they'd first met.

Doctor MacMillan was also present, and informed them that the powder on the first victim was not, as suspected, flour, but some sort of washing soda that smelled of eucalyptus.

"Just like Mrs. Big Arthur's," Phryne said. "Now I know where I've seen this face before."

The lead ultimately led them to Constable Fry's death, a German bayonet with a possum inscribed near the hilt, and a wager for a ride on the Great Scenic Railway if the name of Tom Derrimut's father meant Possum.

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When it was over and the paperwork processed, Jack stood in front of the Fisher residence for several minutes before knocking. This had the potential to go badly. Very badly. But she had been the one to initiate the wager and its terms, and he was a man to pay his debts if nothing else. When she answered the door in her robe and slightly disarrayed hair, he regretted the idea immensely.

"Jack!"

"Miss Fisher, I believe I owe you a ride on the Great Scenic Railway," he said. "Perhaps I should have called ahead?"

"If you had, I would have been obliged to turn you away and there's no fun in that," she said with an open grin. "Go through to the kitchen, Dot's left some scones on the side that are absolutely divine. I'll be with you in a minute."

It was closer to ten minutes, and Jack tried very hard not to notice the sound of the front door opening and closing behind whatever guest—the boxer, presumably, but who knew with Miss Fisher
—she had ushered out so unceremoniously. When she came back into the kitchen she had changed into more appropriate clothing, and was smiling widely as she took his arm.

"Come along then, Jack. You owe me a ride."

Jack had lost the bet, but as they approached Luna Park he couldn’t help but feel that he’d won all the same. It was a marvelous afternoon. He could not remember the last time he had had so much fun, laughing as she pulled him back towards the railway half a dozen times between other amusements. They finished it off with a meal of fish and chips along the seafront.

That night they were in his bed again; Phryne was toying with the hair on his chest.

“I’ve been thinking of buying an airplane,” she said mildly, moving to look up at him. Her lips had curled into contented smile.

“Oh?”

“I miss the freedom of flying,” she said. “And it’s not the wisest investment, but it’s not the worst idea I’ve ever had either. Have you ever been up in one?”

“No,” he said, dropping a kiss against her forehead. “But I suspect that it’s exhilarating.”
It was all the cursed book’s fault, Phryne decided. Jack was not the first man she had shared a sustained affair with—it hadn’t happened often, especially when she was married and having to hide the truth of Charlie’s proclivities, but there had been times when a lover had entertained her for weeks or even a few months before they grew too attached or she grew bored. She wasn’t sure how to count her fling with Jack—whether it was the slow burn of the months she’d known him, or the months since she had asked him to banish Rene DuBois with tender kisses, or the weeks since they had found a rhythm outside of comfort—but she was enjoying it without much contemplation.

Which was how she found herself staring at Jack in her bed, reading a book. He had developed an almost endearing habit of leaving very early or waiting for Jane and Dot to be gone on the days he slept at her place; this morning was one of the latter. She had gone to the kitchen for a cup of tea; heading back into the bedroom carrying a tray with a pot and two cups, she paused at the door. He looked up with an easy smile.

"I do believe this book is banned," he observed mildly.

"Are you going to confiscate it?" she asked.

"Day off," was his reply. "It would take more than that to get me into the station. I do like the cover of this edition more than the one on mine, though."

And it was such a Jack response, dryly amused and unexpectedly subversive, that she felt his very existence tug at her. She had stepped closer before she had thought, intending to brush an affectionate kiss against his mouth, and froze. Just for a second. Then she turned, hid her error by bringing the tray to the table beside the bed.

"Tea," stated Phryne. He reached out to catch her hand, no doubt intending to pull her back into bed for another enthusiastic round, but she pulled away quickly. "Sorry I can't ravish you," she said, trying to sound light and flirtatious and not at all off-kilter like she felt. "I have an appointment this morning."

"Of course, Miss Fisher," he said. His eyes were soft and familiar. "Later, perhaps."

"Perhaps," she said, striving for enigmatic and rather missing it.

He marked his place in the book, laid it on the table neatly, and rose from the bed. She watched him dress, the muscles of his back and arms moving as he pulled on his trousers. Beautiful man. She stepped closer, wrapping her arms around his torso and pressing a kiss against his shoulder blade.

"Your place tonight?" she murmured.

"Perhaps," he chuckled, and she didn't need to see his face to know the slow, teasing smile that would grace it.

The House of Fleuri was large, elegant, and—Simone Fleuri suspected—had a traitor in its midst. Phryne had known the sisters for years; she'd found it was worth the extra cost to have truly important garments made to order, and House of Fleuri was the best. Simone had telephoned her earlier in the week, and Phryne found herself attending the salon with Dot in tow, ostensibly for a new suit, but really to investigate the sudden downturn in clientele.
She was sipping champagne and admiring the fit of Simone's first suggestion—it was a gorgeous hunter green with gold accents, but perhaps a little too classic—when a scream interrupted her morning. She rushed to the source and found the Fleurie's house model, Genevieve Lemaire, standing in the door of the powder room. A woman was lying on the floor, and Phryne moved to her side; she was already dead. There was a growing puddle of blood and a hairpin in her neck.

"Call the police," Phryne ordered the shocked girl. "City South Police Station, for a preference."

The girl was gone before she remembered that it was Jack's day off. Still, he was hardly the only police officer in Melbourne who was willing to humour her. Possibly the only one that welcomed her input, but that had never stopped her before. She stayed in the powder room to secure the scene, using the time to make a preliminary examination of the corpse and the room; it wasn't certain how much access she would have once the police arrived, after all. She noted a few small peculiarities, but there was nothing definitive.

She heard the door open behind her.

"When I said it would take more than literature of dubious legality to get me into the station, it wasn't an invitation to find murder, Miss Fisher," came a deep voice.

She smiled coyly as she turned.

"Wasn't it?"

"Absolutely not."

"And yet here you are," she said brightly. "Lucky me!"

His disapproving look was rather undermined by the twitch of his lips. He strode the few steps to her and the body, crouching down to examine it. She followed suit.

"So?" he asked, clearly expecting her to take the lead.

She pointed to the cause of death.

"Hairpin," she said. "Clearly not premeditated, but convenient. Not many victims come equipped with their own murder weapon." Jack nodded. "And the pearl, there—" she pointed to the aubergine pearl sitting in the blood. Jack carefully picked it up with tweezers, holding it up for examination. "Only one side bloodstained."

"Dropped after the murder?" Jack observed.

"Yes, and look at the colour. Aubergine. Probably highly valuable."

"He kissed the last of many doubled kisses, this Orient pearl," quoted Jack.

"Not even Mark Antony would want to kiss this one," she replied dryly, watching him. There was something about him when he quoted Shakespeare that was irresistible, a glimpse to the depths in her detective inspector.

He said something else, but she missed it in her distraction. Unacceptable.

"Pardon?"

"No pearls on the victim," he repeated.
"Nor anywhere else that I can see," said Phryne, looking again. "Poor Frances."

"Was there anyone else in the salon when the body was found?" he asked.

Phryne shook her head. "I checked the rear door. Locked. And anyone leaving or entering through the salon itself would have been noticed."

"So assuming the time of death was after your arrival, whoever killed Mrs Wilde may still be here," Jack said, standing.

She nodded.

"Shall we go catch a murderer?" she asked, offering her hand to him for assistance up.

Back in the main seating area of the salon, Phryne took stock of their suspects: the Fleuri sisters, the house model, the seamstress, the new widower. Dot and herself as well, strictly speaking,

"Madame Fleuri, do you remember if Mrs Wilde was wearing any jewellery when she arrived?" Jack was asking.

The salon owner thought for a moment. "I know she had on a salon gown when I sat her down to approve the forthcoming catalogue, but I'm not certain about jewellery. Violet, lock that catalogue away again for me, will you please?"

"I think Mrs Wilde was wearing pearls," piped in the seamstress as she moved to place the catalogue in a cupboard as requested.

"What colour were they?" asked Jack.

"I'm not certain, but I know they picked up on her frock. I was pressing it for her while she looked through the catalogue."

"They were a shade of purple, I believe," said the house model.

"I'm afraid I'll have to ask everyone to remain in the building while we look over the premises thoroughly," Jack said. "We'll also have to search the salon staff, Collins, including Mr Wilde."

Simone Fleuri looked horrified.

"Search?" she asked. "Surely that is unnecessary?"

"It's for the best, Madame Fleuri," Phryne smoothed things over. "I'm sure that it won't come to anything, but it will clear the matter up so the police can focus on other lines of inquiry."

Jack spared her a look she was sure was grateful, but so quick and subtle nobody else would have noticed.

"If you could please start with Aubrey Wilde, Constable," he said. "and if Miss Fisher and Miss Williams could assist us with the ladies."

"Gladly," Phryne replied, then gave him a salacious smile. "And you two can draw straws to see who searches Dot and me."

If she were to describe his look in response, she'd settle for deeply unimpressed. That was easy
enough to fix.

"Some *lovely* lingerie, but not a pearl in sight," Phryne announced as she came out of the dressing room after finishing with Miss Lemaire. "That leaves just Dot and me. Hugh, would you do Dottie?"

The constable blushed furiously and his mouth flapped in stunned silence.

"Collins," Jack ordered, and Hugh moved automatically.

"You don't even have to enjoy it," Phryne said pragmatically as he passed her. "Close your eyes and think of church, if it helps. But you might both be pleasantly surprised."

I didn't seem to help; Hugh just blushed even redder as he headed towards the dressing room. Phryne laughed.

"And you, Miss Fisher?" Jack asked, leaning against the tiny reception desk and looking positively delicious.

"I believe that's your job, inspector."

He tilted his head and followed her into the second room. She quickly divested herself of the outer garments, laying them carefully on the chair.

"Why am I not the least bit surprised that you are familiar with the process?" he asked.

"Perhaps I'm just eager," she volleyed back, and they shared a smirk.

"Hands on the chair, legs apart," he directed.

"I thought you'd never ask!"

She grinned as she complied, and felt him move into position behind her.

"Yes, well, I do have a suspicion that if you were the one smuggling the pearls a simple search wouldn't turn them up," he said, so close it was practically in her ear.

"Why not plunder my depths, just to be certain?"

"I'm on duty, Miss Fisher. All forms of intoxication are strictly off limits," he murmured, his voice was so dark that she could feel her body respond to his words alone.

One hand smoothed over her hair—"Interesting technique," she said. He chuckled, "You would be shocked what can be hidden in some hairstyles...or perhaps you wouldn't."—and then caressed the back of her neck as he moved downwards. Both hands on her right shoulder next, lightly running down her bare arm, then her left. He crouched down next.

"Shoes," he ordered, and she kicked them off.

He skimmed her legs, stopping at the top of her stockings, slipping his finger between the material and her thigh; his hands did have a marvellous sort of roughness to contrast the silk, and she took a deep breath. It would not do to overreact to a search that was completely and frustratingly close to professional.

Jack stood again, so close that she could feel the brush of his suit against the back of her arm.
"Now the fun part?" she asked, realizing her voice was shaking slightly in anticipation.

_The problem_, she thought, _is that I know exactly what those hands are capable of._

"For a given value of fun," was his reply.

He was either entirely unmoved—unlikely; she was quite confident in her appeal—or much better at hiding his reaction. Damned man. He felt the expanse of her back, then reached around to run his hands up the front of her torso. He barely brushed against her breasts and she gasped.

"Jack, you are, quite frankly, terrible at this. I could have half of Melbourne's jewels in my brassiere and you wouldn't notice with a touch like that."

He repeated the process, firmer this time.

"Better," she said. "Still not thorough enough."

"Show me then," he whispered, and it shook her to the core.

She cupped her own breasts, feeling the solidness of her lockpick nestled between them. She pulled it out, to prove her point, laying it atop her carefully folded clothes and placing her hands back on the chair.

"See?"

"I have been derelict in my duties, clearly."

"Clearly," she breathed.

He ran his hands up the side of her body, then moved forward to palm her breasts; a gentle press elicited a moan, and his thumb brushed against her hardened nipples.

"What are you concealing, Miss Fisher?" he asked.

She spun around so she was facing him, looking up to his dark eyes.

"I'm concealing a lot of things, Jack. That's what a lady does."

She was fairly certain his breath was an attempt to steady himself, so she wrapped her arms around his shoulders and moved the half step forward to press against his body; it was good to rattle him, keep the upper hand.

"Phryne..." he managed, sounding slightly strangled.

"Yes, inspector?" she asked coquettishly.

He exhaled sharply.

"Phryne," he repeated, and the way he said her name was like a caress in itself.

"Yes, you've said that," she said, trying to ignore the gnawing ache it had left in her. She wanted him. _Him_. Here. Immediately. She didn't _do_ lustfully compromised. "Are you going to complete your search?"

He stepped back just enough for there to be a space between them.
"Hands on my shoulders," commanded Jack. "Unless you want to turn around again."

"This is fine," she said; she wanted to see his face, wanted him to see hers. Wanted to break that tightly coiled self-control he always had.

He patted down her garter belt, tracing the line of each stay down to the stocking and back up, then over her derrière.

"Mmm," she said agreeably.

"This is a police investigation, Miss Fisher," he scolded, his smile soft.

He moved his palms across her hips and down the front of her thighs, brushing so gently against her centre she wasn't entirely sure it was his hand and not the wishful thinking of her growing desire paired with the movement of the silk. The intensity of the soft sensation was so unexpected that she mewled and sagged against him.

"Are you alright?" he asked in concern, all traces of Inspector Robinson and professionalism gone as his hand moved to the small of her back to support her.

She nodded, head still pressed against his chest.

"Just touch me," she pleaded.

He did, first tracing her through her knickers, then moving the fabric aside.

"Oh love, you're so wet," he muttered against her hair as he slipped two fingers inside.

He made surprisingly short work of it, striking a rhythm that had her rocking her hips to meet him almost instantly. She came quickly, muffling her shout against his suit, then stilled.

"Jesus, fuck, Jack. How do you not have a line of women outside your office door insisting on a search before they file a police report?" she asked when she could breathe again.

He chuckled, low and deep and lustful. His growing confidence in pleasing her, and by extension himself, was revealing all manner of surprises.

"I don't believe that last bit is standard police procedure."

"Well it damn well should be," she said, moving away to shrug on her blouse.

———

When Jack and Hugh had taken the witnesses back to the station, Phryne stayed behind to examine the scene and purloin the new season catalogue for later perusal.

"Perhaps we should leave this bit out of our police statements, Dot," she said as they left, and her friend nodded in agreement; there was hope for her criminal career yet.

Dot seemed out of sorts on the drive over the station, and Phryne suspected that Hugh Collins's unintentionally open ogling of the Fleuri's house model was behind it. Dottie really had no reason to worry; Hugh might be admiring Miss Lemaire, but he was almost sickeningly besotted with his girl. Perhaps a bit of shoring up would be in order, a friendly reassurance in a moment of doubt; Dot didn't have many people in her life to do it, and Phryne loved her friend too much to allow her unnecessary unhappiness.
At the station, Phryne joined Jack in the witness interviews. There wasn't much of interest—Simone Fleuri admitted to an impassioned argument with the dead woman, but Simone was French; it was practically expected. Renée Fleuri was dishonest about her camera being broken. The seamstress was hiding something, but had no apparent motive. Aubrey Wilde, the victim's scandalously younger husband, irritably pointed out the stupidity of killing his wife in public. The only person left was the house model.

"I think you should speak with Genevieve Lemaire yourself," Phryne said to Jack. "She strikes me as the sort who would open up to a...strong male presence far more easily than another woman."

Jack raised an amused eyebrow at that. "Strong male presence?"

"You know: strong, quiet men with an air of authority," she said, running her hands across the expanse of his chest and grinning at him. "A woman can hardly resist that sort of charm. Especially if there's frisking involved."

Jack Robinson actually blushed.

"I'll take your word for it, Miss Fisher..." he managed to say. "If you could send her through to the interview room?"

Phryne nodded, and Jack took the side door from his office towards the interview room.

"And don't bring Hugh in," she called out to his retreating back. "The boy fumbled like an exuberant puppy over her at the salon."

Back at the bungalow that evening, Phryne watched Dot from the door of the bedroom. Her friend was tidying away the gown Phryne had worn to one of Aunt P's soirées, holding it up so she could examine her reflection in the mirror. Perhaps Mme Fleuri's well-intended comments about well-tailored suits had not gone down as well as expected.

"Stunning, isn't it?" Phryne said quietly, and Dot jumped with the guilt of a child with their hand in the biscuit tin. Not for the first time, Phryne cursed whoever had made her friend so skittish.

"They'll see you coming," she said brightly, then her tone sobered. "That's what my mum used to say if my sister wore anything flashy."

Phryne snorted. She had rather liked Dot's sister, though she wasn't a patch on Dot herself.

"Surely that's a good thing?" she asked with a chuckle. "If only to avoid a collision."

Dot smiled ruefully. "I wouldn't want to go completely unnoticed, but I wouldn't want to attract too much attention, either. I don't know how you do it, miss."

Phryne came into the room, taking a seat beside Dot on the bed.

"Clothing, Dot, can tell the world exactly what you want it to tell them. But a woman should dress first and foremost for her own pleasure; there's no use telling the world that you're a divine goddess if you don't feel like one, and if you decide to aim slightly less ambitiously, you still ought to feel comfortable. If men happen to like the same sort of things, that's a side issue really."

"I suppose so, miss," said Dot.
"So..." Phryne drawled out, an idea growing. "Tomorrow we're going to the House of Fleuri to order you a ravishing and utterly frivolous gown."

"Oh no, miss, I couldn't possibly..."

"It's not a gift, Dot. It's an order. We need a pretext to return that catalogue and do some further investigating. And I've decided you're it."

Dot didn't need to know that Phryne had a case and therefore needed no pretext of the sort. And, admittedly, Phryne knew that it was unlikely to be quite the Fleuri creation that she would have chosen herself. But the tentative beam on Dot's face was all that Phryne needed.

"Now, I am out for the evening. If you need to reach me for any reason, I'll be at Inspector Robinson's."

"Again, miss? That's the third time this week and it's only Wednesday."

Was it? She thought back and concluded that Dot was right; and the week before she'd spent more nights with him than not. How odd.

"We need to discuss the case," Phryne said airily, electing to ignore Dot's obvious concerns.

"If you say so, miss. I reckon the model did it."

"Are you saying that because you're genuinely suspicious, or because you caught Hugh Collins admiring her assets?"

Dot blushed. "Can't it be both, miss?"

Phryne leaned over and kissed Dot's forehead. Her lipstick left a rather bright red circle of the younger woman's forehead, and Phryne smiled.

"I suppose it can, but I wouldn't worry about your beau's loyalty."

Phryne rose, selecting an outfit for the next day, and then headed out the door. The drive to Jack's house was short, and she knew the quickest route.

He opened the door before she knocked, gesturing her in with a smile. They ate, shared a bottle of wine, and chatted about possible motives in the case.

"Phryne," he said as they finished the last of the bottle. "We need to talk about this morning."

"I know," she said, sighing at the memory. "That was absolutely marvellous, but a terrible idea."

It was odd; he chuckled, but it didn't quite reach his eyes. She reached out, brushing her thumb along his cheekbone.

"I shouldn't have asked," she said gently; Jack took his job seriously. "It went too far."

"It did."

"It won't happen again."

"No, it won't."

She grinned impishly. "It does mean that we'll have to get it out of our systems other times of the
day. After a good meal and a bottle of wine, perhaps?"

His chuckle this time was warm and genuine, and he leaned forward to kiss her properly.

"Now this," Phryne said, pulling back slightly. "This is an absolutely marvellous idea."

Later that night, she lay in his bed and watched the shadows dance across the ceiling. She turned to face him, the moonlight illuminating his profile; reaching out, she traced the slope of his nose and the shape of his lips.

It was becoming too familiar. A hiatus was in order, perhaps; a temporary cessation of the dalliance, to ensure that it remained free of entanglements. She preferred to fly, and Jack was getting dangerously close to being gravity.

———

Dangling from a bolt of cloth half a story above the ground, Phryne could appreciate the irony of Jack being the one to rescue her from the air.

"Evening!" she called cheerfully, adamantly pretending she was not currently hanging out a window in an attempt to avoid a murderer. "I'm rather afraid that poor Violet Hopkins the seamstress is no longer with us."

"Do you need some assistance?" Jack called back from the police vehicle, and she was fairly certain he was amused.

"If you could, perhaps, just drive the car beneath me? I rather misjudged the length of fabric in the dark."

She was too far away to hear his sigh of resignation, but she was certain it was there. He did as asked though, and she dropped down. When she hopped off the roof, he climbed out of the car, put his hands in his pockets and waited expectantly. She launched into an explanation that played down the legally dubious parts of her evening adventure—which Jack was having absolutely none of—and emphasising the discovery of another pearl from Frances Wilde's necklace.

It was the final clue they needed, and the whole scheme unravelled quite quickly: Renée Fleuri was selling House of Fleuri designs to a department store in Paris, and Genevieve Lemaire—real name Genevieve Smith, wanted burglar—used the shipments to smuggle stolen jewels to a partner in France. Violet Hopkins had been helping them both, and Genevieve had murdered her for it.

"I did say it was her," muttered Dot beneath her breath when she heard the news, and Phryne laughed.

"Yes, you did, Dot. Congratulations," Phryne said. "It does leave the House of Fleuri without models for their grand relaunch, however."

"You cannot mean—"

"That is exactly what I mean. The Fleuri sisters have requested our assistance."

———

It was a lovely evening. Dot was beautiful, and Phryne was sorry to miss seeing the look on Hugh's face when she walked down the salon's runway. She had her own gown to display though, and she was putting the final adjustments to it as Dorothy walked. Phryne's was a stunning dress, the intricate
beading alone making it worth more than any garment she'd ever purchased. It was also, the Fleuri sisters insisted, partial payment for her investigation.

As her name was announced she strutted down the catwalk, hips swaying and chin held high; she was not entirely certain she'd ever felt as glamorous as she did in that moment. At the end she caught Jack's eye, and he nodded to her with a smile, warm and affectionate and genuine. She felt the inexplicable pull towards him once more, emanating from somewhere in her chest. She nodded back, then turned to complete her show.

Jack was not the first man she had shared a sustained affair with. But it was the first time she looked back as she walked away.

Even if, she told herself, it was only temporary.
Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

This is the displaced episode!

It was an odd case, a man impaled on the fence in a cemetery. The arrival of Miss Fisher was utterly unsurprising. The retinue she came with, however, was. He thought there might have been a slight hesitation when she spotted him, but she raised her hand and waved; probably just his imagination.

"Jack!" she called.

His heart pounded at the sudden and unexpected sight of her coming towards him, sunlight glinting off her dark hair. It had been less than two weeks, though it felt longer; a sharp decline given their previous patterns but hardly an utter abandonment, and he hadn’t exactly instigated contact with her either. The memory of their shameful behaviour during the House of Fleuri investigation had left him, on reflection, rather gun-shy.

"I'm afraid this is a restricted area. A cemetery worker was murdered here last night," he said as she met him on the stairs to the tomb. "And how is it, Miss Fisher, you always manage to turn up when I'm on the case?"

It was surprisingly difficult to keep the amusement off of his face, but the job was the job and there were witnesses. She was going to have to work harder than 'showing up' to maneuver her way into the investigation.

"Not always, Jack," she corrected, attempting to push past him. "Only the interesting ones. In this instance we merely came to pay our respects."

"This is a crime scene," he said, catching her arm.

She looked down at his hand then back up, and he recognised the look in her eyes. Equal parts annoyed and salacious; par for the course then.

"Roland was a good family friend. Aunt Prudence's godson," she said, attempting to enter the tomb behind him.

"No, no," Jack said, stopping her again. "Crime scene."

It deterred her for less than a second before she changed course, so effortlessly you would have thought it by choice.

"Well, I take it this is the poor fellow's blood as well," she observed, leaning over to examine the stain. "So what are you thinking? He disturbed a would-be graverobber?"

"That's what I think too, miss," piped up Collins.

One of these days his constable would learn that discretion was the better part of valour; until that day, Jack had a feeling he would need to resign himself to revelations at inopportune times.
"Constable Collins, finish searching the area," he ordered, then turned back to her. "The door was locked, and there's no sign of disturbance to the tomb."

He was aware that the fight was already half over. Still, do not go gently into that good night and all that. He looked deliberately over to her companions. The man was struggling to breathe.


"And their connection to the deceased?"

"Oh, it's all very incestuous. Maude is Roland's widow and Freddy was his best friend. Fought under him at Pozieres, then married his wife. They're all staying with Aunt Prudence at the moment. As am I, after an incident with the pipes."

"Is that why I haven't heard from you?" he asked quietly, aware that it might sound too needy and annoyed with himself because of it.

"Well, that and the fact that neither of us has had interesting cases," she smirked. "Unless, of course, you have finally taught Hugh to keep secrets."

"A perpetual and futile attempt, I'm afraid."

She moved slightly closer, raking her eyes over his body so that her intentions were perfectly clear. He was, it seemed, merely part of her investigations.

"If you'd like to question them yourself, you might have to visit me."

"I'm impressed," Jack said, attempting not to rise to the challenge. "You've commandeered my case before I knew I had one."

She smiled wickedly.

"See the sort of trouble I get into if you leave me alone?"

Back at the Stanley estate for the first time since the Foyle incident, Jack felt surprisingly uncomfortable. At least until Phryne met him at the car, waving and smiling.

"Why am I not surprised you beat me here?" he asked, stepping out of the police vehicle.

"We had to get poor Freddy settled. It was practically a medical emergency," she said innocently. "Come on, Aunt P is in the biggest parlour and ready to hold court."

"Oh goodie, battened down the hatches and ready to block investigations?"

Jack had a lot of begrudging respect for Prudence Stanley, but she was bound to make the case more difficult through her ideas of society and propriety.

"She'll cooperate," Phryne said. "She's never been able to pull anything past me, at least, and since we're on the same side...."

He tried not to show his surprise. "Are we?"

Her flippant attitude at the cemetery told him one thing with sudden clarity; whatever Phryne Fisher
saw him as, it was unlikely to be the romantic interest he had found himself hoping for. He tried not to mind; it was not as if he had any real claim to her affections, after all, and she was doing as she had always done. She was always honest about that; he just hadn't listened.

"Usually," she said with a wink, linking arms to lead him inside. He could feel her hand through his jacket, giving his elbow a light pat. "It's always best when we're both left satisfied."

He shook his head but followed her, as if there had been any doubt he would. She led him through the heavy front doors and down the corridor to one of the house’s large parlours, where Prudence Stanley was waiting.

"I can't tell you how distressing this is, Inspector," said Mrs. Stanley in greeting. "No wonder my poor godson can't rest in peace."

Jack saw Phryne roll her eyes at the histrionics.

"Hold your fire, Aunt P. The inspector's on the case now."

"Mrs. Stanley," he said. "I may as well begin with you."

"I hope you'll begin and end with me, Detective Inspector," she said in a tone that made it abundantly clear that it was generally wise to allow her hopes to come to fruition. "Maude and Freddy have enough to worry about, and we have an unfinished seance to deal with."

"Seance?" asked Jack, shooting Phryne a look of consternation.

"Yes," said Mrs. Stanley. "With the great Mrs. Bolkonsky."

_Who?_

"You've not heard of her?" asked Miss Fisher innocently, a hint of a smirk at the edges of her lips. "She's in Melbourne, offering her services to select members of the Spiritualist Society. Aunt P turned out to be one of the select few; the psychic equivalent of winning a chook raffle."

The aunt in question looked horribly offended, which made Phryne’s comments all the funnier. Jack looked down at his notebook to hide his smile.

"Mrs. Bolkonsky chose us on merit," Mrs. Stanley said with as much dignity as she could muster. Jack wondered if 'merit' was the same as 'money' and wisely didn't voice the thought; the look Phryne shot him told him she'd had the same idea. "She told me herself. And so timely. Freddy has suffered very poor health recently."

"Aunt P thought that if anybody could convince Freddy to accept his bravery award—before it's too late—it would be Roland himself," Phryne explained.

"Your late godson, Lieutenant Colonel Roland Claremont?" Jack asked.

Obviously that's who she meant, but the man was _dead_. He wouldn't quite put it past her aunt, but Miss Fisher could not possibly be that gullible.

"Another fine young man, cut down in his prime," said Mrs. Stanley.

It was the sort of thing that was said only by people who had not been there, Jack thought. More importantly however...

"How many miles of red tape did you have to battle to get his remains back from France?"
Mrs. Stanley somehow managed to muster up even more indignity.

"Well, I wasn't about to leave him mouldering in some godforsaken foreign turnip field!"

No, but it was good enough for other men. Not the thoughts to contemplate in the middle of an investigation, however.

"Well, I'll have to interview Captain Ashmead and his wife, and any staff," he said instead. "Now, where will I find Mrs. Bolwhatsit?"

———

Introductions were made to Mrs. Bolkonsky (and her rather smarmy manager, who Phryne took great pleasure in flirting with), and Jack decided that the woman was a charlatan even by spiritualist standards. A conclusion that was not at all challenged when she grabbed his hand and pretended to read his palm.

"True love must never be denied, Detective Inspector," she said ominously.

"Very profound," he said, ignoring the way his eyes had darted towards Phryne when she did so.

Well, if she tried to exploit that later at least he'd know when he gave the game away. Mrs. Bolkonsky continued rabbiting on with her mystical nonsense; she ended on the suggestion that a spirit had been the cause of the gravedigger's death.

"I'm sure it'll provide much comfort to the family," he said. "Now, where is Mr. Ashmead? I'll need to speak with him first."

"I'm afraid he's still indisposed," said the man in question's valet. "But perhaps I could answer your questions?"

"Thank you," said Jack. "If there's a room I could use?"

"There's a small parlour across the hall," said Phryne. "I'll take Mr. Dunn through now. Help yourself to some sandwiches, inspector."

He gave her a surprised look—he hadn't even noticed the servant bring the tray in—and she smiled.

"See, I can read your mind," she said. "Come along, Mr. Dunn."

Jack took a plate and selected several sandwiches; he wondered if Phryne had instructed the kitchen to make ham, cheese, and mustard pickle. Probably just coincidence, he decided. She knew his preferences, but he couldn't imagine her enforcing them in another person's house. He had just turned to follow her into the other room when Mrs. Bolkonsky grabbed his arm.

"Inspector, believe what I say, for your own sake," she stage-whispered to him. The theatrics were wearying. "The heart line never lies. You know that your greatest passion is very close at hand. Pursue it."

For heaven's sake, he was already regretting this case. Regardless of his own feelings, Miss Fisher was uninterested in anything beyond a dalliance; he would reconcile himself to that in time or call it off entirely, but love was far too much to ask.

"And believe what I say, Mrs. Bolkonsky," he said firmly. "I have no intention of pursuing my greatest passion, unless it's these sandwiches, which are a particular favourite."
Witnessing Freddy Ashmead's struggle with battle neurosis raised many unpleasant memories for Jack. He had been fortunate, he knew; his own demons had presented in a far more acceptable manner. Numbness and nightmares and occasional flashbacks that froze him where he stood, and that passed for the most part in the socially accepted time frames. The deeper scars were less pleasant but harder to see; he'd lost the easiness of laughing and the lightness of playful banter that had marked his early life and courtship with Rosie. He'd become single-minded in his pursuits and in his life; he stopped being a partner to Rosie long before he stopped being her husband. The difference had worn on them until Rosie herself had become brittle, ultimately shattering when it became clear that no living children would come.

The whole thing made it much easier to agree to Miss Fisher's plans to dive into a murder that was ten years old and had happened in another country. It also went quite some way in explaining why Jack found himself sitting around a table preparing for a seance to invoke the spirit of a man who threw lizard guts at his nanny when he was twelve.

The upside to this absurd arrangement, he supposed, was that Phryne made sure to sit next to him. It was a pleasant little moment, a chance to caress her fingers before they began, but when Freddy Ashmead broke down at the table over Roly's leadership, she squeezed his hand firmly. They both knew that type of officer. It was a rarity, that kind of understanding; her friendship would be enough, once the disappointment had passed.

Miss Fisher's instincts were, as ever, absolutely correct; Roland Claremont's death had, through a series of actions intended to cover it up, led to the accidental death of a gravedigger in Melbourne. At the end of the case, Phryne came into his office, shutting the door behind her.

"Evening, Jack," she said, dropping into a chair with an air he had learnt usually meant he wasn't going to like what she had to say. "No jibes about the sanctity of the boudoir?"

Her liaison with Warwick Hamilton had not been a pleasant discovery, but it hadn't been a surprise either.

"Miss Fisher," he said, feeling magnanimous. He knew where he stood; he didn’t like it, but he knew. "You are a free woman. If you wish to sleep with the business manager of every spiritualist in the country, that's your choice."

"Funny you say that," she smirked. "Seeing as how you allowed him to leave the country earlier in today."

"Merely an oversight," he said with a smirk of his own. "I will amend that to southern hemisphere if it pleases you."

"Well, seeing as how there's no business manager around, I thought I might make do with a policeman."

"I'll let you know if I see one."

She laughed.

"Come on, Jack. I'm looking to practice my palm reading and I need a willing participant."
She held out her hand in playful expectation, and he offered his up grudgingly. She cradled it, gently tracing the lines on his palm with a finger. It was, somehow, an intensely intimate contact despite their previous encounters.

"I see a very careful man," she said, still stroking his hand. "Who professes to be cynical in the face of mysteries he can't explain and claims to have no passions—"

"Oh no," he said, suddenly wondering if she'd overheard Mrs. Bolkonsky's ramblings. He really couldn't bear it. "Don't."

She brought his hand to her mouth and pressed a kiss in the centre. Her eyes were tender as she looked at him, and he wondered how much she knew. Too much, certainly.

"I see a noble man, Jack, with a good heart."

"And I see a man in need of a hot bath and a hot meal," he said, then boldly (foolishly) added. "And perhaps company."

"Well, my pipes still aren't fixed," she said, smiling. "But a hot bath sounds lovely."
Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

So, the Hugh's scarf detail? 100% true. It's the cutest thing in the entire show.

When Bert came to her with the Case of the Missing Cap, Phryne accepted it far more quickly than the situation warranted. There would be little (or no) payment, and the coach had likely left it somewhere and it had been picked up by a passerby. It was a hat, for goodness sake. But it was also a case that would not require police involvement, therefore advancing her goal of disentangling the myriad ways Jack had woven himself into her life. Things did so much better when boundaries were clear: sex was sex, and she would not fall into the habit of bedding him regularly, though there were times exceptions could (and would) be made; her job was her job, and she took the cases that were of interest to her, regardless of other investigators on the case; and while she had no intention of ceasing their friendship, pulling back to a more acceptable level of intimacy was in everyone's best interests. And so she went searching for an allegedly stolen flatcap, and possibly an unencumbered player to share in her inevitable success.

It was a sound plan, until she discovered the body.

———

She was watching from the clubhouse door when the police motorcar arrived and Jack stepped out, followed closely by Hugh Collins. Well, she did say that she investigated regardless of the police officer involved; having Jack be that officer did put a rather large hiccup in the disentanglement portion of the plan—already jeopardised once by the investigation at the cemetery—but it was what it was.

And what it was was nice to see him.

Unaware of her presence, he walked towards the building, pausing to break up some disgruntled Abbotsford supporters. She felt rather voyeuristic at the thrill watching him work gave; how he could walk into any group and take command without raising his voice, the authoritative demeanour balanced by his sardonic sense of humour. She could hardly believe that she had dismissed him as humourless when they first met.

The Abbotsford supporters—including Bert, and he'd hear about it later—continued to holler at him, accusing him of barracking for West Melbourne.

"As a matter of fact, Abbotsford is my team as well, Mr Johnson," he said, pleased to have the upper hand, and she smiled involuntarily. Men and their football. "So if you'd all like to go home, we can get on with our investigation. Thank you, gentlemen."

She stepped out from the doorway, prepared to greet him with witty repartee and a smile. There was always the possibility that the cases were connected, after all, and it was best to get along with the other investigators. Before he saw her there was a commotion; it was Celia Harper, the victim's wife, and Jack's demeanour changed instantly to firm but kind as he suggested she go home.

She felt that tug toward him, and shook her head as Celia was escorted to her car. Disentanglement
had been derailed, but not for long.

"Hello!" she said brightly, and he didn't even have the good grace to look surprised by her presence.

"A football ground, Miss Fisher?" he asked. "This is the last place I'd expect to find you."

"I'll have you know that I watched my first match from my father's shoulders, Jack."

"Collingwood supporter?"

"Lapsed," she confessed. "Since Collingwood versus Carlton, 1910."

"1910...? But your team won," he said, and she wondered exactly how many footy statistics he had secreted away to be retrieved at will. It seemed to be the only universal trait among men; even Charlie and Bobby had had their moments. She rather missed Bobby, who had moved to Sydney for a fresh start a month previous.

"They did," said Phryne.

"Admittedly, some of the worst fighting ever seen on a football field. Is that what put you off?"

"You know me better than that, Jack," she reprimanded with a laugh, turning to lead him into the locker room where Harry 'The Hangman' Harper was still hanging.

"Why exactly are you here, Miss Fisher?" he asked as they went down the short corridor.

"She's here to help recover my hat," Coach Maclean said, coming towards them from the locker room itself.

"Your lucky hat?" asked Jack, and Phryne resisted the urge to snort. Oh, he'd happily decried Mrs. Bolkonsky as a charlatan—which she was—but add football into the mix mere days later and he was as superstitious as they came.

Amazing what a simple game could do to a man.

Phryne was inside the clubhouse for a final look around before heading to West Melbourne to speak with the club's orange girl, a Poppy Brown, when she heard a car drive up and a vaguely familiar voice.

"Jack, we just heard. What a terrible thing."

Was that...?

"Rosie," came Jack's voice. Phryne froze. "I thought you'd returned to the West Melbourne fold."

Right. Well. She could just wait here for a moment; it was unlikely that Jack's ex-wife would stay long. No point in making it awkward. She had the impression that her behaviour at their previous encounter had made things more difficult for Jack and she didn't want to repeat the error. She shifted closer to the window for a better look.

Rosie was sitting in a car beside Sidney Fletcher, in the midst of informing Jack that her new fiancé was also an Abbotsford supporter and so she was once more. Phryne knew she hadn't liked the woman—after their interactions during the Imperial Club investigation Phryne had deployed Aunt P's considerable gossip powers to learn about Rosie Sanderson, and the reports of her shocking
divorce and the simultaneous engagement did not reflect well on Jack's ex-wife—but she didn't even have the loyalty to stick with her team. Foolish, weak-willed…

"He worked in shipping, didn't he?" Jack was asking Fletcher, presumably about the victim.

Right, she was listening in for the investigation, not to satisfy her curiosity about Jack's former wife.

"Managing one of my warehouses, after he left West Melbourne. Rosie and I have become quite close to both the Harpers."

"Celia must be shattered, poor thing," Rosie oozed sympathetically. The engine started. "Oh, and if you happen to see our favourite Deputy Commissioner, no need to mention we were here. Father couldn't take any more antagonising."

Phryne watched the car pull away with a vague feeling of trepidation. She didn't trust Rosie Sanderson.

She smoothed her coat, took a final glance around the room, and headed outside. Jack was still in discussion with Hugh, and she smiled brightly.

"Hello again!"

"Miss Fisher."

"Investigation going well?"

"We're bringing Stan Baines in for questioning, along with the rest of the team."

"West Melb's captain, right?"

Jack nodded.

"I take it he was not a fan of The Hangman's desertion?"

"Not particularly."

She cocked her head and smiled again.

"It really doesn't speak well of his character, flitting his loyalty around like that."

He smiled slightly.

"And here I thought you were a lapsed fan."

"Lapsed, Jack, not dead. I'm a Collingwood Girl until I die."

"Sure you aren't saying that due to their current success?"

"I am genuinely offended. When I choose my team, I stick with them."

"That I can believe," he said with a small smile that was mostly in his eyes.

"Anyway, I'm off," she said breezily, looking around for Cec and Bert. They knew more of the people involved that she did. "I have a lead on my missing magical millinery."

"Good," he said, then grimaced. "We'll need it, with Harper gone."
Poppy Brown, a scrappy girl of about fifteen, eventually admitted that she had been paid to steal Coach Maclean's hat.

"Look, I did it for all of us that love West Melbourne, not for a rotten pound," she said petulantly, kicking at the ground.

Phryne was suddenly very, very grateful for Jane.

"I have a witness who can identify you," she said bluntly. "And if you don't cooperate, I'll take you to the police myself."

"If I tell you who it was, he'll kill me," the girl said.

It wasn't fear in her voice. She probably didn't want to be labeled a snitch; Phryne would have done the same at her age. She was, she would admit, rather more interested in justice than self-preservation nowadays.

"A description will do."

"Dark hair, big shoulders," offered the girl.

"Could be half a dozen West Melbourne blokes," Bert said.

"Or Abbotsford blokes getting back at Coach Maclean," added Cec, determined to defend his team. "He was always arguing with his players."

"All very interesting, boys," Phryne said, recognising the beginnings of an argument. "But not enough to go on. Poppy? Another crumb?"

"Gold front tooth."

Both men seemed to recognise the description.

"Has to be him," said Bert.

"Who?"

"Stan Baines," both men said in unison.

Well, fortunately for Phryne she knew exactly where he was.

Back at the police station, Phryne had to nearly fight her way through the angry crowd to reach the doors. She stepped into the relative quiet and waved to Hugh, who was speaking with another constable.

"I take it from the crowd out there that the Inspector is still with Baines?" she asked.

Hugh nodded at her briefly before resuming his impassioned speech on recent tactics from the Abbotsford team, and Phryne took it as permission to go through.

She knocked on the door to the interview room then poked her head inside.
"Inspector, sorry to interrupt," she said, swishing into the room and perching on the interview table to offer her hand to the big man behind it. "Stan Baines, captain for West Melbourne, so delighted to meet you," she purred, extracting her business card and passing it to him.

The cocky man was lapping it up, smiling as he read the card.

"Miss Fisher, Lady Detective."

"If I might have a word with you about Joe Maclean's lucky hat?"

His demeanour changed instantly.

"Is this a joke?" he asked angrily. "Harry Harper's dead and you're worried about his coach's flea-bitten old cap?"

Phryne didn’t respond immediately. It was a gamble, but Jack came through.

"You're here about Harper's death," he said placidly, as if he had expected this turn of events. "Answer the questions."

"Do you know a young woman called Poppy Brown? West supporter?" Phryne asked. "Runs a fruit barrow?"

"Maybe."

"Well, she confessed to the theft—under heavy interrogation—but she refused to name the man who paid her."

"What is this?" asked Stan Baines irritably to Jack. "She your fullback?"

Phryne sat a little straighter as she turned to glance at Jack. He was looking remarkably resolute. There might—though she could not be certain—even be the hint of a smile.

"I like the sound of that," she said; between ex-wives and angry mobs he'd probably need the defense. Disentanglement would have to wait.

The door opened behind her.

"Excuse me, sir," said Hugh. "Deputy Commissioner Sanderson's here, with Coach Gibbs."

Jack sighed and rose. Once he was out of the room, Phryne turned back to Baines.

"So," she said, arching one eyebrow as coolly as she could. "Maclean's hat."

The man sighed and extracted the hat from a pocket.

"Are you serious?" Phryne asked, snatching the hat quickly and examining it. It was a completely unremarkable hat that could be bought in a dozen shops within walking distance of the Abbotsford football ground. "You've been carrying it around with you?"

Stan Baines shrugged. Phryne hopped off the table.

"Pleasure doing business with you," she said, deliberately glancing at her card, which he had placed in front of him on the table. It was remarkable what men would confess to, given enough time.

Back in the reception, she saw Jack staring at the door with a rather dour look on his face.
"I take it your ex-father-in-law was not pleased with your enquiries?"

"Not at all," Jack said.

"Well, I have some good news at least," she said, holding Maclean's hat in the air. "I've solved my case and Abbotsford is lucky once more."

"You might regret that," Jack said, smirking. "We play Collingwood next week."

She laughed. "I suppose I could always steal it again."

"Miss Fisher," said Jack over the telephone. "I have a body to investigate."

It was a testament to her self-control that she managed not to ask if he meant morgue or boudoir.

"And you'd like my assistance?" she said instead.

"I suspect I'll have it regardless," he replied. "I'm merely extending the offer so I convince myself that it was my idea."

"Well," she said. "My case is closed. I suppose I could fit you in."

"I'll see you in half an hour then. Good day, Miss Fisher."

Twenty-five minutes later, Phryne stood before the body of Harry Harper. He was certainly an...impressive specimen; leaner than most of the other players, well-proportioned. Absolutely delicious thighs... and she had reached the point where she was genuinely evaluating dead men for their attractiveness instead of focusing on evidence. She needed a night on the town. Preferably with a lot of alcohol and a lot of men, both of them leaving no trace in the morning.

A throat was cleared, and a hand lowered the sheet.

It was Jack, looking distinctly bemused.

"I was just looking at his tattoo," she said cheerfully.

"You've seen it before."

"Yes, well, you never know what you'll notice on a second viewing."

"Anything of note?"

"Rather hirsute man. Scar on his left thigh, probably chicken pox."

"Both insightful observations," he said, and his lips twitched into the ghost of a smile before regaining his general air of resignation. "But neither will win me any points with the Deputy Commissioner."

Jack was quiet and punctilious, but very rarely truly melancholy. At least not without good reason.

"It's very bad luck that his daughter found herself another Abbotsford man," she said, giving him a gentle smile. "Sidney Fletcher won't be winning any points with him, either."

His response was a quick tightening of his lips that practically screamed 'not discussing this' and
turning back to the corpse on the table.

"Let's talk about Harry Harper's feet," he said. "These burns are third degree."

"Really?" she asked, rounding the table to take a look herself.

"Which doesn't make any sense," he continued. "We got the water back up to full heat, but even then it wasn't enough to burn skin."

"And his feet were hanging off the ground, in any case."

"It's a conundrum."

"What about cause of death?"

He moved away from the feet, heading towards the injuries on Harper's neck.

"We're still waiting on the full autopsy, but preliminary examination points to strangulation, no broken neck. But these marks indicate a rope."

Peculiar.

"If it was a rope that killed him, how did he come to be hanging by a scarf?"

"That, Miss Fisher, is an excellent question."

"Back to the clubhouse?"

"Back to the clubhouse."

———

The clubhouse provided some clues—a travel agency’s business card liberated from vice-captain Vince Barlowe’s locker, signs a note might have been left and hurriedly discarded—and the ultimate questions: why would a man at the peak of his career kill himself, and who would cover it up?

“If you’re done…” Jack eventually said, watching her circling of the room with amusement. She rather felt the same about his relaxed recline on the bench, staring at the shower where Harry Harper’s body had hung. It was why they worked so well together though, and he did present a rather delicious image; disentanglement didn’t mean ignoring the aesthetic benefits of their association, after all.

Jack spoke with Coach Maclean and met Phryne back at the station to talk over the existing facts of the case, then Phryne saw the time.

“I promised Jane I’d be home for dinner this evening,” she said, standing to leave. “I’d invite you, but I suspect that might just give the deputy commissioner an apoplexy.”

It was both convenient and true. Jack nodded and stood to escort her out so they could finish their conversation.

“Joe Maclean was at the clubrooms last night,” he said of Abbotsford’s coach. “But we still need to verify the times.”

“Bert was there, he could help,” Phryne suggested. “Maclean was no help at all with Harry Harper’s state of mind?”
“Refuses to even entertain the possibility of suicide.”

Hugh, standing at the desk, looked up.

“And I'm with him, sir.”

Jack gave him a reprimanding look.

“I'll have to raise it with Harper's widow tomorrow,” Jack said.

Which opened up a line of discussion that Phryne had been steadfastly avoiding and yet was desperately curious about.

“You said she was staying with your... wife?” she asked, trying to get a sense of how he felt about Rosie’s sudden reappearance.

“Former,” Jack corrected.

“Your... your former...”

“Wife,” he supplied, amusement skittering across his face.

“Wife, yes. Former wife.”

“Yes,” Jack said, then added after a pause. “And her fiancé.”

“Potentially awkward,” she said with false alacrity, her laughter shrill. “But then what's awkward compared to dying naked in the shower with the opposition's scarf around your throat?”

She laughed uncomfortably, feeling as if the bumbled delivery left her bordering on hysterical. Awkward did not even begin to cover the situation; positively mortifying might be closer. She paused by the door, feeling slightly more balanced as she gave him a sincere grin. “Besides, you have me on your team.”

Which, really, was the important point to make on the matter.

———

Phryne carefully considered Sidney Fletcher's house as the drove up the lane. It was large and a little on the ostentatious side, but well-situated in an affluent suburb of Melbourne. Respectable in an established sort of way.

"Whatever kind of shipping Mr. Fletcher dabbles in must be doing very nicely," she remarked without thinking, then shot Jack a look. He didn't appear offended, but still. "Though I don't think there's a mansion large enough to compensate for his personality."

Jack snorted.

"I'm sure he has many features to recommend him," he said diplomatically, parking the car.

Before he could exit the vehicle, Phryne reached across the divide to adjust his hat. He turned to look at her, face inscrutable.

"Miss Fisher?"

She withdrew her hand and gave a slightly tremulous smile. She wasn't sure why she had done it.
"Well, we couldn't have you facing your former wife like that," she said, forcing herself to laugh. "You'd bring the force into disrepute."

He searched her face. Found answers to questions she didn't know to ask.

"Phryne, are you... protecting me?"

She laughed again, rather nervously. "That's what a fullback does, right? Defense?"

The look he gave her was warm, a tender smile softening his eyes. Her stomach somersaulted.

"Rosie and I are perfectly amicable," he said. "I am not, perhaps, impressed with her choice in fiancé, but I wish her every happiness. And that certainly wasn't with me."

Phryne was less than convinced that amicable and Rosie Sanderson belonged in the same sentence, but she let it pass; instead she reached out again and cupped his cheek, just for a second.

"You are the best man I know, Jack Robinson," she said quietly before pulling her hand away. "So let's go speak with Celia Harper and find out who hanged The Hangman."

She climbed out of the car, ignoring the way her hands were trembling— _it really was dashed inconvenient_, she thought—and heading up the path towards the front door. Jack caught up with her, and they were side-by-side when he knocked. A movement in one of the windows caught Phryne's eye and she moved away to peer into the house; by the time she was in position there was nothing to see, and she heard the door open.

"Oh, it's Jack," Rosie breathed. "I thought it was Father. It's that policeman's knock. Just..."

"We've come to speak with Mrs. Harper," said Jack, voice firm and polite and utterly professional.

Phryne stepped back into Rosie's line of sight with a cool smile in place.

"...and Miss Fisher, of course," Rosie added, sounding distinctly unhappy about the prospect.

"Miss Sanderson," said Phryne.

The women stared at each other, false smiles plastered on their faces, until Jack cleared his throat.

"Is this a good time?"

Rosie started.

"Oh, yes. Come in, please. I've just come to help Sidney with preparations for Harry's service this afternoon."

And yet she was answering the door herself. Highly unlikely, in Phryne's opinion; staff or occupants may answer a door, but it was in poor taste for a guest to. Phryne was all for bucking convention, but it was preferred that people would own up to it. Rosie led them through to the parlour and then left to call for Celia.

Their conversation with the football player's widow told them very little; Harry had struggled after leaving West Melbourne in favour of Abbotsford, Sidney Fletcher had helped him obtain a job (Phryne suspected that said job had been a rather large incentive in moving clubs, though she had the tact not to voice it), and the Harpers' marriage had been strained despite Rosie's assertions otherwise. It took more than romantic cruises to make a relationship happy. It also reinforced Phryne's dislike for Jack's ex-wife. It seemed the woman became less and less sympathetic with each passing
meeting; her less than subtle jibes at Jack's lack of romance and occupation had Phryne's back prickling. She was just deciding the best method of insulting Rosie Sanderson so thoroughly that it would be talked about in Canberra—she was leaning towards overly effusive praise that underlined the woman's flaws—when the conversation ended, and Rosie stood to escort them out.

Phryne knew she shouldn't say anything, as it would compromise her access to the memorial service that afternoon. So she bit her tongue and smiled as she said her goodbyes, and pretended not to notice Rosie catch Jack's arm behind her or their whispered conversation. Rosie's first mumbled words were indecipherable, though Phryne thought she heard something about treading carefully.

"I am not interested in your father's opinions right now," replied Jack, just loud enough for Phryne to make out. She stopped to examine a flowerbox and stay in earshot. "He's allowing a game to get in the way of his judgement."

"And you never have?"

"I'm not having this conversation here, Rosie."

"But Jack—"

"No. If Celia has anything else to say, you know how to reach me at the station," Jack said firmly, then tipped his hat as he turned to meet Phryne and walk down the garden path.

When they had both seated themselves in the car, he tapped nervously on the steering wheel.

"That wasn't..." he began apologetically. "That's not who Rosie is."

"A petty, vindictive—"

"Phryne!"

He sounded shocked, and she crossed her arms and leaned back in the seat.

"You can't tell me she wasn't directing barbs at you."

"It's...complicated."

"What, because she thinks you had a torrid affair with a loose woman?"

He looked ashamed.

"No, don't you dare tell me you did," she said scathingly, feeling a sudden and uncomfortable weight on her chest. She had known he was married. She had known and she'd still dragged him over that damned line because she was scared and she'd allowed herself to get too close. "You said yourself that she was living with her sister. Rosie certainly showed no qualms about moving on."

"Why do you even care so much?"

"You are my friend, Jack, and I don't like my friends to be hurt."

He ran his hand over his face, took a deep breath. Exhaled loudly with a slightly bitter chuckle.

"I can safely say that I am in no danger of being hurt by my ex-wife, Miss Fisher."

He leaned forward, turning the ignition on the car. It spluttered to life, and they drove back to the police station in silence.
"I assume you never took Rosie on a continental cruise," Phryne said as they arrived at City South; a tentative attempt at an apology.

"No," Jack said, then gave her a small smile. "But I did take her to Mrs. Moller's Holiday Cottages at Lorne."

She laughed, on solid footing once more.

"Excellent choice."

Sending Jack on a trip to King and Co Travel Agency, based off the card found in Vince Barlow’s locker and the way Celia Harper had blanched at the mention of a post-season cruise, Phryne returned home briefly to change into a more appropriate outfit for a memorial service and headed back to the Fletcher house. She was greeted by staff this time, and a steady stream of friends, players and supporters came and went. She took an offered drink and stood against a wall to observe Celia Harper.

“Phryne Fisher,” said a voice. Phryne turned to see Rosie approaching, and grit her teeth.

“Miss Sanderson,” she responded.

She did not make a habit of disliking other women. Life was difficult enough without contributing to the unachievable expectations set upon their shoulders. She was quite happy to set this aside to dislike Jack’s ex-wife, but the look on his face when he had said that the cold woman was not the one he had married gave her pause. Active friendship was beyond her, but Phryne thought that cordial was at least possible. The woman did think they’d been sleeping together, after all, and had no context as to why.

“I didn't know you were an Abbotsford supporter,” Rosie said.

Phryne gave a tight smile, ignored the impulse to assert that she was a Magpie, and took a sip of her drink. “It’s a fledgling interest.”

“What are you hoping to find here?” asked Rosie.

The set of her shoulders told Phryne that she was prepared to go to battle to protect her friend.

“Vince Barlow seems very attentive,” Phryne observed, watching as the vice captain retrieved a drink for the widow. It was at least the third since she had arrived.

“If you're looking for a scarlet woman, I think you'll find you'll be disappointed.”

“I am not interested in a woman’s morals,” Phryne replied. Heaven knew what people thought of hers, after all, and she preferred to extend the courtesy of not judging. “I am only trying to solve a murder case.”

“I thought you and Jack suspected suicide?”

“I don't think Harper's the type,” Phryne said, unwilling to discuss the evidence of Harper’s murder.

“I'd have to agree with you there,” Rosie said. “Purely on the basis of intuition.”

“Intuition or observation?” Phryne asked, watching Vince Barlow’s interactions with Celia. “Sometimes one becomes the other. A gesture, a little too intimate? Words said, or left unsaid?”
“A woman in your marital home at half past eight in the morning?”

Phryne sighed. “Miss Sanderson—”

“Call me Rosie.”

“Rosie, that day was not…”

“I know,” the woman conceded. “I saw your sister in the paper, and those other girls.”

“Jack is a good man,” Phryne said. “He made it abundantly clear when we first met that he was married and had no intention of breaking those vows.”

Rosie raised her glass at the comment and gave a half smile.

“He is one of the kindest men I know,” she said quietly. “Always ready to help someone in need. Father always said it was why he made such a good policeman.”

She meant it as a compliment of Jack’s noble nature, Phryne knew, but it was rather like a cold bucket of water over the head. She was not and had never been a woman in need, someone to be rescued. (Except, a traitorous voice piped up, when she had.) Rosie didn’t seem to notice her reaction, as she continued to talk.

“Do you suspect Vincent of harming Harry?”

“People usually kill for love or money,” Phryne answered.

Rosie’s demeanor had thawed considerably with the air between them cleared. She seemed to be mulling something over, and finally spoke. “Celia did ask my advice.”

“About what?”

“Divorce,” Rosie said. “But I don’t think she had any plans on going through with it.”

Phryne was prevented from enquiring further when Stan Baines arrived, a commotion breaking out in his wake. Phryne finished her drink quickly and placed the glass on the side, ready to follow West Melbourne’s captain as he left.

———

After an illuminating conversation with Celia Harper, Phryne was standing in reception, contemplating the exchange she had witnessed between Baines and an unidentified woman. She was examining the scarf used to hang Harry, freshly arrived at the station from the morgue, when George Sanderson came into the room.

“I wish to speak with Inspector Robinson,” he said bluntly, and Hugh jumped to comply.

In Phryne’s opinion, it really wouldn’t hurt for the Deputy Commissioner to have a little less compliance from time to time.

Jack came out of the interview room, and the two men shared a short and terse conversation; something about arresting Vincent Barlow to keep the peace, from what Phryne could hear. Ethically dubious, in her opinion, but probably a valid tactic. Jack, unsurprisingly, was less pleased by the idea.

“Just until the morning, Jack,” Sanderson said, seemingly convinced his word was law. He took
notice of Phryne and the scarf for the first time. “*That* is evidence and you are not police. And may I suggest that you make yourself scarce, Miss Fisher?”

With that, George Sanderson left.

“A suggestion is not the same as an order, is it?” Phryne asked, her hand hovering over the scarf. There really wasn’t much more to be gleaned from it, but the contrary part of her wanted to continue handling it for as long as possible. Just not if it would make Jack’s life more complicated.

He gave her a resigned smile and gestured at her to continue.

“Not in my book,” he said.

She ran her hands across the scarf once more, just so she could say she had, and then placed it carefully back in the envelope. She headed towards Jack, who was leaning against the door to his office.

“Does Mrs Harper have an alibi for the night her husband died?” Jack asked her.

“Yes. And I just found out; according to Celia, Harry refused to grant her a divorce the night before.”

Jack sighed.

“Looks like Barlow's spending the night with us after all.”

———

Upon returning home Phryne found a rather upset Dot sitting on the chaise, knitting needles in hand.

“Did you really arrest Vince Barlow?” she asked.

“He’s been detained, yes. Why the worry?” Phryne asked. “I thought you’d be relieved it wasn’t a West Melbourne player.”

“Hugh is absolutely beside himself,” Dot burst out. “He’s burnt his scarf!”

“That *is* serious,” said Phryne, not entirely genuine.

“Don’t tease, miss,” Dot scolded, needles clicking. “If it’s important to Hugh then it’s important to me.”

“Of course it is, Dot. As it should be. But you must admit that it is *slightly* ridiculous?”

Dot blushed. “It is. I’ve already started on a replacement though, with my best wool.”

“You, Dot, are a treasure, and Hugh Collins had better appreciate it,” Phryne said. “Tea?”

“Oh yes!” Dot exclaimed. “Please, I mean. Hugh was going on and on about what a disappointment Abbotsford were, and how he was laying aside childish loyalties, and how ashamed he was to be known as a supporter.”

Phryne headed to the kitchen to start the tea, calling back to continue the conversation.

“Did you insult Abbotsford?” she asked.
“Why would I do that, miss?”

“To incite his defense, of course!”

“I don’t think I’m quite the sort to do it that way,” Dot admitted. “I’m more the sort that brings a plate of biscuits and fortifies.”

“A vastly underestimated role, darling. An army marches on its stomach, and without the Dot Williamses of the world supplying the grub, we’d be in a much sadder state of affairs. Speaking of which—” the kettle boiled, and Phryne filled the teapot. “—do we have biscuits? I’m positively famished.”

“In the green tin, miss.”

Phryne found the tin in question and discovered lemon shortbreads. Excellent. She put some out on a plate and carried in the tray of tea things. Dot looked up and smiled.

“Thank you, miss,” she said.

“One of these days I will get you to call me Phryne, you know.”

Dot grinned at that. “I suppose you will, one of these days.”

Phryne took a seat on an armchair, and the two women chatted for quite some time—Dot’s visit with her mother, the latest news from Women’s Choice, and a particularly obnoxious article in The Argus were items of particular interest.

“You are a marvel, Dot,” Phryne said as her friend finished the green and maroon scarf. “I can’t knit a stitch and you can create something like that in an evening!”

Dot blushed.

“It’s not done quite yet, miss.”

Dot took a bit of maroon wool and stitched a heart onto one end of the scarf. Dear soul. Phryne loved her immensely.

“So what will you do about your faithless beau, Dot?”

Dot smiled. “If the army marches on its stomach, I suppose I’ll just have to feed its soldiers. Chicory with honey and pepper ought to do it.”

———

It took another murder (Stan Baines); the discovery their case was murder-made-to-look-like-a-suicide-made-to-look-like-a-murder (courtesy of Coach Maclean, desperate to protect the morale of his team); a picnic in a locker room to watch ice melt (it said a great deal about her commitment to disentanglement that she didn’t actually question why she stuck around until later that night, and none of it was good); and an abortion gone wrong to uncover their murderer.

The resolution found her sitting in her chair, legs folded neatly, and adamantly not eyeing the place on the edge of his desk where she perched when teasing him.

“Why the numbers, do you think?” Phryne asked, referring to the date West Melbourne’s coach had carved into Stan Baines head.
“Some days, Miss Fisher,” he said dryly, leaning back in his chair. “I choose not to look a gift horse in the mouth. I’m not entirely sure even your powers of deduction would have solved the case without them.”

“You’ll turn my head, Jack Robinson,” she said.

“Dinner?” he asked in response, completely casually.

Yes, she thought, then remembered he had not been made privy to her extraction plans. Well, perhaps she needed to rethink them. Nobody was getting hurt, really, and now that she was aware of the dangers she could neatly sidestep them.

“Afraid not,” Phryne declined. “But perhaps I’ll see you at the game tomorrow? I’ve promised to drive Dot, and now that I know you’re such a fan...”

“Perhaps,” he said with a slow smile and tilt of his head. “Abbotsford could use all the support they can get.”

———

Arriving at the game the next day, Phryne smoothed her long duster jacket before climbing from the car.

“Come along, miss,” said Dot. “We’ll miss the good views if we take too long.”

Phryne followed her friend to the stadium, crossing paths with Jack by the entrance.

“Miss Fisher, Miss Williams,” he greeted them.

“You made it!” Phryne said. “Dot’s promised us excellent seats if we’re quick enough, which is almost enough to entice me to stay.”

“Are you not intending to?” he asked, matching her speed as they made their way in. Dot had spotted a friend and fell behind.

“It would be a real shame to break my lapse without Collingwood to lure me,” she laughed. “But I’m sure I can be persuaded.”

They climbed several steps, nodding to Hugh who had chosen to stand.

“You’re looking dashing, Hugh,” Phryne remarked, thinking of how much nicer he’d look with Dot’s scarf around his neck. Bless Dot’s acceptance and unwavering loyalty.

Phryne and Jack continued up the bleachers, stopping again when Rosie Sanderson met them.

“Just wanted to wish you luck,” she said brightly to Jack. “And Miss Fisher—”

“Phryne, please.”

“Phryne, I’m so glad to see that your fledgling interest is ongoing. I’m surprised the game’s still going ahead,” she confessed. “The club presidencies met last night to consider cancelling out of respect. Father lost to Sidney. Even my observational skills tell me that this does not bode well.”

Rosie made her way across to Sidney’s seat, and Phryne heard Jack chuckle.

“Did you tell Rosie you were an Abbotsford supporter?” he asked.
“I expressed an interest, merely to justify my presence at the memorial,” Phryne said, and Jack nodded sagely.

“Naturally, Miss Fisher.”

They climbed up another two rows and made their way along the benches, finding an open space with a good view of the field.

“Do you think Rosie knows her fiancé bribed Harry Harper to leave her father's team?” Phryne asked, still watching Jack’s ex-wife.

“All's fair in love and football, Miss Fisher.”

“I suspect most men don’t regard them with equal intensity,” Phryne laughed. “But I'm glad you think so.”

“So tell me, what kept you away from the game?” he asked, watching the field.

“My mother,” answered Phryne. He turned towards her for clarification, and she confessed. “After I was caught trying to sabotage Carlton's newest recruit by smuggling him beer.”

“Always an unsuspecting man involved.”

“I was only 10 at the time.”

“So this should be interesting,” he said. “First game in years.”

“At least the last week has levelled the playing field. Two dead players, one coach locked up for obstructing an investigation and the other one charged with murder. Anything could happen.”

“Even a Collingwood girl would have to stay for a game like that,” he said, smiling as he removed his team scarf and placed it around her neck. He pulled her closer as he adjusted the scarf, and she didn’t resist. She was too busy watching his face, open and soft and affectionate. “To humour an Abbotsford man.”

He looked as if he wanted to kiss her for no other reason than because he wanted to. It wasn't sex and it certainly wasn't comfort, and she did not like the other available option.

But, oh, she wanted to kiss him.
Feeling rather like Sisyphus, Jack was spending the day in his office completing paperwork. He was halfway through a particularly dense report when the station telephone rang, and Constable McNair popped his head through Jack’s door.

“It’s Collins, sir,” he said.

He’d sent Hugh to a report of a motor vehicle accident an hour earlier. Single vehicle, one deceased. Collins should have been more than capable of handling it. Jack shifted the papers in front of him to mark his place, then nodded to McNair.

“Thank you, constable,” Jack said, then picked up the telephone. “Collins?”

“Sir?”

The connection was terrible, scratchy and distant.

“Sir...at the acci...Miss Fisher...”

If the connection had suddenly gained crystal clarity, Jack doubted he would have noticed.

“I’ll be right there, constable,” he said. “Don’t...” Don’t move her body. Don’t touch. Don’t let her be seen like that to passing motorists, not like that. The words stuck in his throat. “I’ll be there.”

“Yes, sir.”

Jack hung up the telephone, stood. Donned his hat and coat as if it were armour, moved towards the door of the station.

“Sir?” McNair called after him.

He turned, raised a hand. He didn’t know why.

“I’ll be with Collins if you need me,” he said.

Walked to the police car. Started it. Drove to the location of the initial report, a completely unremarkable place that was now seared into his mind as The Place Phryne Fisher Had Left Him Behind.

In reality, the drive was fifteen minutes at most. It seemed somehow both inconceivably shorter and horrifically longer; longer because he thought of nothing but her, the way she laughed as she drove despite (or perhaps because of) his reprimands, the exact shade of her eyes (soon to cloud in death, a process he had once found fascinating), the times they had shared a bed (too many, not enough), the peculiar pain of realising that she was unwilling to give what he truly wanted and that he was not honourable enough to care. Shorter because he was there, unprepared for the sight of a car—not hers—and the tree and the body in the driver’s seat covered in a sheet.

Under other circumstances, he might have waited. Taken a deep breath, donned a facade of professional courtesy, executed his duty. Fallen apart in privacy later, if he allowed himself that freedom at all. But it was Phryne, and he had never been quite that resilient. He was out of the car
and ever-so-slightly unsteady on his feet, unable to do anything but head towards her as he had since they’d met months before.

“Sir,” said Collins. “I hope I’ve done the right thing calling you in. I know motor vehicle accidents aren’t your department, but…”

Jack held his hand up to silence his constable. He didn’t need to hear the details; his mind would supply them readily enough. “I just want to see her.”

“Uh, she’s still in the vehicle, sir.”

Jack could see that. He stopped; she was no more than a lifted sheet away. There was blood—not much, but enough for him to wonder how familiar he would find the face beneath.

He should have told her, consequences be damned. Oh it would have cost him—even in his grief-stricken daydreams he knew that she would have gently broken his heart—but at least he would not be standing before her covered body, trying not to say it now. But he had been too much of a coward to admit it even to himself.

He removed his hat—a sign of respect or a way to occupy his hands, he was uncertain—and hesitated before placing it on the back of the vehicle. He lifted the cover, expecting to see red lips and a black bob.

“Who is this?” he asked.

“Gertrude Haynes, though she preferred Gertie,” came a voice behind him.

Her voice.

He turned in disbelief. It was like a macabre magic trick, the dead risen and replaced with an unwitting member of the audience.

“Miss Fisher arrived when I was awaiting the coroner, sir,” Collins explained. “She knew the deceased and requested your attendance. I relayed a message…”

“Just passing by, were you?”

He should have felt relief—it was there, clawing for attention in the peripheral—and a better man no doubt would have. But all he managed was anger: anger that she could be so glib, that she was so callous and negligent with her own safety that he had never doubted it was her in the car, that here was a chance to right an error that he already knew he would not take.

“You know better than that, Jack,” she reprimanded him, moving closer. He wondered, just briefly, whether she was a mere apparition, but he could smell her perfume. “My Adventuress Club was sponsoring Gertie's entry into the road rally race this Saturday.”

“Your Adventuress Club,” he said dully.

“For like-minded women. I've just joined.”

“Of course you did.”

What else would she do with her spare time?

“This was no accident, Jack,” she said, listing her suspicions. She had a counter for his every argument, poorly formed though they were. He would investigate, he knew it already, but there was
no thrill of anticipation at the thought. She fluttered her hands in agitation. “Why are you not willing to entertain the idea of foul play?”

“Why ask my opinion if you’re not willing to listen to it?” he countered.

“Because that usually doesn’t bother you.”

He was nothing more than a willing audience to dazzle.

“Who’s her next of kin?” Jack asked.

He wouldn’t have to tell Miss Williams and Jane. He wouldn’t have to seek out her parents, certainly her legal next of kin despite their estrangement. He would not have to face the wrath of Prudence Stanley.

There, finally, was the glimmer of relief. Too small to make a difference, but there nonetheless.

———

Phryne had already arrived at the rally site by the time Jack did, flippant and airy as she greeted him. He had found it refreshing, once. Now it just reinforced his anger, her willingness to flaunt the rules simply because they were there. He wondered if she would ever leave him alone as they spoke with Gertie’s brother Claude, then his race sponsor.

“I seem to be able handle my motor vehicle without any trouble. Wouldn’t you agree, inspector?” she said, staring down the race organiser Lachlan Pepper as he elaborated on the biological unsuitability of women drivers.

The man was a sexist prig, in Jack’s opinion. He still wasn’t going to condone Miss Fisher’s driving.

“I doubt a police officer is the right person to ask.”

The look she shot him was genuinely surprised, as if they hadn’t had this conversation a hundred times before. Perhaps she didn’t remember; she was remarkably good at hearing what she liked and ignoring the rest. It had served her well—he had long admired the ways she had used the silly social rules that benefitted her and defied the rest. But some rules were there for a reason, and she paid those no heed either.

They split up after that, a small mercy. Jack headed back to the station to wait for the coroner’s report, still unsure whether there was an investigation to be had. He busied himself with the paperwork he’d been completing before the telephone call, but found he could not focus; he crumpled up a page with too many errors to file, tossed it into the wastepaper basket, and began again.

The coroner’s initial report came in just before his shift was over, confirming Gertie’s death had been murder as Miss Fisher had expected. He would have to telephone her with the news. The clock ticked as he dithered, and he heard constables talking to each other as the shift changed. He was off then, officially speaking. He took his bottle of whiskey and glass from the drawer and poured himself a large one. Intended to be a quick bracing before he picked up the telephone, the drink became several as he relived the day’s events.

*He was a fool.*

“Claude Haynes stole a vital car part from his sister in order to sabotage her chances in Saturday’s rally.”
He looked up slowly.

“Good evening to you too, Miss Fisher.”

He hadn’t even heard her come in.

“And somebody took that,” she produced a wheel nut from her handbag and placed it on the desk. “from Gertie's motor car while she was inside the VAA Lounge.”

“Witnesses?”

He was suddenly aware that his drinks had had more of an effect than he’d anticipated—he hadn’t had lunch, and drinking on an empty stomach was never a good idea—but he was determined that it wouldn’t come through in his speech.


“I know, but we can't blame it all on the wheel nut,” he said, handing over a folder. “Coroner's report.”

“Gertie Haynes was strangled and the scarf used to cover it up,” she read. “So, I didn't jump the gun after all.”

Jack nodded. She came around the desk, settling in on a rarely used bench and giving him a flirtatious smile.

“Can we be friends again? In spite of my cavalier approach to driving?”

“It's true,” he said contemplatively, fiddling with the removed wheel nut. It was heavy in his hands, oddly reassuring in its weight. “You drive too fast.”

“Too fast for what?” she snorted derisively. “A milk cart?”

“And you're needlessly reckless.”

Reckless with her life, with him, with all the people who loved her. She was the centre of the family she had created and she would happily destroy them all for the thrill of speed, of the wind in her hair and no restraints. And they all knew it; loved her because of it, not in spite. That didn’t make it right.

“That is an opinion, not fact. I would suggest you could apologise to me by offering me a drink, but…” she reached into the wastepaper basket, pulling out the empty bottle amidst the unusable paperwork. “Given your lack of supplies and your new penchant for drinking alone, I'll settle for sitting in on your interview with Claude.”

“As it happens,” he said, standing up and indicating the door. “My shift finished an hour ago. Goodnight, Miss Fisher.”

She looked at him as she passed, her eyes particularly bright in the dim lighting and her lips soft; he knew exactly how she would taste if he closed the door and lowered his mouth to hers. It caused the pain to renew in intensity, and he stepped away. Retreated to his desk. She was still watching him.

“Please close the door on your way out, Miss Fisher,” he said, opening up the report that he'd been working on all day. “And there will be no need for you to join me for Mr. Haynes's interview.”
Interviewing Claude Haynes about the stolen carburettor the next day, Jack could feel his irritation rising. Mr. Haynes claimed that his sister had given him the part as insurance in their plans for Gertie to throw the race. It felt like a dead end, until Haynes mentioned Ailsa Wilton, a member of Gertie’s team.

Jack took Collins to the garage to bring Ailsa in; Miss Fisher was there. Of course. Why wouldn’t she be? Two bloody steps ahead and certain to bask in it.

“What’s going on, Jack?” she asked instead.

“Certain information has come to light with our interview with Mr. Haynes,” he said curtly.

Ailsa’s daughter became nearly hysterical at the sight of her mother being taken in for questioning, breaking down and admitting that she had been the one to remove the wheel nut.

Jack looked at the girl, then at Phryne.

“Bring her to the station. Now,” he said, turning on his heel to head back to his own car.

Phryne beat him there, of course, and was waiting with the girl on the bench just inside the station.

“What aren’t you telling me, Jack?” she asked, springing up.

“Miss Wilton? Please come through to the interview room,” Jack said instead, motioning with his head for the girl to follow him through the gate and down the hall.

Phryne grabbed his arm just before he stepped inside the interview room himself, asking him again what was going on.

“The carburettor wasn’t stolen, it was given to Mr. Haynes,” Jack said. “Gertie claimed that Ailsa Wilton would kill her if she found out. I want this wheel nut detail cleared up.”

Phryne nodded and headed into the interview room.

Millie Wilton was nearly in tears as she sat in one of the seats

“Would you care to set us straight?” Jack asked, crossing his arms as he looked at her. “What happened that night?”

Millie retold how she had overheard an argument between Ailsa Wilton and Gertie over the car, and how Millie had followed her and removed the wheel nut in a bid to scare Gertie into returning.

“I didn't think it would kill her!” the girl cried out.

“Well, that's incredibly foolish of you, Millie,” Phryne said consolingly. “But you didn't kill her. Gertie passed away after the crash. From something else.”

“So it wasn't my fault?”

“It wasn't because of your actions,” Phryne clarified.

“Even though those actions were delinquent, malicious and with an utter disregard for Miss Haynes' well-being!” Jack cut in, shocked at the loudness of his own voice. Phryne tried to placate him, but it was no use. “Let alone the well-being of anyone else on the road!”

The tears that had been threatening since the girl had entered the station began in earnest. “I'm so
sorry! I didn't like Gertie, but I didn't want her to die!"

Jack sighed. He believed the girl, but that didn’t excuse her actions.

“Did you see anyone else at the lounge?” he asked, hoping that the interview would not be a complete waste.

———

He was deep in his cups, a not entirely unknown feeling but not one he made a habit of. He usually avoided this… what had she called it? His ‘sudden penchant for drinking alone’, that was it. It was a terrible habit to form, but he could, perhaps, excuse it just this once. An indulgence in melancholy, much like the book of Shakespeare turned to the Dark Lady sonnets in his hand, pandered to and then forgotten in the morning in favour of punctilious restraint.

There was a knock at the door; he contemplated leaving it unanswered, but even in his slightly inebriated state he felt duty-bound. He’d told several neighbours they were welcome to his telephone in emergencies no matter the hour, and there was always the chance it was police business. He placed his tumbler on the table and stood, walked slowly to the door which was being knocked again, more firmly.

It was Phryne, appearing to actually glow in the hazy light of sunset.

“Good evening Jack!” she said, stepping into his hall without waiting for the invitation.

“Miss Fisher.”

She sniffed exaggeratedly.

“Drinking again?” she asked mildly.

“Miss Fisher,” he said again. “What do you want?”

She shucked her hat and coat off, hanging them on the pegs nearest the door, then headed for the parlour.

“What I want is to know why you were so foul to Millie this afternoon—you made the girl cry, Jack—but I doubt I’ll get any sort of explanation. So I’ll settle for a stiff drink.”

With that, she dropped into an armchair and raised a hand as if expecting a cocktail to be conjured from thin air. He poured her a glass of whiskey instead, setting it on the table beside her, topped his off and took his own seat again.

She drank quietly—a miracle unto itself—and Jack had no desire to break the silence. When her first glass was done, she stood and refilled it, then pulled out his draughts board. He looked at it, raising his eyebrow, and she smirked.

“If you won’t talk, you can entertain me this way,” she explained, beginning to lay the pieces out.

“Or you could go home.”

Her hand flinched over the board, but she didn’t stop.

“We have a case, Jack.”

He nodded, sipping from his glass again. He would not refill when it was gone, aware that his
control was already perilous in the light of her presence. They barely spoke for the first game—he lost—and by the time they began the second Jack could feel the inadvisable truth threatening to spew forth. He rose the topic of the case instead, hoping it would be a distraction; it was, even if it also rose the spectre of her death. He moved his pieces listlessly, so resigned to inevitable defeat that he’d lost the will to try. It would play out the same regardless; Phryne always played with the same approach, preferring an offensive assault against his cautious defenses until they were overwhelmed more often than not. Really, she hardly needed him for the game at all.

“I won, again,” she scolded, moving her final piece into position. “You're usually much better at this game.”

Jack remained silent; she was regarding him carefully, as if he were another mildly diverting mystery. He supposed that was what he was, ultimately.

“You're right,” he conceded quietly, shaking his head to clear the cobwebs. “You're right, of course. I'm off my game.”

He carefully removed his remaining pieces from the board, placed them back in the box. Then he stood to close the curtains—it was dark outside, their games stretching longer than he realised—and returned. Finished his discarded glass of whiskey.

“When I heard about the motor car accident…” he finally said, vividly remembering the tinny sound of Collins’s voice over the line. Even now, with her in front of him, anxiety clawed at his chest.

“Hugh sent you a message.”

Jack nodded confirmation.

“All I heard was ‘Miss Fisher’…” he forced himself to exhale. “And a crashed motor car.”

“Jack…” she drew out, and he saw the realisation dawn in her eyes, followed by pity. “You thought it was me?”

He nodded, lump in his throat, unable to trust his voice. She stood, came around the table, extended her hand to him; his sense of preservation abandoned him and he took it, standing at her gentle tug.

She placed his hand over her heart; he could feel the erratic beating and curled his fingers as if to catch it. An impossible task.

She smiled up at him. “I’m still here.”

She had never been there to begin with. Not really. He pulled his hand away.

“Jack?” she said; it sounded almost uncertain. She cupped his face, stepped close enough that he could feel the heat radiating from her. “Jack, I’m here. I’m alive.”

He bent forward slightly, to run his tongue along the shell of her ear. She shivered, and he allowed the words cantering through his head to be whispered against her hair.

"My love is as a fever, longing still—"

"Shakespeare at this time, Jack?” she laughed, bright and happy and alive, all heaviness gone from her in an instant.

He growled in response; they were the only words he could manage, the flowing familiarity not requiring any true engagement of his mind. He suddenly wanted nothing more than to taste her, to
feel her, to fuck her until they both came and the memory of the day before was gone from his mind entirely.

"By all means, don't let me stop you!" she trilled when he paused, grasping his lapels to keep him close. He broke like waves upon the rocks, a desperate clashing as it roared.

"For that which longer nurseth the disease..."

She met him action for action, every crushing kiss returned in kind, every nip, every thrust reciprocated. They moved in tandem until her back was against the wall, Jack between her legs but the angle wrong. She groaned in frustration, and Jack grasped her and pulled her up, moved closer still so her long legs could wrap around his waist, the brunt of her weight pressed against the wall. She arched her back to get closer to him, grinding downwards as he held her up. Even through clothing the sensation was enough to make him see stars.

"As much fun as this is," she panted, trying to keep the upper hand.

He pushed her skirt higher, fluttered his fingers across the crease of her thigh and over her ass so gently she writhed at the almost absent sensation. "Feeding on that which doth preserve the ill, the uncertain sickly appetite to please," he murmured.

She groaned and tried again. "As much fun as this is—bedroom. Now."

They stumbled out into the corridor and towards the bedroom, teeth and hands and bodies meeting each other, retreating, blows unsatisfying in their glancing nature as they fought to get ahead.

The door to his bedroom banged against the wall as Phryne pushed it open. They twisted as they stepped inside, Jack in the lead once more as they careened towards the bed, desperately shedding clothes in the moments of separation in their grotesque dance. There was the sound of buttons skittering across the floor—her blouse, he was almost certain, though he didn't stop to check.

"My reason, the physician to my love," he muttered as his knees hit the mattress and he fell backwards. "Angry that his prescriptions are not kept, hath left me—"

She followed him down, straddling his now naked lap, stroking his cock with a positively wicked gleam in her eyes. He grunted, managed to flip them so she was beneath him.

"And I, desperate, now approve," he groaned as he entered her. "Desire is death, which physic did except."

She keened in response, scraping her nails down his back. Her desperate panting, suggesting she was already close to her peak, drove him forward. He moved, sloppy and desperate, felt her walls clench around him, trapping him equally in heaven and hell.

"Don't. Stop. Talking." she hissed, gripping his hair and pulling him towards her neck as he thrust.

Jack was losing the line of it now—Past curse? Past cure.

"Past cure I am," he muttered against her as he moved downwards, nipping at the skin of her beast. "Now reason is past care. And frantic mad—" he took her nipple in his mouth, sucked, pulling away so the sudden sensation of his chilly bedroom air caused her to gasp. Where was he? "Frantic mad with evermore unrest; My thoughts and discourse as madmen's are," She'd gotten her leg over his hip, drove her body upwards to meet his, pulling him deeper, moaned.

"More," she demanded, and he didn't know whether she meant words or contact. He gave her both,
moving his hand between them to spur her higher.

"At random from the truth, vainly expressed—"

She screamed as she came, her entire body shuddering, and it drove him faster to his own release; messy, raw and imperfect, it provided no relief. No reason was left, no comfort to be found. He collapsed, exhausted and gasping for breath, the final lines running through his mind. For I have sworn thee fair and thought thee bright, Who art as black as hell, as dark as night.

From somewhere a light was flicked on—the bedside lamp, he realised. Phryne said something, but he couldn't make it out over the pounding of blood in his ears. Her hand came up to his cheek, turning his face towards her.

"I said 'Where have you been keeping that?' Jack," she repeated, looking thoroughly ravished and utterly thrilled.

Jack groaned and dropped his head against the pillow.

"Jack?"

He wondered what would happen if he simply refused to ever move again.

"Jack?" she said again, sounding concerned. Too late, Miss Fisher, he thought bitterly. "If that wasn't enough to convince you I'm alive..."

"No," he said. "I am now utterly convinced that you are alive and whole."

And that you will destroy me.

"Fabulous!" she said. "What was it you were reciting? I was, I will admit, far too distracted by the sound of your voice to pay any heed to the words."

"Just a sonnet, Phryne," he said tiredly. "Just a sonnet."

She got out of bed, retrieving the clothes she could find and eyeing them. He could tell even from the bed that the blouse was beyond repair.

"I really ought to leave spare clothes here, if you intend to make a habit of that," she said cheerfully. He wondered if death was preferable. "I'll need to borrow a shirt of some sort to get home...."

He waved to his wardrobe in what he hoped was a clear 'help yourself' manner. She grabbed one his jumpers—a cream one that looked better on her than it did on him—and then looked around for her knickers. She found them on a shelf, and held them up playfully.

"Jack, you wouldn't happen to know why these are ripped, would you?"

His deplorable lack of self control was not, he suspected, the answer she was looking for.

"Miss Fisher—"

She laughed, tossing her knickers in the wastepaper basket by the wardrobe and pulling her skirt on.

"I'll just have to make do without," she said. "I do hate to love you and leave you, but I have a rather early morning tomorrow and obviously cannot head there from here. Your jumper is warm, Jack, but likely to raise questions. I'll telephone you when I'm done?"
Jack closed his eyes, nodded briefly, and hoped that the whole evening was simply the hallucinations of an alcohol-riddled mind. When he opened his eyes again several minutes later, she was gone. He could almost believe it a particularly vivid dream, but her scent clung to the sheets surrounding him, taunting him. He rolled out of bed, pulled on a pair of pyjama bottoms, and headed towards the guestroom to try and get some sleep.

Chapter End Notes

So Jack, drunk and with the words fresh in his mind, is quoting Sonnet 147.

My love is as a fever, longing still
For that which longer nurseth the disease,
Feeding on that which doth preserve the ill,
Th' uncertain sickly appetite to please.
My reason, the physician to my love,
Angry that his prescriptions are not kept,
Hath left me, and I desp'rate now approve
Desire is death, which physic did except.
Past cure I am, now reason is past care,
And frantic mad with evermore unrest,
My thoughts and my discourse as madmen’s are,
At random from the truth vainly expressed;
    For I have sworn thee fair and thought thee bright,
Who art as black as hell, as dark as night.

Or, the No Fear Shakespeare translation:
My love is like a fever, always making me yearn for what will prolong my disease. It lives on whatever will preserve the illness, in order to prop up my fickle desire. My reasoning has acted as doctor and treated my love, but then it left me because I wasn’t following its instructions. Now that I’m finally desperate enough, I realize that sexual desire, which was against the doctor’s orders, is lethal. Now that my mind is past caring, I’m past the point where I can be cured, and I’ve gone frantically crazy and grown increasingly restless. My thoughts and speech are like a madman’s, pointlessly expressing random untruths. For I have sworn that you’re beautiful and thought you radiant when you’re actually as black as hell and as dark as night.

Or even more simply: Jack should never mix Shakespeare and drinking.
Phryne was awake at the sort of hour she usually chose to believe was mythical, but was an unfortunate necessity if she was going to get Dot into the rally race. She’d brought home a set of Gertie’s racing clothes, which fit her friend well enough.

“I really do feel ridiculous, miss,” Dot said over a cup of tea.

“Pish-posh. You’ll do marvellously, and think of the story it will make!”

Dot blushed. “Just so long as I don’t need to actually drive.”

“We’ve gone over this, Dot. You’ll forget your goggles and nobody will notice the swap.”

“Isn’t this slightly… well, wrong miss? If the rules say that you cannot race then it’s not a real victory, even if it does thumb your nose at Lachlan Pepper.”

“All’s fair in love and motor cars,” Phryne said glibly, then winced; Jack had said something remarkably similar last week, and thinking of Jack made her think of the night before.

He’d been so out of sorts that she’d gone to his house out of concern and had found him taciturn and cool. When the reasons came to light she had understood; such a mistake in communication must have been a shock, but it was soon put to rights. And the passion—she had long suspected that there was something simmering; he was courteous and clever and fun in bed, but he’d kept things in reserve. Uneasy, perhaps, at his newfound discovery in the pleasures of the flesh. The point was, the night before had been a revelation and she was looking forward to seeing what else she could draw from him. Preferably without the mistaken death fiasco next time.

“If you say so,” said Dot doubtfully.

Phryne was saved from expanding on the matter when there was a knock on the door, and the two cabbies came in.

“Russian driver’s licence,” Bert said.

“Well, we’re fairly sure it’s a driver’s licence,” Cec added. “Could be a fishing permit.”

“Somehow I doubt Lachlan Pepper would know the difference,” said Phryne, looking over the small rectangle. It was passable. “What’s the name?”

“Oh, you’ll love this, miss,” said Cec. “Valentina Runemalova.”

Phryne gave an undignified snort. “Excellent. Thank your red ragging friends for us next time you see them, will you?”

“Will do, miss.”

“That it?” asked Bert, always one to cut to the point.

“Yes, thank you. I shouldn’t need you both again until the race itself. Tomorrow. 9 am at Ailsa’s garage.”

The men took their leave, and Phryne turned back to Dot.
“So, dear Dot, once more…”

At the rally site, Phryne introduced Valentina to Lachlan Pepper and ensured that he would approve the paperwork. She had the threat of Claude’s theft of the twin carburettor and his impending political campaign to hold over him, and the man capitulated surprisingly quickly. Phryne then faked a conversation in Russian with Dot and turned to Pepper once more.

“Miss Valentina insists on inspecting the track,” she said, smiling apologetically. “I explained to her that you're a very busy man but she wants you to be the one to show her.”

Pepper gave his begrudging acceptance, and with him out of the way Phryne decided to investigate Anthony Rose’s car, seen following Gertie the night of her death. She slipped into the right tent and called out softly.

“Mr. Rose! Are you here?”

When there was no response, Phryne made short work of the car and found Gertie’s purse hidden behind a seat. There was a note inside; she’d just gotten the jist of it—a sort of pleading threat that made the writer incredibly suspect—when a voice startled her.

“Naughty, naughty, Miss Fisher.”

She jumped and turned; it was Anthony Rose, one of the other racers and Gertie’s recently rejected lover. He prowled—there really was no other word for it, and it made her uneasy—towards her.

“Claude may not have secrets,” he said in a deceptively calm tone. It made the hair on the back of her neck prickle, and she cursed her decision to wear trousers. No dagger to be had, and her pistol left behind in her own car. “But I might.”

First order of business was to make it abundantly clear that she was not afraid of him.

“Such as what happened to your tail light?” she asked.

“Well, some idiot smashed it. They're lucky I didn't catch them.”

The threat was implicit; he hadn’t caught the vandal, but he’d caught her. They exchanged barbs as he moved closer, revealing his alibi for the time of Gertie’s death; Phryne refused to move away, but was calculating the distance between them, waiting for him to be in striking range.

“How did Gertie's purse end up in your car?”

“I've no idea,” he shrugged with an insolent air. “Perhaps you put it there.”

“I just found it behind your seat.”

“There's only your word for that.”

“The police take my word quite seriously,” she said, then added with the slightest tinge of regret. “Usually. Maybe I should ask them to search your car more thoroughly.”

He was so close she could feel his breath ghost across her face.

“Nobody touches my car.”
She lashed out quickly, sending him reeling; the forced distance was enough for her to regain the upper hand.

“Now, you can come with me quietly or I can have a constable bring you in. Make a production of it in front of all the racers; I’m sure it will make a huge impression with your sponsors.”

Anthony Rose wiped his mouth and nodded his compliance.

“Excellent!” Phryne said, double checking that the contents of the purse were still secured. “Come along then.”

Pulling up in front of the station, Phryne shot her passenger a warning look. He hadn’t attempted to intimidate her since the racing tent but that didn’t mean a great deal.

“Inside then,” she ordered, and smirked at the speed with which he complied. He was a bully, and not a particularly good one at that.

Hugh was at the desk when they stepped through the doors, and Phryne gave him a wave.

“Is the inspector in?” she asked.

“Uh, yes, Miss Fisher, but—”

She was already through the gate. “Keep an eye on Mr. Rose here, would you constable?”

She knocked on Jack’s door, propped ajar, and opened it enough to slip inside before he replied. She shut it completely behind her, not wanting to risk Rose overhearing what she had to say. Jack looked up.

“Miss Fisher?”

“I have a suspect and some evidence for you,” she said cheerfully, waving Gertie’s purse.

“No doubt recovered in a completely legal and ethical manner,” he said.

The retort lacked his usual vigour, and Phryne looked at him; there were circles under his eyes still, and his mouth was downturned. Odd; he’d seemed perfectly fine when she’d left him the night before. She crossed the room and perched on the edge of his desk.

“Of course it was, Jack,” she said blithely, then at his doubtful glance amended it to “Well, mostly. It was practically in plain sight, and that’s the same thing, isn’t it?”

Jack sighed. “Only to you, Miss Fisher.”

“Anyway, I thought you might want to interview Gertie’s paramour about this,” she produced the suspicious note found in the lining of the purse with a flourish.

He took it with a reprimanding look, placing the paper on the desk and smoothing it with his hand. Phryne leaned in to read the note again, brushing her little finger across his wrist; he hissed as if he was scalded and pulled his hand away.

“I think it is time to speak with Mr. Rose,” he said, standing quite suddenly.

Returning the note to the purse, Phryne watched him stride from the room with curiosity. He couldn’t
still be upset over the telephone call, could he? They’d talked about it and then he’d made love to her like...like a desperate man. She groaned, trying to ignore the sudden suspicion that the previous night’s affirmation had not had quite the effect she had thought. She would need to tread carefully if she wanted to undo the damage.

Anthony Rose was not the note writer, cleared when he produced a sample of writing in his own hand. Jack barely looked at her the entire conversation, and when it was over he left the interview room without so much as saying goodbye. She waited in his office for twenty minutes, thinking he would be back soon enough and she could confirm or alleviate her concerns.

For him to be so unsettled by the thought of her death... it was less than ideal. She wished she’d extracted herself when she’d intended to, or at least found a way to keep their assignation separated from the rest of it. Messy. Foolish.

But perhaps it was simply the cost of friendship. She’d certainly be upset if she thought Mac had gotten herself killed, or Dot. Or—and she didn’t like the way her gut twisted at the thought—if it had been Jack himself. Which left her with an unfortunate dilemma; it would be a shame, despite her earlier intentions, to pull back too far. He was, at the very least, getting an education in her bed that would stand him well if (when) he chose to pursue romantic entanglements at some future point. She assumed he would; it was the sort of man he was, stalwart and traditional and loyal. One day he’d find someone equal to the task, with a life in rhythm with his own, and she would lose him from her bed. She did not want to lose his friendship though, or their professional arrangement; either one would be a disappointment. No, not a disappointment. Even the thought of it made her chest ache terribly.

She shifted in her seat, realising that he had no intention of returning to his office any time soon. And she had her answers, at least the ones that mattered. He had been upset, more upset than she had realised, as any good friend would be. The lines were too blurred (she did not make a habit of bedding friends; she was bound to make some mistakes), but that could be cleared up easily enough with a forthright discussion. After the case was solved, of course.

She stood, brushed down her skirt, and left the office, waving at Hugh as she passed him by.

“Tell the inspector that I will be in all evening if he wishes to discuss the investigation,” she said, striving for an offhand manner. If she didn’t quite succeed, Hugh would never notice the difference. Besides, she had a case to solve.

Jack did not take her up on the offer, which was just as well. After returning to the rally to steal back the twin carburettor for the women’s team (it was missing, which was terribly inconvenient) and dealing with Lachlan Pepper’s accusations of blackmail, Phryne wanted nothing more than a long soak in the bath and an early night. Unfortunately for her, while having the aforementioned soak she had a sudden thought about why Pepper was covering a years old affair; “I was a gentleman. I would have done what was necessary,” he’d said when confronted with the note. Phryne pulled the bath’s plug and dressed again, then rang Mac.

“Mac, darling,” she said. “I need a favour.”

The friends met at the morgue an hour later, and confirmed Phryne’s suspicions; Gertie Haynes had had a child. And based on the timing of Gertie’s trip to London, Phryne was fairly certain she knew who that child was.
The next morning she stopped by the station to fill Jack in.

“I haven't long,” she said cheerfully, snagging a piece of toast from his plate with a smile. “The rally starts in one hour and I missed breakfast. Have you interviewed Lachlan Pepper?”

“Yes. He seems convinced that you’re part of the attempt to blackmail him and is demanding I deal with it. How, exactly, did you manage to make him that angry?”

“I made sure the women’s team could still enter the race.”

“I presume you are the driver?” he asked, sounding resigned.

“Oh no. I’ve been banned on the basis of my driving offenses.”

“And yet I doubt.”

“Well, we’ve got a lovely Russian girl who is the spitting image of Dot Williams.”

Jack sighed, and Phryne waited for his lecture. Instead he shrugged, almost indifferent. Odd.

“He admitted to meeting Gertie at the VAA lounge, at least. The bartender saw them arguing in a private booth.”

It wasn’t new information, but it was a start.

“Why would Gertie blackmail him over having an affair?” Phryne mused out loud, considering other explanations. “It was years ago. Neither of them were married. There was nothing shameful about a small dalliance.”

“Not in some people's eyes,” Jack corrected dully. They would definitely need to have a talk when this was over.

“Then, take a look at this,” said Phryne, pulling the Adventuress Club’s record book from her bag and handing it over and turning to the relevant page. “The Adventuress Club keeps meticulous records of all our members' achievements. Gertie took a six-month hiatus from racing in 1913.”

She explained her theory that the dalliance between Pepper and Gertie had led to a living child, threatening Pepper’s political career. She left her suspicions about who that child was unvoiced; she’d known Ailsa Wilton for years and owed her a chance to explain.

“Anyway,” she said brightly, heading for the door. “You've made me late. I'll fill you in on the rest later. You’ll come for dinner tonight, of course?”

“Miss Fisher…”

She would not give him an opportunity to argue the matter. She waved as she walked through his door.

“See you after the race!”

-----

Arriving at Ailsa’s garage as everyone was preparing to head to the rally, Phryne cornered the woman with a friendly smile.

“How much will it cost?” Phryne asked. “Are you nervous? This must be the first race in years that
Gertie isn’t your driver…”

Ailsa fidgeted. “We should be off; we can’t be late. Pepper will use any excuse to disqualify us.”

Phryne heard the last people leave behind her.

“How long has it been? Sixteen years? That’s when Gertie made her comeback, wasn’t it?”

Ailsa rubbed her hands together and nodded, ever so slightly.

“Millie is Gertie’s daughter, isn’t she?”

“She’s been my daughter since the day she was born,” Ailsa countered.

Thinking of Jane, Phryne couldn’t help but agree. Ailsa spilled all the details; how Gertie had chosen the race over Millie, how Ailsa had taken the baby in and raised her alone, how Gertie had threatened to take Millie back to get in her father’s good graces and regain her inheritance.

“She was using Millie to get to his money!” Ailsa cried, and Phryne hurt for her. The bond between Ailsa Wilton and her daughter was undeniable. “I raised that child for 16 years, but to Gertie it was just a convenient arrangement.”

Ailsa continued, seemingly relieved to confess how she and Gertie had fought over Millie, how she had followed Gertie to the VAA lounge that night and then by stolen car until Gertie had crashed.

“I wasn't thinking! I just did it!” Ailsa said.

“You strangled her,” said Phryne. “Then you draped the scarf through the door to make it look like an accident, and you took her purse.”

Ailsa nodded. “I took out the birth certificate and destroyed it.”

“And then you drove Anthony Rose’s car back to the Lounge.”

“Gertie always did exactly what she wanted and to hell with everyone else. But I had to protect my daughter,” Ailsa said.

It had shocked Phryne how rarely she had dreamt of Murdoch Foyle and his abduction of Jane once it was over. But when she did… she could think of nothing worse. She laid a hand on Ailsa’s forearm.

“I know,” she said. I know you love her, so fiercely you would tear the world apart to keep her safe.

“I just want to say goodbye to Millie and explain to her why I did what I did. Please. You can take me to the police station after that…”

There was a banging on the door.

“Miss Wilton! It’s Inspector Robinson.”

Ailsa shot her a horrified look, and in a split second Phryne had to choose. Ailsa would face justice either way. Jack was knocking again.

“Go. I'll take care of the Inspector”.

“Thank you,” Ailsa whispered, running out the back door.
Another knock, louder and more insistent.

“Coming, Jack!” she called, cursing her voice for sounding so artificial. He’d know she was lying.

“Miss Fisher?”

“Yes!”

“Is Ailsa in there with you?”

Phryne hedged her replies and pretended to struggle with the door until she was certain Ailsa had a large enough head start. When she finally allowed him in, he looked around the room.

“I’ve made enquiries. Ailsa Wilton is not Millie’s mother.”

“Well, I suspect Ailsa and Millie would beg to disagree.”

His look in response was unmoved.

“Where is she, Miss Fisher?”

“I do believe that she… stepped out the back.”

Jack headed in the direction she pointed, and Phryne quickly removed one of her stockings. She just needed a little time. That was all. He’d understand once she explained it to him. Later. Ailsa and Millie needed her first.

———

That evening, Phryne found herself replaying the events of the day—the last minute discovery that Anthony Rose was the one who had stolen the women’s team carburettor, Phryne substituting for Claude to “accidentally” block the path, Millie winning the race, Ailsa’s arrest, and introducing Millie to Lachlan Pepper as his daughter.

Staring quietly into her glass of whiskey, she was most adamantly not thinking about the case to avoid thinking about her plans for the rest of the evening. Dinner was long over and he hadn’t come. Jane and Dot had both gone off to bed, still laughing at Dot’s turn as Valentina, and she sat in her parlour alone, waiting for a man. Inexcusable.

She had just placed her drink on the table and was contemplating her bed when a knock came at the door. Ignoring the flutter of unease in her stomach—it was a friend coming by for a nightcap, nothing more—she stood. This conversation could so easily change what they had. *Firm but fair*, she reminded herself as she moved to the hall. Clearly establish the boundaries.

*What were they again?* She’d forgotten. Perhaps she had never known.

She stood in front of the door, pasted a smile on her face, and swung it open.

“Jack!” she said brightly. “I was beginning to give up hope.”
Chapter 28

Chapter Notes

Y’all should thank WhileNotWriting and her excellent adulting skills, as I feel morally obliged to post this chapter now instead of tomorrow.

Parked in the street in front of Miss Fisher’s house, Jack ran through his plans once more while he waited for the courage to actually follow through. It would be easier if she had been intentionally cruel, but that was not her way. She had said as much months earlier, in a moment of particular vulnerability, and he believed her; it would no doubt pain her to realise what the outcome of this game had been. It was simply the result of self-interest on her part, unwillingly inflicted, and conceited vanity on his. His own behaviour had been barbarous though, lashing out at her to avoid confronting his own failures, and he did not like that man. He would not be that man.

No. There was only one thing for it; he had to end his association with Phryne Fisher before it ruined them both.

He opened the door to the motorcar and headed towards the house; he had been so often that he rarely noticed the details, but as it was likely to be his last visit he took the time to look at the bungalow that had become a second home. Completely unremarkable, except for the inhabitants. Miss Williams and her courage, the resourceful and delightful Jane. Phryne.

In front of the door, he paused again and fingered the stocking in his pocket. He had known that she could never care for him in the way he cared for her, or perhaps she could but would not choose to change; he was loath to change her at any rate, even at the cost of his own preferences. He had thought—wrongly, as it turned out—that he had made his peace with the alternative, of being a warm body in her bed, of living off the meagre scraps she gave him. A damning indictment of his character, but he had not cared. The stocking, however—almost certainly one of the stockings he had peeled from her legs in the last few months—the stocking told him exactly where he truly stood. An impediment to her plans, nothing more. Extracting his hand from his pocket, he knocked on the door.

The door swung open with enthusiasm—she was not fond of restraint even in her actions—and she was there, filling every one of his senses.

“Jack! I was beginning to give up hope!”

He stepped inside and removed his hat, then followed her through to the parlour. He stopped a few steps into the room, ready to retreat once the words were said.

“Whiskey?” she called back to him, already pouring a glass.

His hand was out to take it before he could respond, but he drew back before she had time to notice.

“Ah, no,” he said, shaking his head. “No thank you.”

“Not indulging tonight?” she asked; her pout was playful, but her eyes were too sombre to convince him that she was perfectly at ease. “A shame, really; indulgence can be so... invigorating.”

What was the first step? Ah, yes. The stocking.
Removing the offending hosiery from his pocket, Jack shook his head again.

“I’ve just come to return something of yours you left in my car.”

She took the wadded up stocking, regarding it curiously.

“You didn’t wash it?”

How remarkably like her, to ask him a question he had not anticipated.

“I didn’t see much point,” he answered honestly. “The exhaust pipe burnt right through it.”

“It was only a small delay,” she protested, as if it was just another game.

“Engineered by you, once again, to your own advantage,” he said, more harshly than he intended. It hurt her; he could see it in the way she sat on the chaise, curling her feet beneath her, even as her eyes challenged him to continue. He sighed; as much as it would hurt in the moment, this was for the best. “It never even occurred to you to ask, did it?”

She glanced down at her hands, neatly folded on her lap and still holding that wretched stocking. There was his answer; she did not trust him. And that… *that* was unbearable.

“I know we have some minor points of contention, Jack,” she said softly, looking back up at him. Pleading with him.

“This is not a ’minor point of contention’, Phryne. This is...this is you thinking so little of me that...” he stopped before his voice cracked. Fiddled with the hat in his hands. “You are who you are.”

“And I can’t give that up,” she said.

“No!” He recoiled at the idea. “No, I would never ask you to. But I am who I am, and I can’t give that up either. Not to the degree required. Not without becoming somebody I was ashamed to be.”

Her nod was slow and understanding. “So us, what we do together... you’re giving that up instead.”

There was no question in her voice, just resignation and pain.

“When I thought it was you in that wreckage...”

He could count on one hand the number of times he had seen his father cry. Jack himself had cried more than that, especially in the early days of the war, but it was not a reaction that was naturally comfortable for him. He had come perilously close several times since Collins’s telephone call two days before.

Don’t make me say it, Phryne. I’m not sure I’d survive.

“Do I even get a say?”

He shook his head and tried not to meet her eyes, shining with tears. *Not this time.*

She unfurled from the seat like some elegant and haughty cat, padding to the almost extinguished fire in the grate. She shoved the stocking into the embers, and the fire glazed brighter for just a moment.

“If you do this, Jack,” she said, still facing the flames. Her voice wavered. “If you do this, I will feel like it was you lying in the wreckage.”
I’m sorry.

She turned to him then, fierce and vulnerable and beautiful. She took his breath away.

“Please, can you think about that?”

He nodded. Swallowed. Found his voice long enough to say “I will” so quietly she might not have heard him; she gave him a tremulous smile, drawing her arms around herself.

There was nothing left to say. He opened his mouth to say goodbye, but closed it before he did. Turned, slowly. Walked out the door, down the steps (skipping the one that always creaked), and into his waiting car. Placed his head against the wheel and allowed himself to cry for the first time in years.
Phryne Fisher took a deep breath, smoothed her skirt (sensuous and flowing, it gave the impression of far less coverage than there was), checked her fingernails (a childhood habit), and moved towards City South Police Station. Inspector Robinson was sure to be there already, and it was vital that she complete her day’s task quickly and efficiently. She had contemplated leaving it entirely; she hadn’t seen him since he had removed himself so completely from her house and her life three weeks earlier, but it was a matter of pride. She would not allow him to believe that he had caused her to flee the country. No, this was merely an exchange of information between two professionals. She took a deep, bracing breath and glided through the doors.

"Hello Hugh!" she said cheerfully. "Is the inspector in?"

Dot’s beau was not the green young thing he had been months before, but she still threw him off balance. He nodded yes before his mouth could say no, and she took it as permission to go through to the office.

She didn’t bother to knock, which caused a scandalised Hugh to loudly whisper "MISS!" behind her. The noise was enough to make Jack look up, and her stomach lurched at the sight of him; he looked exhausted, but the instant he recognised her his face closed off completely.

"Good morning, Jack," she said cheerfully, ignoring the sinking feeling in her gut.

"Miss Fisher," he said.

She briefly contemplated her usual chair, but chose to perch herself on the edge of his desk instead; it would make it impossible for him to ignore her.

"Anything of interest?" she asked, twisting to see the papers he had been reading.

Jack shut the folder quickly.

"Not to you. What are you doing here, Miss Fisher?"

Her confidence almost flagged in the light of his guarded tone. But she was Phryne Fisher, and a bit of disapproval was hardly going to be the end of her.

"I thought you should know that I'm sailing to England on Friday."

The briefest flicker of... *something* crossed his face before he regained his mask of indifference. He wasn't immune then; the only thing she hated more than her own grief at their current situation was the idea that he felt none of it. She could just about accept that she had let him get too close; lack of reciprocation would be a step too far.

"I fail to see how that is of interest to me."

"I thought you'd be relieved that there would be no chance of our paths crossing."

"I'll mark it on my calendar," he said dryly. "Though I won't believe my good fortune until the ship leaves port."

"Don't be an arse," she reprimanded. "It doesn't suit you. Aren't you the least bit curious as to why?"

"I have no doubt you'll tell me regardless of my interest or lack thereof."
She slammed her hand down on the files he was eyeing.

"You're the one who walked away, Jack," she seethed. He'd been damn successful at it too. "You don't get to blame me."

"How, exactly, am I blaming you, Miss Fisher?" he asked calmly, spreading his hands to indicate the papers in front of him. "I am sitting at my desk, attempting to do my job, and you walk in and upend things once again."

"Would you like me to go?" she asked tartly, certain that his curiosity would best him and he'd concede.

She had not anticipated the naked pain in his eyes, too close to her own agony to be dismissed. That bastard.

"I don't want you to go, Miss Fisher. I need you to go."

A scathing reply was on her lips as she stood, but she found herself unable to give it voice. It would only hurt more to remember the charred ashes of their friendship.

"Very well," she said instead. "I'll try not to trip over any bodies in the next few days, and if I do I'll make sure I call another station."

Her hand was on the knob when Hugh popped his head around the corner of the partially open door.

"Doctor MacMillan's on the telephone for you, sir," he said.

Phryne veered back, taking a seat in her chair. Jack's lips narrowed in irritation, but he knew better than to argue; he picked up the receiver.

"Doctor? Where?" A pause. "And have you secured the scene?" Phryne moved closer, to take the phone from him when he was done. "I'll head right over...and I suppose you'll want to speak with Miss Fisher?"

Jack handed the telephone over, then stood to grab his hat and coat. Phryne listened to her friend inform her of a body found during a last minute medical exam review.

"Well, Inspector Robinson," she said when she was done. "I believe we might have one last case."

He tilted his head in weary concession, and her heart ached. It wasn't supposed to be like this. ———

At the university, Jack took charge of the investigation without regard for her; he strode so quickly that she needed to actually hurry in an effort to stay alongside, he dispatched his constables to complete tasks, and he ignored her presence as much as possible. There was no banter over the body of Professor Katz, a fact that raised the suspicions of her oldest friend.

Jack left with Professor Bradbury, Dean of Medicine, to begin interviews with medical students; he didn’t include Phryne in the invitation. Well, she could investigate just as well without him. Katz’s office would be a good start. Phryne huffed.

"Can you show me his office?" she asked Mac.

"Yes. Just as soon as you tell me what’s going on."
“Well, I’ll need to know Katz’s routine, who was the last to see —”

“What you and Jack Robinson.”

Phryne forced herself to swallow the bitter taste in her mouth and smile.

“That might take awhile.”

Mac nodded her head towards the door and they began to walk.

“Short version?”

“There isn’t one.”

“There’s always a short version, Phryne, and I know when you’re avoiding a question.”

Phryne rolled her eyes.

“Told him I was going to England.”

“Well, surely he’d be happy for...“ Mac trailed off, piecing suspicions together. “How long have you been sleeping together?”

“A few months? Off and on, mostly off. Now adamantly and permanently off.”

“Why?”

“Why do I ever end flings? It ran its course.”

Mac stopped short, folding her arms and glaring at her.

“That is absolute horse shit,” declared her friend.

“It got... messy, Mac,” she said, far too quietly to pass it off as an amusement. “We are very different people.”

“Let me guess; he couldn’t wait to cage you—”

“No!” Even Phryne was surprised by the vehemence in her tone, and softened it. “No. He wouldn’t. But a cage is a cage regardless of who places it there.”

“One of these days, Phryne, you will explain to me what the difference is between a cage and your self-erected walls.”

“But not today,” she said firmly. “I have a murder to solve and my source is being an obnoxious coward.”

Mac snorted. “Most men are, if they aren’t too busy being something worse. Katz’s office is the far end of the east wing,” she pointed in the general direction. “I’ve got meetings with some of the first year students in about ten minutes.”

“Thank you, Mac. And if any information comes to light...”

“I promise that I will inform you first,” said Mac. “But I need both of you on this case.”

Their paths split then, Mac heading towards her meeting and Phryne moving the opposite direction. Approaching the office of Professor Katz’s, Phryne ran—almost literally, she really did need to pay
more attention to her surroundings—straight into Jack.

“Inspector!” she said, unable to hide her surprise. On another day she would have turned the proximity to her advantage (she could smell him, the clean, crisp smells she had begun to associate solely with Jack, though none of the components were unique. It was utterly unfair), but instead she stepped back. “I thought you had students to interrogate?”

“I have men to help with that,” he said, stiff and formal.

“Then I fear we're headed for the same destination.”

“I'll keep my distance.”

Another day he would have smirked and tilted his head. Another day she might have kissed him for it later, teasing those tiny creases around his lips into existence. Another day. But it was not, and her determination to wallow in melancholy and might-have-beens was beginning to wear. An hour back in his presence and she was behaving like a teenager in the throes of first affections.

“Why don’t you walk two steps behind?” she asked tartly, then turned on her heel and headed towards Katz’s office. Let him catch up to her this time.

———

That evening, Phryne continued her packing. Most of her clothes were to be left behind; she’d purchased several new outfits already and would replenish her wardrobe completely once they landed in England, but there were a few items of mostly sentimental value she was unprepared to part with. Pulling out every piece and placing it on the bed, she thought through the case.

When she and Jack—rather irritatingly in step—had arrived at Professor Katz’s office, Katz’s assistant, Beatrice Mason, was desperately trying to get past Hugh to retrieve a rare manuscript they had been working on. A manuscript that was missing from a safe; not a particularly well-secured safe, but a safe nonetheless. Then they’d discovered the murder weapon and the scene of the crime, and for the briefest moment it had been like there was no strain at all between them, just the familiar back and forth. It hadn’t lasted; he had reverted to purposeful avoidance soon enough.

Well, if he wasn’t sharing information then she would have to investigate her way. Which would explain why Miss Mason and her enormous selection of books and notes was currently set up in the parlour; it was preferable to the harassment the woman experienced at the university at least, and Mac had vouched for her.

Phryne picked up a cardigan and examined it carefully; it had been a rare impulse purchase that had never really suited her, but might do wonderfully for Dot. She would miss Dot; she’d even suggested that her friend come along, expenses paid, but the mere idea of leaving her home, her family, and her beau so completely had sent her into a rare state. Phryne had hugged her in response and insisted that she never change; the world would do better with more Dot Williamses in it. She tossed the cardigan on to her bedside table, but missed and it fell to the floor. Bending to pick it up, Phryne caught sight of something between the headboard and the wall.

She pulled it out and her breath caught. It was Jack’s jumper, the one she had borrowed during the investigation into the death of Gertie Haynes. She’d shucked it off and collapsed into bed that night, too exhausted for anything else, and the next day things had gone so spectacularly wrong she’d forgotten about it entirely. She pulled it to her face and breathed in deeply before she could think about it; it still held the scent of his house, his washing powder, and a harsh sob escaped her throat.
That selfish, petty bastard. She was off to England for who knew how long and he didn’t even have the decency to say goodbye properly. No, it was all cold ‘Miss Fisher’ this and ‘I have constables’ that and a ‘this is a police investigation’ thrown in for good measure. And all because of a silly misunderstanding (but it wasn’t silly; in the intervening weeks she had imagined the situation reversed and it was awful) and one minuscule little liberty she had taken in the course of justice. (But it wasn’t the liberty. *It never even occurred to you to ask, did it?* he had said, with the weight of every time she hadn’t thought to ask behind it.) And then he had walked away. Successfully.

She’d seen this coming. She had known. Too close. Too much. And now she was standing in her own bedroom with tears in her eyes over a stupid (highly intelligent), stubborn (steadfast) man. That bastard.

The galling thing was, he wasn’t even wrong.

And she was doing it again. Bringing home a witness and deliberately not telling him. Well, she couldn’t back down. She would not show him weakness. But perhaps there was a more circumspect route. She stuffed the jumper in the back of her wardrobe, deciding to deal with it later, and checked her face in her dressing mirror. There was no evidence of her tears, so she quickly refreshed her lipstick and left her room.

“Dot!” she called.

“Yes, miss?” Dot replied from the kitchen.

Phryne followed her voice, nodding at Beatrice as she moved through the parlour, and found Dot making cocoa.

“I’ve offered Miss Mason some,” Dot said. “Apparently she only eats jam sandwiches though, so I made her a plate. She even brought her own jam.”

“Well, we all have our quirks, I suppose.”

“That we do, miss,” Dot smiled, pouring the cocoa into two mugs. “Jane’s already taken herself off to bed this evening.”

Phryne nodded. Her ward had been struggling with the news of England.

“Have you spoken with Hugh this evening?” Phryne asked innocently, taking a sip of cocoa. It was delicious, warm and comforting.

“No, miss. Why?”

“No reason, really,” Phryne prevaricated. “But if you were to speak with him, perhaps you should mention our houseguest?”

Dot looked at her appraisingly, then nodded. “Of course, miss.”

There was a sudden thump from the parlour. Phryne sat her mug down and rushed in.

Beatrice Mason had passed out over the table.

“Miss Mason!” Phryne called, remembering that the woman disliked being touched. She didn’t stir though, so there was nothing for it; Phryne laid a gentle hand on her shoulder and shook it. “Miss Mason? Miss Mason! Wake up, Beatrice!”
Beatrice sat upright, slurred something that sounded like “it was the jam”, and laid her head back down.

“Dot, telephone Mac,” Phryne instructed, trying to assess Beatrice’s condition. “Right away.” She glanced at the jar of jam and the half-eaten sandwich on a plate. “And when that’s done, a telephone call to Hugh might be in order.”
Chapter 30

Chapter Notes

Early update because apparently it's easier to find time at 2 am than it has been to find time in the ACTUAL morning. I will, I suspect, post the final chapter this evening (my time! It's very early Wednesday here) rather than tomorrow as well. Shorten the length of agony, and neither chapter is particularly long.

It had been a long few weeks. Miss Fisher, who never did as she was told on any other occasion, did not care enough to defy his embargo. He spent most of his time at crime scenes waiting to hear the click of her heels or catch a whiff of her perfume, expecting to look up and find her blue eyes watching him from across a body. Instead there had been silence. The silence had been preferable to the moment she waltzed into his office; the time apart had not dulled the ache, and he was snappish and short tempered as a result.

She seemed to think him incapable of investigation without her input. And the truth was that without her he was not quite as quick, not quite as sharp, never quite as good as he was with her. But he was without her and would be without her; this blasted journey to England ensured that even if there had been a chance for reconciliation otherwise. Not that there would have been; she’d commandeered Collins for her own uses within an hour, and based on the half of the conversation he was listening to Hugh have with Miss Williams, she’d commandeered his witness as well.

“Well, sir,” said Collins when his telephone call was done. “I’ve found Miss Mason, but you aren’t going to like where.”

He drove over to her bungalow to question Miss Mason in person, and found that she was asleep. Most likely sleeping pills, according to Doctor MacMillan.

“How?” Jack asked.

Phryne held up a jar.

“I know that you are more than capable of handling this murder investigation without me, Inspector,” she said. Quietly, with no hint of deception. “But you might like to test this blackberry jam.”

It was, he suspected, the closest she could come to a peace offering. It was not enough to undo the hurt. There was nothing that would be enough to undo the hurt, in truth; she did not trust him regardless, and no number of jam jars would change that. But it was enough for him to soften, for them to find something that was very nearly a workable rhythm in their investigation.

It was not an easy case to solve. There was a break-in (she called him at home, telling him that a police presence would only upset Beacrice but that he ought to know; another silent peace offering); attempts to frame the odd Miss Mason and the poor Charlie Street, undesirable students despite their brilliance; The Book of Hours, stolen from Katz's office was discovered to contain a secret code, which led them to a school treasurer who was more than he first appeared; and a stolen skull, recovered by chance due to Collins’s bladder.

The latter finally led them to the motive and the murderer; the skull undermined Professor Bradbury’s
life work, and when he had ordered a student to destroy it the student had given it to Katz instead.

“Now we just need to prove it,” Jack said.

Phryne and Doctor MacMillan had exchanged a look, and Jack knew he wouldn’t like what they were about to suggest.

He was right.

“Absolutely not, Miss Fisher.”

“You need a confession, Jack, and I need to wrap this up before my boat leaves.”

He had sighed. She’d do it regardless.

“You won’t be catching your boat if you’re laid up in hospital,” he countered.

“Must you be so dramatic?”

“Miss Fisher, this man chased down another human being with a katana over a paper. A paper.”

“You’ll be just outside the door,” she said with some of her usual flirtatiousness. He’d missed it.

“Nothing would happen with you right there, now would it?”

And there was so much faith in her eyes that he found himself lurking outside an examination room waiting for a confession.

“The skull is a hoax!” exclaimed the Dean of Medicine. ”It's a lie, I tell you!”

Well, there was his cue.

“You're under arrest, Professor Bradbury,” he said, stepping into the room.

The professor panicked, shoving Jack into a table as he made a run for it. Jack gave chase, Phryne at his heels; just outside he found a motorbike and quickly did the math—if he didn’t catch Bradbury soon he was likely to lose him in the unfamiliar corridors, and the bike would close the distance. He mounted the bike and felt Phryne behind him.

“What are you doing, Miss Fisher?” he called back to her.

“What we do best, Jack!” she replied, wrapping her hands around his waist. “And I'm afraid I'm going to have to touch you.”

He drove, catching Bradbury before the next corner. Phryne had gotten his gun from his trousers and was pointing it at the murderer.

“Hold it right there!”

Jack dismounted the bike and placed handcuffs on Bradbury. Looking up he saw Phryne, positively beaming from the thrill of the chase, his gun still trained on the murderer.

“My gun, Miss Fisher?” he said, and she grinned at him.

“We make an excellent team, don’t you think inspector?” she asked, handing the weapon over.

It would be so easy to fall back into their old routine, a bit of banter, a bit of give (usually him) and
They found themselves back in Jack's office the next morning, going over the details of the case.

“I imagine that Miss Mason and Mr. Street are still in a rather difficult position,” he said, trying to ignore the way Miss Fisher lounged in her chair as if she belonged there. Perhaps she did.

“Yes, well, I believe some of the concerns were allayed by the institution of a new scholarship fund,” she said. Jack raised an eyebrow, and her answering shrug was too casual to be sincere. “So I've heard from Mac. There was a mysterious benefactor.”

“How intriguing,” he said mildly, suspecting he knew the identity. The only question was where she had gotten the money. He decided to change the subject and address the elephant in the room. "So, England, Miss Fisher?"

Over the past few days he had considered and discarded many reasons for her journey. Was it a trip? A permanent move? He hadn’t asked. He hadn’t wanted to ask. Asking would mean that he cared, and he was trying very much not to.

"Yes, some distant relative has died and my father's inherited a barony. I shudder to think what he'd do if I didn't go with him and manage the affairs."

He nodded, as if such a thing was an everyday occurrence. The only surprise, really, was that it was only a barony; he would have pegged her as a marchioness at a minimum.


His lips twitched; she smiled in response.

"It will be good, I think, to see how things have changed," she said, more sombrely than he would have anticipated.

“And your ward?” he asked.

“Remaining in Australia for the time being,” Phryne replied. “She’s uncertain about leaving everything behind, so we thought it best that I go ahead and make arrangements before making any other decisions. None of us know what we will find on the other side, really; all the lawyers will say is that there is an estate, and a sum was sent to arrange the move.”

Ah, one of Miss Fisher's leaps of faith then.

“And you leave… tomorrow?”

“Yes,” she said. She tugged at the hem of her skirt, suddenly seeming so much smaller than usual. “Yes. I'm spending the night at the Windsor, to keep from waking Dot and Jane in the morning.”

Jack suspected there was more to it than that; a desire to avoid difficult goodbyes in the morning, or an aversion to the inevitable weeping.

“And this evening?” he asked. “A farewell party that breaks at least three laws, I’m sure.”

She tilted her head and smiled at him, almost wistful, and he realised with a pang that he would never
see that look again.

“No,” she said. “I’m taking Jane and Dot out for dinner, then I’ll be in the hotel room all evening.”

“Early night?”

“Depends on the company.”

It lacked the usual sparkle of her invitations, if that was what it was.

“I’m sure you’ll have no difficulties,” he said diplomatically.

She rose from the chair, clearly out of sorts. “That’s not what I meant, Jack. I… Oh, damn it all! Yes, I will have an early night. Then I’ll get on the damned boat tomorrow and hope that I don’t succumb to the urge to push my father overboard at the earliest opportunity.”

“Confessing a motive for murder in front of a police officer is unwise, Miss Fisher,” he said, hoping the absurdity would make her smile. He would miss her smiles, the way the corners of her eyes would crinkle without her realising.

She just sighed and pulled a card from her purse.

“Here’s where you can reach me if there’s any unfinished business,” she said. “I’ll be in from eight, and I leave at seven.”

“That’s early for you, isn’t it?” he asked, taking the card. It had the Windsor’s details and a room number scrawled across the back.

“Frightfully early,” she said, finally managing a sincere smile. “But think of all the opportunities! I’ll just have to suffer through.”

She turned to leave, pausing at the door but still facing the reception.

“Goodbye, Inspector Robinson.”

“Goodbye, Miss Fisher.”

———

It was almost ten o’clock when he arrived at the Windsor; he’d been held up at the station until nearly half eight, distracted from his work by unanswered questions. He’d gone home only briefly, to shower, change, and wrap the package he had arranged on his lunch break, then sat in front of the hotel for ages debating whether he had really understood. He’d feel an utter fool if he was wrong. But it would feel worse not to try, to have said goodbye to the woman he loved in a police station without so much as looking her in the eye.

The concierge approached him as he entered the lobby, no doubt wondering what a man like Jack Robinson was doing at a place like that. He flashed his police credentials, planning to claim a witness statement if he was pressed, and tried to ignore that it was an abuse of his position. The concierge nodded and indicated the lift, and Jack gave him a grateful smile.

He went up to the fourth floor and followed the numbers until he reached Phryne’s door. He raised his fist to knock, then hesitated. Lowering his arm, he ran a hand across the package he had brought with him. Perhaps he should just leave it outside the door with a note of explanation. It would save him the grief of another disappointment. What could he find on the other side of the door, after all?
Nothing but Phryne Fisher, for one last time. But perhaps that was enough.

To knock or walk away?
Chapter 31

Chapter Notes

The final chapter of this story. I am genuinely overwhelmed by the outpouring of love and support and flailing that you have provided me with, dear readers. I want to thank each and every one of you; the response has been more than I had ever imagined. I love you all.

Phryne checked her cases again, found them as packed as they had been the first three times, and contemplated going to the Green Mill for a final night of debauchery. The last thing she needed was an early morning with a hangover and her parents though, so she flung herself into a chair, picked up the book that was holding none of her attention, and aggressively turned to her dog-eared page.

She’d really thought he would come.

She’d really wanted him to come.

The novel was about as engrossing as it had been during her other attempts; she had read three pages before realising that she hadn’t taken in a word, her mind drifting back to Jack’s office that afternoon. The way he’d looked at her…. She had been so certain he would understand. That he would come.

It was no good. She stood up, grabbed her hat and coat, and decided to go for a walk. Anything would be better than staring at the walls for hours on end. She nodded curtly to the lift operator on her way to the foyer, then went into the dark Melbourne evening. The stars would be different in England, she remembered. The first time, with the brashness of a teenager, she had thought it wouldn’t matter—she barely looked at the stars anyway. She’d been wrong; it had never quite settled in the four years she was in Europe.

She had only gone a short distance in the brisk night air before it began to rain, a light mist that was just enough to leave her chilled. She pulled the jacket closer, thankful that it was a plain one eminently practical for the weather, and turned to go back to the hotel.

Once back in the well-lit foyer she considered telephoning Jack to satisfy her curiosity, then discarded the thought and headed back to her room. What could she possibly learn that wouldn’t prove unpleasant? ‘Sorry, Miss Fisher, but you’re too much trouble’? She sighed in irritation; she’d wrapped up her life so neatly, uncertain if or when she’d return to Melbourne, and Jack was the last loose end.

She got out of the lift, still musing over the situation. She turned the corner of the corridor and had taken several steps when she saw him: standing in front of her door, head bowed in contemplation, his familiar brown coat and fedora almost out of place in the ornamentation of the Windsor’s decor.

“Ja—” Phryne’s voice caught in her throat. She coughed lightly. “Jack!”

He turned to face her. He looked… worn, but he gave her a tentative smile.

“Miss Fisher,” his voice was rough.

She hurried to close the distance.
“I wasn’t sure you’d come,” she said.

He shrugged, shifting a package from one hand to the other.

“I wasn’t sure I was welcome,” he said. “Am I too late?”

She shook her head. “Never.”

His reflexive smile was bittersweet and her stomach twisted in response. She looked away, digging through her purse to extract her room key.

“Come in,” she said, moving past him to unlock the door.

Inside the room she switched on the lamps, giving the room a dim glow. The door clicked shut and she turned to him. He remained by the door, shifting from foot to foot, his discomfort clear.

“Come in, Jack. I won’t bite. Sit, if you’d like.”

She took a seat on the chaise herself, leaving space for him if he chose. Jack held up the package in his hand instead and her curiosity was piqued.

“Is that a present for me?” she asked.

Presents had been rare in her childhood, and it was always a thrill to receive one. He nodded and she reached for it with both hands. He passed it over and gingerly took a seat at the edge of the chaise.

“Is that a present for me?” she asked.

“Thank you, Jack,” she said quietly, barely stopping herself from reaching to squeeze his hand.

“You haven’t opened it yet,” he replied.

“I know. Thank you.”

She opened it carefully, noting the precision to his wrapping with a smile. How very like him. It was a large tin of boiled sweets, a book, and a bookmark.

“It’s not much—” he began.

“Thank you.”

“When I was shipped off… well, Rosie had packed me a bag of bullseyes. It helped when the seas were rough,” he said. “But I remembered that you preferred the fruit ones. I don’t know if they’ll—”

“Jack, stop explaining. This is…,” there was a lump in her throat, she realised with embarrassment. “This is the most thoughtful gift.”

She took a good look at the book next, running her hand along the spine. It was a biography of Leonardo Da Vinci, and she stole a look at Jack in confusion.

“A man who could do just about anything. It seemed apt,” he offered in explanation, and she smiled.

The bookmark was marking a page, and she opened the book. The bookmark itself was a dark brown leather embossed with an outline of Australia; he’d teased her, more than once, about her habit of marking her spot by folding pages. She read the page and exhaled loudly; it was a quote from Da Vinci himself, beautifully illustrated.

*For once you have tasted flight you will walk the earth with your eyes turned skywards,*
for there you have been and there you will long to return.

Her hands trembled as she replaced the bookmark and set the volume aside, then she twisted herself to face him properly.

“Jack…” she said, uncertain what came next.

His eyes drifted closed, as if he was letting her voice wash over him. Then they opened again and he looked at her intently, their eyes meeting.

“Miss Fisher.”

She reached up to cup his cheek.

“Say my name, Jack. Please. Just for tonight.”

He shuddered, the hastily erected walls between them crumbling once more.

“Phryne,” he breathed.

Nobody in the world said her name the way he did, like it was everything precious in the world, like it was a secret to be treasured, to be used sparingly in moments that mattered.

She kissed him, a light brush of her lips against his tampered with hesitance. His returning kiss was slow and shallow, his hand cradling her head. They pulled away at almost the same moment, sharing a small smile.

"One last gaudy night?" she said softly, hoping he would say yes. She couldn’t bear to end it already; there were hours before her ship left.

“No,” he said, and her heart fell. He gave her a sad, lopsided sort of smile. “A farewell, perhaps, but there is nothing gaudy about tonight.”

She had expected a desperate tango, mad and passionate and unrestrained. Instead she found a waltz; slow, close and perfectly in step. The sort of intimacy that came from knowing that your bed partner was ticklish behind their right knee, and left speechless by a well-timed kiss at the hollow of their throat, and exactly what they looked like when their pleasure was almost unbearably close. The sort of intimacy that Phryne had spent most of her life deliberately avoiding.

She remembered it in pieces later.

The way they had undressed each other so slowly and carefully that she almost came from the anticipation alone.

His sudden withdrawal just before she’d found her first release. Her eyes had snapped open and found him grinning. “You bastard,” she muttered, and he’d laughed again. “Trust me,” he had countered, stroking her lightly. She had nodded. Oh, ooooh, oh… so very worth it.

Kissing while they both recovered, soft and sloppy and careless in their giddiness.

He said something that made her laugh as she had ridden him, and his eyes had closed at the pleasure and he’d groaned her name. “Nothing feels better than you laughing around my cock…” She’d raised an eyebrow at that, and he’d managed half an explanation about the unexpected flutter of muscles before she was laughing again and he was left without words. Or coherent thought.
A particularly enthused round that made her declare his hands the eighth wonder of the world.

“Do you love me?”
He had been tracing circles across her skin when she’d asked; he’d shaken his head.
“Would it change anything if I did?”
“No,” she admitted; it was both freedom and duty that called her away.
“Then spare me that one indignity,” he’d said, so quietly that she had almost missed it.

“Forget your hands,” she had gasped at one point, his mouth exploring her thoroughly. “Your tongue is definitely the Eighth Wonder.”

Moving together, both of them half-asleep but not quite ready to end their evening.

There was a certain irony in the fact that this was their only night without pretenses, nothing held in reserve. In the exhausted afterglow, she traced the line of his shoulders, down his arm, catching his hand in hers.

“When did you become so marvelous?” she asked quietly.

He looked almost sheepish, the wayward curl across his forehead adding to the effect.

“Now is a time for you to dance with princes and film stars, Phryne, where you belong. But I did hope you wouldn't forget me entirely.”

Daft, dear man; as if she could.

She moved closer, pressing kisses against his eyelids.

“Go to sleep, Jack,” she whispered, nestling against his shoulder.

His breathing soon evened out, but Phryne found it impossible to sleep. She shifted, studying his face in the slight light from the street. He was asleep, looking young and endearing and content. She rested her head against his chest, listening to the steady thump of his heart.

“You could come with me,” she whispered into the darkness. It was not a serious suggestion, and he wouldn’t have agreed if it was. But she knew she would miss him, that she already missed him.

“There’s a whole world out there. Think of all the things we could see.”

The thought given voice, she found that she was tired and drifted off with his heartbeat in her ear.

She was roused a few hours later by the sensation of Jack slipping from the bed. She wondered whether she should let him know she was awake—she could reach for him and they could find one more stolen moment—but decided against it. It would mean saying goodbye again. After several hushed minutes while he dressed, she felt the mattress sag and his hand stroking her hair. Then he pressed a kiss against her temple and murmured something; she strained to make it out.

“Fly, darling, maddening Phryne.”

And then he was gone with nothing more than a nearly silent click of a door.

———

In the morning, she rose and dressed in a jade green dress and hat with black accents; practical enough for travel, stylish enough to make an impression. A valet took her cases down to the street,
where Bert and Cec met her in the taxi. She planned to meet up with her parents once they were on the ship, and then hopefully avoid them for most of the journey.

At the docks, her friends quickly arranged for her luggage to be loaded and said their goodbyes. Cec hugged her and Bert made a gruff comment to hide his tears.

“Don’t forget to write just because you’re a toff now,” he scolded.

“Albert Johnson, I am hurt. I’ve always been a toff, you just didn’t notice,” she laughed, embracing him. “But I will write. And take care of Dot and Jane for me.”

Goodbyes done, Phryne climbed the ramp of The Orient, prepared for her new journey. And if she stood for just a moment too long at the rails, searching the crowd of well wishers for a familiar brown figure, nobody would know.

Nobody but the figure himself, tucked away out of sight, watching a woman in green.
Chapter 32

Chapter Notes

Look, the end of Chapter 31? That's the story's end. This epilogue? This is the fanfiction ending. I debated whether to post it at all, as it rather lacks artistic merit. So if you are emotionally satisfied by the last chapter, keep it that way; it makes for a stronger story. If you cannot bear to leave it, this is for you. And once more, thank you all for reading and commenting.

No, seriously. If you liked the ending ending, leave it at that.

May 1930

Miss Fisher's first letter had arrived only a few weeks after her departure, posted from some far-flung locale when she had come into port. It had sat on Jack's kitchen table for a week before he was capable of opening it.

She sounded light and happy, telling him about her time aboard the ship. It was the first of many letters exchanged. She wrote about the journey and settling in England. He kept her abreast of developments at home—the engagement of Collins and Miss Williams, Mac's appointment as coroner, cases he had worked. She wrote about her tour of Europe, places both of them had only seen as battlefields now green and pleasant in the late summer sun. He assured her of her aunt's health after the passing of her son Arthur, choosing not to include that Prudence Stanley had requested him to handle the inquiry specifically; it was not his story to tell.

She relayed the story of a minor member of royalty's marriage proposal and her decline—"His Grace was too costly to wear every day" she had written, making him laugh out loud in the quiet of his kitchen. He chose not write about Concetta Strano's proposal or how close he had come to accepting it, selecting instead a particularly amusing anecdote about the arrest of Bert Johnson for public drunkenness and about the promotion of Hugh Collins.

She wrote about places in Europe neither of them had been before and the adventures she found there—a murder investigation in Nice, a smuggling ring in Antwerp. Jewels, not people, so she hadn't discovered the other end of the Sanderson-Fletcher case; he wouldn't have put it past her. One night he had a drink too many and wrote to her about that investigation: his former father-in-law taking him off the case for political reasons that ended up being a concentrated effort to keep his involvement hidden; Miss Williams and her willingness to exploit her Catholicism to gain access that was closed to him once she realised girls were in danger; the ultimate discovery that Sidney Fletcher had been behind it all and George Sanderson had turned a blind eye to benefit from it. Her response was uncharacteristically sombre; she asked how Rosie had handled the news (not well, and he fell a little more in love with her for asking) and how he was holding up. (Also not well, hence the writing of the letter.)

The letter also contained an admonishment not to shoulder the blame: "Not everyone can be as honourable as you, Jack. Some people (and I must unfortunately include your former father-in-law in this category, though it pains me given your previous admiration) are downright despicable. But I am glad that those girls had you, Jack Robinson. The man who always does the right thing." He had
doubted that particular sentiment, remembering his behaviour towards her on occasion, but her words had been a comfort he returned to several times in the following months nonetheless.

Neither the letters nor time had managed to cool his feelings for her; to the contrary, the distance reminded him of all the reasons he had cared for her in the first place. Her wit and humour, sharply observant and so in line with his own. Her kindness, emerging at odd times and in unexpected ways. Her vivacity; she had included a photograph of herself smiling at the top of Ben Nevis in one letter, and written on the back: “It is not much of a mountain, I suppose, but it will prepare me for larger ones.” as if the tallest mountain in the British Isles was no feat at all. He’d tucked the photograph in his billfold; probably an inappropriately intimate action, but it served as a reminder.

He missed her. Very much. But it was clear that the separation was in their best interests, forcing them to disentwine in a way his forced extraction from her life would not have done. He would have caved, he knew that beyond a doubt, the first time one of them had asked for the other. And they would have asked.

His point had been reinforced quite thoroughly with her latest letter. She wrote of a man on her parents’ estate—the novelty of that had not worn off, though he had the distinct sense that her father had not taken to the life with the aptitude she had—who raised falcons for hunting. “It is exhilarating,” she had written, “to watch the bird take flight as the jesses are slipped, free to wheel and spin in the air. And when it is done she flies back to where she is safe and (I believe) loved.” He had not yet replied to that letter; every time he sat down he was tempted to compare her to a falcon as he had once before. He no longer remembered if he had shared that particular thought with her, and it gave him pause. Pause enough to realise that such a notion would not do their recovering friendship any good.

He had spent the afternoon writing reports, pausing only briefly in a quest for coffee to counter the particular dullness of a file from a woman complaining her cat had been stolen—the animal was eventually found two streets over, having taken up residence in the house he had been mooching extra dinners off for months. He had just finished it and was debating whether to begin another when there was a knock at the door; Collins, presumably, and he was torn between hoping for a case that would require his attention and the awareness that his shift was almost over and he was only a report or two away from freedom. He had a new book and a particularly nice bottle of whiskey waiting at home, assuming he could justify leaving when the paperwork stack seemed to grow exponentially every time he turned around.

He looked up and felt his entire world shift off-kilter.

"Phryne."

———

City South Police Station looked much as it always had; she thought the reception might have gotten a fresh coat of paint, but it was the same dreary colour and didn't improve anything. Hugh was at the desk on the telephone, and his eyes widened when he saw her.

She motioned for him to be quiet.

"Is the inspector in?" she whispered, and he nodded.

She walked through the gate and towards Jack's door, left far enough ajar that she could see him working without stepping inside. She didn't draw attention to herself immediately, choosing to watch him instead; she had missed him, terribly and wonderfully, and it wasn't until he was in front of her that she realised exactly how much. Everything about the tableau before her was achingly familiar;
the line of his jaw, the method he employed for reading and signing the reports on his desk, the way he would stop to sip his tea without looking up. Even his suit was one he had worn many times before. But after a moment she noticed that there were changes; his office had been remodelled, and there was at least one new trophy on the mantel—she remembered him mentioning it in one of his letters, actually—and it made her smile. He was still Jack, but his life had not frozen completely in her absence. Good.

Her own life had certainly not frozen, though it had led her home far earlier than she would have possibly imagined. She had only just gone through the estate’s finances and secured sufficient assets from her father's proclivities to keep the estate in good condition and begun her time on the continent when the stock market had crashed in America. It hadn't put an immediate damper on things, but eventually she found that she could not justify the huge expense. And, truthfully, she had grown homesick.

It had come to a head when she met up with an old pilot friend from her time at war, who offered to fly with her. They had run into some minor trouble, and he had leaned back to yell to her about using gravity instead of fighting it. She'd landed the plane safely enough, and turned down the friend's advances over drinks that evening.

She had arranged her return to Australia shortly afterwards. A large house in St. Kilda had been purchased at a low price because the desperate owner was liquidating his assets for cash. A butler (called Mr. Butler, which was either hilarious or a clear indication of predestination) was employed through a recommendation of an old friend, and Dot had taken over most of the little details. She was, for the first time in her life, feeling truly secure about her finances; safe investments and landlady to multiple properties had, in light of recent events, come to seem much more than it had before. Which only left the little matter of Jack.

She had missed her first boat over the issue. They had both made a mess of things by assuming too much or speaking too little, and she was not sure she could resist the temptation to fall into those same habits. Their exchanged letters had gone far in healing the injuries to their friendship; she needed to know what she wanted before she faced that delicious mouth of his, for both their sakes. It had taken her a stunningly short amount of time to realise that what she wanted was Jack.

She wanted his support when things went wrong, and she wanted the way he would sneak out of his own house to let her sleep, and she wanted his reminders not to be afraid of shadows. She wanted to be his support in equal measure, to share laughter and smiles, to understand his own shadows and stand vigilant against them. She wanted talks that lasted late into the night and lovemaking that lasted into the early afternoon. She even, God help her, wanted his concern over the stupid things she did; she wouldn't stop doing them, but the concern was nice, and sometimes even justified. She wanted Jack Robinson, and Phryne was a woman who got what she wanted.

This, however, required him to want it too.

She had written and rewritten letters to try and explain, but none had been right. The closest she had come was after the falconry demonstration with one of the men who worked at the estate. So she'd written about that instead, got on a boat, and crossed her fingers.

He finished off one report, filing it neatly without looking up from his desk. It was her cue; she knocked gently on the door, then stepped inside. He glanced up, clearly expecting Collins or another constable, and a look of utter disbelief crossed his face.

"Phryne," he said, sounding like the breath had been knocked from him.

He still said her name like nobody else. He half-rose to greet her and then froze, as if not entirely
certain what would be appropriate.

"If you're wondering whether you should kiss me," she said with a laugh, closing the door behind her, "the answer is yes."

He strode towards her, cupped her face gently, then stilled. His eyes—have they become bluer in my absence, she wondered, or had I just forgotten?—searched for an explanation.

"If you don't kiss me, Jack Robinson, then I'll be forced to kiss you and I don't have the self-restraint you do to keep it to just the one."

He chuckled but didn't move.

"I mean it," she warned. Suddenly back in this close proximity, she was overwhelmed by it all, the familiarity of his scent and the feel of his hands after such a long absence.

He kissed her slowly and sweetly, but with a reserve that meant his guard was up. Which was fair enough, under the circumstances. There was the tiniest hint of a smile when he pulled away though, and her heart thudded.

"Since when do you drink coffee?" she said, recognising the unfamiliar note in his kiss.

And there was the full smile.

"It's a tactical error to think you know everything about me, Miss Fisher."

"An eternal source of mystery?" she asked.

Her hands had found his tie by their own volition, and she saw him swallow. She released it, reluctantly, determined to be fair.

"Yes, but I might give you this one," he said. "It does wonders when I'm tempted to nod off."

"Late night?"

It was probably a bad idea to have this conversation if he was tired. She didn't want to wait any longer now that she was there, worried that her courage might fail her if it was put off. But if it was what he required, she would just have to accept it. No, she would choose to accept it.

"Boring reports," he clarified, to her relief. "But as I am off the clock in...five minutes, I think I'll survive."

"What do you say to giving those clock hands a teensy little nudge forward and leaving now?"

He sighed, stepping backwards.

"What is this, Phryne? Back in town—"

"Don't," she cut him off. "Don't say what you're thinking right now, please. I know why you'd think it, but I can't bear to hear it."

He reached up to touch her cheek, brushing his thumb across it tenderly.

"What is it?" he asked again.

"I'm moving back to Melbourne," she said, watching his face for a reaction. "And we need to talk."
"That is, under the circumstances, probably a wise idea," he said quietly, and for the first time since she had stepped into his office she had no idea what he was thinking.

They drove in separate cars to her new house. She even obeyed the speed limit so he could follow behind, though he was perfectly capable of finding it himself. Or perhaps it was to ensure he did arrive; the temptation to drive anywhere else but his own doom was great.

"Welcome to Wardlow," she said when they arrived.

He took the large house in. It was, frankly, stunning; large, well-situated, and the strong lines and ornate ironwork were an architectural manifestation of the paradoxes that composed Phryne Fisher.

"Come in through the kitchen," she said, moving towards the back.

He followed her, wondering if he should have insisted on having this conversation elsewhere. It would not, he suspected, be fit for public consumption, so her house was as good as any other option. Better, probably, than his, which still resonated with memories of their liaisons.

The kitchen was comforting and cozy. A selection of food had been left out with a note from her butler, saying he had gone out for his weekly card game. So the house was empty. Good for privacy, not good for his sanity.

"Sit," she ordered, putting the kettle on.

It was silent as the kettle came to a boil. Once she had poured the water into the pot to steep, she brought over the tray and sat across from him.

"So...?" he asked eventually. Rude, but he could already feel the pain re-emerging, threatening to damage the friendship they had so carefully reforged.

"I'm back," she said. "For a variety of reasons, all of them boiling down to my own choice."

"And you want to resume our professional association?"

"Yes, but that's not why I asked you here."

"Phryne, I can't... I can't do that again."

"I know," she said earnestly, reaching out to grab his hand. "I know that, Jack. If I hadn't been so wrapped up in my own...situation, I would have known that before. But it was easier to justify my own actions as a mutually agreeable game. And I could see it sometimes and tried to extract myself, but all it did was hurt both of us because I couldn't stay away."

"I know the feeling," he said, remembering how easy it had been to justify their actions in the moment. How many times he had told himself that he wouldn't say yes, wouldn't ask, and still found himself with her.

"I still can't stay away," she admitted. "It's why I wrote to you. I told myself I wouldn't when I left, you know. That maybe what we had, that final goodbye, was enough. But it wasn't. It's never enough, Jack. And I had such a lovely time in Europe, I did. But I..."

There were tears in her eyes, and he rounded the table to hold her close. Over a year apart and it felt like the most natural thing in the world. She leaned against him for a moment, her breaths deep and
shuddering. When it subsided she pulled away and gave him a tiny smile.

"I'm sorry. I've spent six weeks on the boat trying to find the words, and they never seem to come when I need them. But I missed you, Jack. I had everything I wanted, or that I thought I wanted, and I still missed you. And it never abated. So I had to ask myself what I wanted, and it was always home. My family. You. That was freedom; everything in Europe was just trappings."

He had never managed to feel both elated and full of dread at the same time. Because he knew that he was not strong enough to say no indefinitely, and it had almost destroyed him once before.

"Phryne—"

"Let me finish," she said. "I wanted you, and I knew I could have you. I am, I will admit, quite confident in the fact that the pull goes both ways. But that wasn't enough either. I had to be sure it was something we both wanted, that brought out the best of ourselves instead of the worst."

Against his better judgement, hope welled in his chest; she would never be intentionally cruel despite the damage they had unwittingly inflicted upon each other in fear, and she would not toy with him. He was certain of that, at least, and it was enough to hope.

"And what was your conclusion?"

"That I had to try. That I had to lay it before you and hope that love was enough."

He was stunned. So stunned that his silence lasted too long and she began to backtrack.

"I don't...I didn't intend to put it quite so bluntly. Obviously you would have to think about it and I would completely understand if you—"

"Phryne," he said, her name the only sound he could manage. He was quiet for another moment, looking for the words. Even Shakespeare had deserted him, that bastard. "Phryne...love isn't enough—no, listen—love isn't enough by itself. It requires respect and trust and the ability to forgive." He had no recollection of reaching for her hand, but it was in his, soft and warm and strong. He raised it to his lips, pressed a kiss against her palm. "And I think that we've found that, somehow. Perhaps we had it and lost sight, or it was always waiting to come out with time and care, or perhaps I am simply deluding myself. But I'm confident enough to try, at least, if you are."

The hand he had kissed moved to his cheek; he imagined he could still feel the warmth of his lips on her palm, that her handprint would mark his cheek forever, even if their time was limited.

He found he didn't mind.

After a long moment they moved apart, remembering the tea and meal before them. Phryne poured two cups while he retrieved plates and cutlery, then they sat side by side, arms brushing as they dished out their dinners.

Taking a bite of the gratin, Jack gave an appreciative sound.

"Mr. Butler is Cordon Bleu trained," Phryne laughed. "And absolutely worth his weight in gold. I thought that he might be able to tempt you into a conversation if I could not."

She laughed again, but Jack heard the underlying concern; she had prepared for his rebuff and come to him anyway. Heart of a lioness.

"He might be Cordon Bleu trained, but I'm sure he can't manage a sandwich like you."
There was a slight smirk to her lips in response. “Oh Jack, he makes sandwiches an art form. You’ll just have to come to lunch someday soon and see.”

“I’d like that,” he said quietly, then took another bite of gratin. “This is delicious.”

As they ate they talked about Phryne’s return journey and her plans for the near future, simply enjoying the ability to exchange words instantly instead of weeks apart.

“Where is Jane?” Jack asked at one point. He’d become exceptionally fond of the girl, who had taken to stopping by the station a few times a month with Miss Williams. She had been unable to face leaving her mother behind in the end, though she often talked about visiting Miss Phryne after leaving school and before starting university; she had even toyed with the possibility of going to school in England.

“Spending the weekend with Aunt Prudence. Who, I hear, is exceedingly fond of you nowadays.”

“I believe I provided her with some assistance at a much-needed juncture,” he said.

“Jack, the woman actually cried when she told me about it. She’s a battle ax, and she certainly doesn’t cry without reason.”

“It was nothing, Phryne.”

She shook her head. “It might have seemed like nothing to you, just doing the right thing because it was the right thing. But to Aunt Prudence it meant the world. Thank you.”

He took a sip of his tea to avoid replying; Prudence Stanley was a good woman in spite of her blustering persona, and he’d been happy to help her any way he could.

As the meal wound down, Phryne poured them each a measure of whiskey and the tone of their conversation turned more serious as they attempted to define the boundaries of their newfound understanding.

“I need you to trust me, Phryne,” he said. “To trust that I will be on your side.”

“I do.”

“Sometimes,” he said, remembering all the times she had not.

“Always,” she asserted. “It’s just… I can’t guarantee it will be my first response every time. Old habits are not so easy to break, and there’s a lifetime of reasons behind it. I can’t erase those.” She reached over to lace her fingers through his. “But I trust you, Jack. When I fail—and I will, I’m sure of it—that’s me, not you. Never you.”

He thought that he could accept her occasional doubt, wait for the impulse to protect herself to pass. It was not an unfair request.

“I don’t know if I’d ever being willing to marry again,” she offered up in turn, looking almost apologetic.

“As a divorced man and a widow we might have leniency for longer than most, but that could eventually cause...difficulties in my job.”

“I know. That’s why I’m telling you now. But I won’t marry because it is the solution to a problem, and beyond that...”
“It doesn’t appeal?”

“Not even to you, darling.”

He contemplated it; whether he could face the censure or be willing to walk away, whether the risk of the unknown was too great for his cautious nature. His first instinct was that more time with her, a luxury he had not even dared to dream of, was worth any cost; the more rational part of his brain knew this was not true. Neither would be happy if he compromised his integrity. Luckily, his integrity had proven itself far more flexible than he had once thought.

“That seems fair,” he said, and the relief on her face cast aside the last sliver of doubt. “But if it becomes…”

“We’ll talk about it,” she promised. “There will be a solution somewhere.”

He nodded. They continued to eat the last few bites of their meal.

“I can’t…” he paused, trying to articulate what he intended without giving insult. “I cannot share your bed with other men.”

He was not that liberal-minded, though he wished he could be. It had driven him mad before, to merely be part of a parade.

She nodded. “I wouldn’t expect you to.”

“Are you certain?” he asked. “I would never dictate what you—”

“Jack,” she said firmly. “You have been the one constant in my life for a long time now. It’s surprised me as much as anybody else, but it’s true. It’s nice. It’s more than nice, it’s…” she paused, shifting to brush his cheek with her free hand. “It’s what I want. I will flirt—”

“I would hope for nothing less,” he smiled.

“I will flirt, probably more than you would like, and I won’t abide jealousy. But for as long as we are doing this, you’ll be the only one I extend an invitation to.”

“Alright.”

“It was better than alright, if I recall,” she smirked, taking another sip of her drink, and he felt the fear in his chest begin to abate.

When it was done he cleared the plates and returned the uneaten food to the icebox and pantry, uncertain what would come next.

“I’m afraid that most of the rooms are still in a bit of a state,” she said. “I think my bedroom may be the only room in the house that is ready for company, as it were. Entirely unintentional, I assure you; we can stay in here or call it a night, but the invitation is open.”

There was something in the admission that warmed him; that she had sought him out so shortly after arriving, perhaps, or that she felt no reluctance to share her foibles and imperfections, even if they were just in her interior decorating.

“And if we go upstairs?” he asked, trying not to give the game away; he’d already decided that he had no intention of leaving anytime soon, if she offered.

“There’s champagne and music and the most comfortable bed I’ve ever slept in. And no
expectations.”
“Sounds perfect.”

“With the right company it is,” she said quietly.

He tipped his head in acknowledgement. “Lead the way, Miss Fisher.”

She stood, walking past him towards the door leading to a corridor.

“Oh, Phryne?”

She turned as he reached out, catching her arm with one hand and drawing her closer. She came with a smile, eyes bright; her hands rested loosely against his hips, neither possessive nor restraining. He cradled her head with his other hand, feeling the silkiness of her hair, and kissed her. Slow and eager and open. When they broke apart, they both smiled.

“You know,” he said, unable to stop the grin on his face. “I used to worry that you would leave without me. It never occurred to me that you’d come back.”

“I’m full of surprises, inspector,” she said with a laugh, reaching out to take his hand. “But I think I can safely say when you kiss me like that, I will always fly home.”

———

She barely paid any heed to the half decorated rooms as she led him towards the stairs, pausing from time to time simply to kiss him again. He was gravity and safety and happiness, and she loved him; she could live without him, certainly, and perhaps one day she would by choice or necessity...but for now, she could be that little bit better she always was with him beside her.

Up the stairs and inside the boudoir, he stopped to take it all in. It was a stunning room; the bed was plush and welcoming, her favourite artwork was on the walls, and it nearly sang of both elegance and comfort. She did not mention the empty drawers, set aside in the hope that he would fill them with a change of clothes and pyjamas and all the sorts of things that found their way into his pockets after a long day at work; there would be time for that later.

“Do you like it?” she asked, finally releasing his hand to retrieve the champagne from a low table.

He continued to look around.

“It is… it is very much you, isn’t it?”

She popped the top off the bottle and began to pour the champagne into two glasses. “Is that a bad thing?”

“No,” he said adamantly, taking a seat on the chaise and giving her a small smile. “I love it.”

She brought over the two glasses, kicking off her shoes and draping herself dramatically across the raised end of the chaise.

“So, how are Hugh and Dottie?” she asked. She knew what Dottie had written, of engagements and happiness, but she suspected it was not the whole story.

“The wedding is in… six weeks?” Jack said.

“And…?”
“And there were some bumps along the road, but they got there,” he said, taking a sip of his drink.

“Such as?”

“Hugh’s mother didn’t approve of his decision to convert to Catholicism, as I’m sure you already knew.”

“I did,” she confirmed dryly. “I hear he went fishing, a thought process I failed to follow then or now. But I suspect that’s not the whole story.”

“I believe Miss Williams had no interest in relinquishing her post at the magazine,” Jack offered. “Both of them grappled with the realities of being and being with a modern woman.”

“Ahh, a common dilemma.”

His smirk was wry, and she nudged his leg with her foot in a playful reprimand.

“I believe a compromise was eventually reached, though they both had to revise their expectations. Dot’s writing fewer articles, which has the advantage of stretching out her reserve of Psyche Baker tales. If her more recent stories are anything to go by, she’s making them up whole cloth by now. Either that,” he smirked. “Or I never want to be made privy to some of your other investigations. And that is all I am saying about my constable’s social life.”

Both of their glasses were empty, so Phryne stood and moved across the room to fill them again. When she returned she found that Jack had removed his jacket, draping it across the top of the chaise, and she was certain that she had never seen a more beautiful man.

“I hope you didn’t mind,” he said, looking chagrined. “It was getting uncomfortably warm.”

“Oh, I certainly do not mind,” she purred. “In fact, I might just ban the wearing of jackets in my house. There’s something about a man in shirtsleeves…”

He raised an eyebrow, attempting to look unamused, but the twitch of his lips gave him away. She hadn’t kissed him since they’d entered the room, unwilling to press him even slightly, but she allowed herself to bend over and brush her lips against the corner of his mouth as she handed him his glass. He tugged her towards his lap, so gently that she felt no pressure to follow; she did though, demurely crossing her legs as she perched on his knee and grinning at him.

“Why, Jack! You do look terribly flushed!” she exclaimed. “If you’re really uncomfortable, I think you’d better remove that tie.”

His eyes were so beautiful when he smiled. Phryne passed her champagne glass into his empty hand and slowly unknotted the tie, running her hands down the length of silk before removing it. Then she loosened the button on his collar, exposing the hollow at the base of his throat. She wondered if it would still taste the same if she licked it.

Later, she told herself. There will be time.

“There,” she said quietly, smoothing the collar. “Much better.”

His Adam’s apple bobbed as he swallowed. She took her glass back from his outstretched hand and sipped, breaking the intensity of the moment to their mutual relief. Phryne stood again, putting some music on the gramophone, then returned with a flirtatious sashay.

They finished the second glasses and the next as they talked, Phryne lounging comfortably on his lap. He mentioned the new species of orchids he’d planted, a notoriously difficult one. She mentioned that she was buying a plane of some description and soon; she was going to see a Tiger
Moth after the weekend.

“Have you ever flown, Jack?”

“Afraid not, Miss Fisher. I do believe you asked me once before.”

“Will you come up with me?”

“I don’t know,” he said, smiling so broadly he looked like another man entirely. “Is it more or less terrifying than your driving?”

“Infinitely more,” she replied with a smile of her own.

She was suddenly aware that she was carding her fingers through his hair, and of the feel of his hand against the small of her back.

“Do you really want me to?” he asked, gentle and serious now, sensing the shift in her mood.

“More than anything,” she said. *Fly with me, darling Jack.*

“Then I’ll come.”

After the third glass she simply brought the bottle over and they took turns sipping from it directly as they laughed. As they got progressively more tipsy she leaned against him, appreciating just how good he managed to smell even after a day at work. The music ended, and Phryne stood to change the record.

The first song was a waltz and she began to laugh.

“Dance with me, Jack,” she said, moving towards him with her hands outstretched. He allowed her to pull him up, placing a hand on her waist. His other hand caressed her fingers as they moved into proper waltz formation. There wasn’t enough room to manage much beyond the basic steps, but that was beside the point; they were moving, slow and close and in sync. When the song was over she broke away, changing the record again to something more upbeat and grabbing the nearly empty bottle of champagne.

Their movements became just a little sloppy as they danced to the new music, and as she raised the bottle to her lips she spilled some down her blouse. She saw Jack’s glance, affection and desire mingled as he eyed the spot.

“Shame to waste it,” she laughed, putting the bottle on the table beside her.

He lowered his head, lapping and suckling in turns at her breast through the silk of her blouse, his breath hot and wet and welcome; she arched backwards to give him better access. Moaning, she laced her fingers behind his head, anchoring him there.

“Phryne?” he asked, his breath ghosting across the wet fabric. She shivered. “Is this too much?”

“Not for me, darling,” she said. She pulled away to see his face; his pupils were dilated, his breathing ragged, his jaw clenching, and he was smiling. “You?”

“No,” he said hoarsely. “God, no.”

“Good,” she said. “Then make love to me, Jack Robinson.”

It was meant to be a playful command, but she was a little too breathless to make it convincing. He
stepped back, his eyes never leaving her lips as he loosened his cuffs and began to unbutton his vest. She removed her own blouse and trousers, shimmying a little more than necessary just to see his eyes widen. The sight of her in her lingerie was enough to distract him from his own divestment, and she stepped forward to take over the process. She shucked off his vest. Grabbing his braces as leverage, she stepped forward to kiss him again then pushed them off his shoulders and began to work on the buttons of the shirt herself.

“Too many layers,” she grumbled. Feeling his large hands cupping her bottom to pull her close, she added, “And too many distractions.”

“Do you want me to stop?”

She had his shirt open now, finding a singlet beneath.

“Not a bit,” she purred, placing her hands on his chest. “But if there’s anything beneath this I might just take you clothed.”

He chuckled, the sensation reverberating through her hands as she moved them to his shoulders to ease his shirt down; her palms skimmed down his arm as it fell, and she felt an unfamiliar bump on his forearm. She grasped his wrist and turned it towards her; it was a scar, small but still a rather livid purple.

“Perk of the job,” he said wryly.

“I like it,” she replied. “Now get your damned trousers off.”

He did, followed by his singlet. He really was remarkably good looking, she decided; almost perfectly balanced in height and musculature, with the lightest smattering of hair across his chest. Solid hands that were capable of almost unbearable gentleness, a face that grew more handsome as she learnt to read its every expression. She knew he was equally appealing beneath his smalls. It was the sort of beauty she could find something new about every time she looked. And that wasn’t even taking into consideration his non-physical attributes, which were numerous. Just looking at him caused desire to pool in her stomach, hot and tight.

They both moved at the same moment, meeting halfway then stumbling towards the bed in unison and shedding the last of their clothes. She ravished his neck, nipping and soothing it in turns as his fingers pressed against her folds, circling her nub until she was gasping and teetering on the edge of the precipice. Before she could fall he was gone, entirely for a second and then back to press featherlight kisses down her sternum, across the expanse of her stomach, against her inner thighs. She gripped his hair, trying to urge him closer; he shook his head. As the most urgent tension began to abate, he finally moved his mouth against her; his tongue quickly re-tightened the coil until she thought it past breaking, never quite enough to push her over the edge.

“Ja-ack,” she moaned, trying to nudge him higher with her legs. “Your mouth is marvellous, but...oohh.”

“I want to make this last,” he said against her cunt, his voice rough and low.

She wanted to argue, to point out that they had plenty of time to go slowly; she writhed against the sheets, seeking relief from her clenching thighs as he pulled away, trying to articulate that she wanted him now, that she had waited weeks on a bloody boat and she was quite done waiting thankyouverymuch, but what spewed out was an inarticulate mess of praise and pleading and fuck he was right that sometimes patience was worth it but she wanted him now.
Then he was over her and inside her and she was soaring, out of her body and past the stars and she was never going to return to Earth. And then, after a moment that transcended time and logic, she felt the pull of gravity, her descent slow at first but gaining speed as the ground rushed up to greet her and she knew she would be dashed upon it with the full force of freefall.

“That’s it, Phryne love,” he murmured: his voice in her ear; kisses pressed along her jaw and her neck and her shoulder; his hands, one smoothing her hair, the other coaxing out the tiny little aftershocks that buffered her fall and softened her landing. “That’s it.”

When she was back in the room, she opened her eyes and looked at him above her; glorious and sweaty, a lock of hair across his forehead. A man wildly in love with her, a man she was wildly in love with. She reached up and smoothed his hair.

“You’re looking a little dishevelled, inspector,” she laughed.

He groaned, rolling over and dropping against the pillows.

“I cannot imagine why, Miss Fisher.”

He was grinning though, and extending his open arms to her.

“Next time we do it my way,” she said.

Her thighs were still trembling from the force of her orgasm, her blood still humming.

“Mmm,” he agreed, eyes drifting shut. “My way is exhausting.”

“Oh, go to sleep, darling,” laughed Phryne as she nestled against his shoulder. “I have plans for you in the morning.”

His finger was tracing up and down her arm, moving more slowly at every pass until he drifted off to sleep. Tired and utterly content, she stayed awake a while longer to watch the slow rise and fall of his chest, as steady as the man himself.

———

“You’re watching me, Phryne,” he rumbled, voice still heavy in sleep.

He opened one eye, savouring the sight of her in the morning light: her hair tousled, lips bare, eyes dancing.

“I like watching you.”

He laughed, and the sheer joyfulness of the sound startled him.

“What do you like watching, Miss Fisher?” He teased, remembering her verbose enumerations of his many good features the night before. “My talented fingers? My dextrous tongue? My...what was it? Powerful thighs?”

They were both laughing, the absurdity of it in the light of day making it somehow more meaningful instead of less. In one smooth motion she rolled him onto his back, straddling him. She gently scraped her nails down his chest and he groaned. It was met with a coquettish grin, but before she could continue there was a knock.

“Breakfast, miss,” came a voice through the door.
“Thank you, Mr. B!” she called out. “Just leave it there and I’ll retrieve it.”

She chuckled again and then leaned down to kiss his lips.

“I like seeing you, Jack,” she said, so lightly it would be easy to mistake it for irreverence.

She sprung from the bed, wrapping a robe around her before she retrieved the tray, and laughed again when she opened the door.

“Two cups! And extra toast! I do believe that Mr. Butler will do nicely,” she said, padding back to the bed.

She sat the tray down, and he reached for her; she laced her fingers through his and allowed him to pull her back to bed for another kiss.

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