

NATASHA DEEN

THE LONDON FILES

AT
DOCK'S
END



At Dock's End

by

Natasha Deen

The London Files

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At Dock's End

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At Dock's End

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True Grime 2: Angel Maker

Burned

Guardian

Chapter One

It should have been one of those quiet evenings that makes a person happy to be home. The rain drummed against the windows and in the hearth, a fire burned bright and warm. Lamps poured golden light on the thick rugs and over-stuffed couches, and lent security from the cold damp outside. However, the peacefulness of the scene was marred by the tension in the room. Briscoe, my best friend, and I had been fighting. It wasn't one of those arguments where we yelled and screamed. It was the quiet sort, full of unspoken words and hurt feelings.

He lay on the sofa, curled up with his newspaper. The lamp above him gave his dark hair a gold outline and traced the angular lines of his lean frame. I sat with my notebook in hand, listening to the soft hiss of the gas lamps and trying to jot down our last adventure before the details eluded me. On the table beside my work, the remnants of a puff pastry littered the blue-edged saucer. I glanced at my ample waistline and debated if eating a third cream puff constituted gluttony. Reminding myself that we might have to chase a suspect, and that my waistcoat had become harder and harder to button closed, I opted for restraint and went back to my writing.

“Confound it, Boots,” Briscoe said, tossing the evening papers aside with the crinkled snap of his irritation, “what are you doing?”

I sat back and wiped the blue ink from the quill with a cotton handkerchief. “Setting our latest escapade to paper.” No need to tell him of the greedy thoughts and desires of my stomach. “The publisher wants to see the entire draft by next

week.”

His nose twitched. “Not that drivel again.”

“It isn’t drivel.” My voice hitched higher with protest. “We saved a lady’s maid from being sent to a debtor’s prison. And what of the things we discovered about slum housing?” I stopped, caught off guard by the flood of memories. Those despicable places haunted my sleep and followed my waking moments. “You of all people should welcome the opportunity to bring the details of our last case to the public and educate them.”

His brown eyes widened in subtle challenge. “I, more than any other person?”

“Well—” His irritation left me floundering for a delicate way to broach the issue of his past. “I thought, perhaps, with your experiences, you would want people to know...”

He lifted an eyebrow and that said more than if he had spoken for hours.

Briscoe was never an easy person to live with, but lately, he’d been extra irritable. The reason was clear: his new case. His. Not ours. I was in the cold. Left out of the investigation. I’m ashamed to admit it made me edgy and quick to fight. “These adventures are not just yours, but mine as well. If I want to publish them, it is my right.”

“Truly, Boots, a person of your intellect and passions can find a better use for his time.” He reached for his reading, once more. “I don’t know why you continue with becoming an author. There is no money in it.” His face disappeared behind the paper. “Why don’t you just buy the publisher? At least then you could guarantee yourself a published book.”

I felt hot and slighted by his contempt. And his jab at my family’s wealth. It had afforded me a private education and access to the finer things in life. Briscoe had joined our family two years ago and our competitive nature had us graduating from school early. There was talk of college but

both of us wanted to do something exciting and not related to books or schoolwork.

Both of us had been fascinated with the disturbing murders committed by Jack the Ripper in Whitechapel. What kind of man would commit such monstrosities and how was it that the police had never caught him? The idea of pursuing criminals, bringing them to justice, and keeping decent people safe was one that appealed to both of us.

Once school had finished, and though the Ripper cases were seven years in the past, we'd opened our business. At first, the cases were pitiful. A lady's lost locket, a gentlemen looking to find out who'd pilfered his pocket watch. But as time passed and people became comfortable looking at our skills rather than our age, the crimes became grittier, with more to be lost if left unsolved.

We weren't yet at a point where the cases paid for everything. My trust fund covered a small apartment in a cozy area in London. But it would not be long before we were no longer reliant on my family's wealth to pay for our lodging. The flush of gaining success dimmed as recollection brought me back to my exclusion of the current case. "Since I am not part of the current investigation, there is no reason for me to ignore my other pursuits."

The papers dipped. He said nothing, only watched me from over the top of *The Daily Mail*.

I hated it when he did this. Silence. It was his best weapon because it never failed to defeat me. I shuffled the papers on my desk. "It is important that the city know of this case—of the terrible conditions some of its citizens are forced to live in."

His face wrinkled. "Leave this case to memory, Boots. Do not drag it into the light of public scrutiny."

This was an old debate. He thought turning our cases into stories made us seem more like fictional characters than real people. "The publisher requested it, and this is the farthest I've ever gotten with an editor. I will not break my

word.” I met his gaze. “If you can have cases separate from me, then I can have aspects of my life that do not include you.”

His nose twitched. “Wha—”

“Besides,” My voice rose with a ferocity borne of seeing the disgraceful, humiliating way some of the city’s residents were forced to live. “The owners of those slums need to be revealed, and suffer the public’s wrath. How can they justify leaking roofs, no heat, crowding families into too-small rooms? It’s nothing short of evil, to sacrifice basic survival in the name of profit.”

“Confound it—” He jumped up and made his way to where I sat. “This cannot be an issue between us—”

We both stopped, spun as our front door slammed open and ended our feud in one loud crash.

Chapter Two

In the doorway, stood—shivered, really—a small man. I frowned. He seemed familiar, but I couldn't place his face.

Our landlady, Mrs. Kessel, charged up behind him. Her hair escaped from her white bonnet, stuck out at sharp angles. She struggled to untie her apron from her sturdy frame.

"I'm sorry, sirs," she said, "but he just barged in here—with not even a 'how do you do' or—" she glared at him, "taking any mind to the effect his muddy shoes would have on my freshly polished floors."

"I wouldn't have done it unless it was of the utmost importance," said the man. He took off his bowler hat, shook himself one way then the other, spraying tiny droplets of water everywhere and sending Mrs. Kessel into shrieks of annoyance.

Briscoe put an arm around her shoulder and detoured her from our visitor. He gently pushed her into the hallway. Closing the door, he leaned back and inspected our newest client. "You must forgive her. She's an admirable lady but she takes the condition of her floors quite seriously."

"What? Oh, yes, of course." The tension in him made his voice come out high pitched and squeaky. "I apologize. It was never my intention to upset her." His words, full of anxiety, rushed from his small frame. "My name is—

"Cyril Tethers," I said, memory coming into focus. "Your reputation in fashion precedes you."

He offered a small smile in return, but worry chased it off his face. "I'm desperate for your help, Mr. Sartes and Lord Donovan."

His use of my title, Lord, said he'd come to us via my family connections. My father supported my desire to make a name for myself. Our family's fortune was vast and it would have been easy for me to live off our funds. That I wanted to make my own money and do it in a non-traditional field such as private investigations, made him proud.

"Please, address us by first name and we shall do the same for you. Come," Briscoe said. "Sit and tell us your story."

Collecting my thoughts and my manners, I hastened to where Cyril stood, dripping rainwater onto the carpet. "Allow me to take your coat. Please, sit in a chair by the fire and warm yourself."

"Perhaps a hot drink is in order." Briscoe took the coat from me.

I agreed, and after going to the kitchen to put the kettle to boil, I returned.

"Thank you, sirs." Cyril shuffled to an armchair.

Briscoe went toward the fireplace and hung coat on the screen to dry. "What brings you here?"

"It's my business and my family," he hurried to say, "I think they—and me—are in danger."

"Danger?"

"I—I believe someone's going to murder me." He trembled with agitation.

An intense gleam came into my friend's eyes. He remained immobile, muttering the word "murder."

The coat continued to drip water on the rug. It wasn't just the floor that Mrs. Kessel was particular about. If the carpet was ruined, we'd never hear the end of it. Going to him, I took the garment. Then I pushed him toward the couches.

He shifted, his eyes clearing as his mind brought him back to reality.

"Did you make this jacket yourself?" He looked down and realized he no longer held it in his hands.

"I have it," I said as he glanced in vain, seeking to locate it. Turning to Cyril, I repeated the question. "It is your design, is it not?"

"Yes, indeed."

"You are a true craftsman," I said. The forest-green coat was a material of great softness and fine fit. Its stitching was true and straight. Gold buttons, etched with the emblem "CTF," shone with the soft brilliance only quality could give. My fingers sunk into the material. Even wet, it felt luxurious.

"It's an old coat. My wife, she says as a designer I should stay true to trends and not hang on to fashions from ten years ago." He smiled. "She's always pushing me to try new things. My wife, Molly, found Mr. William Morris' aesthetic designs scandalous but fascinating, and is quite eager for me to put my own spin on Arthur Liberty's oriental fabrics. I admit, I find their work intriguing—" Affection softened his smile, and it seemed as though he was mentally replaying the conversation with his wife. "At heart, however, I hold to classic designs and time-tested fabrics. The jacket you hold is a favorite I cannot bear to give away."

"When something is made well, it lasts," I said.

"That is precisely my problem." He set his hat on the table to his left and ran a hand over his hair. "I've made a living and a reputation out of making the clothing that satisfies two standards: it lasts and it's good quality. I pay my workers well, keep my factory in order."

"Factory?" Briscoe looked at me, then Cyril. "I thought you were a clothier to the fashionable elite in London."

"My partner does not keep up with the changing ways of fashion," I told the man. Turning my attention to Briscoe, I said, "A few years ago, Mr. Tethers expanded his business. Many designers are using sewing machines, instead of sewing by hand. It allows them to produce more goods at a cheaper price. Mr. Tethers has made quite a reputation for himself producing ready-made garments. Instead of a lady

having to go to numerous fittings, she simply goes into the shop and tries on the clothing that is already there.”

“Clothing purchased off the rack?” Briscoe’s eyebrows rose. “Fascinating. I would have thought the upper class would turn their noses at something not made exclusively for them.”

Cyril nodded. “You are correct. Many upper class ladies prefer hand-made clothing and I retain a small amount of select clients. Mass produced clothing, however, is the future. I don’t think warm jackets or pretty frocks should be the exclusive domain of the wealthy.” He grimaced. “We need to improve our use of tailoring patterns and molds so the garments fit better, but we’re making good progress.”

I smiled and catching Briscoe’s eye, gave my head a small shake. “He’s being modest. His patterns and molds are setting the industry standard.”

Cyril blinked. “Forgive me, I’ve taken us off topic. I find talking of fashion soothing. I’m afraid I use it to cope when I feel anxious or worried.”

“It’s fine.” I found that listening to a person talk about matters unrelated to their case could hold clues as well as give me an idea of his personality. Thus far, I found myself liking the man, both for his love of his family and his egalitarian view of society.

“Your fashion methods,” Briscoe said. “Is that the reason you’ve come to us? A competitor, perhaps, who wishes to steal your ideas?”

Cyril shook his head and made a small, muffled sound as if he was trying not to cry. “No, someone far more dangerous.”

Briscoe and I leaned forward. In the background, the water in the kettle began to bubble.

“Tell us more,” I said.

“Three months ago, a menacing looking man named The Messenger showed up at my company. He claimed to work for someone called Sable—”

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From the corner of my eye, I saw Briscoe stiffen. Cyril, his gaze fixed on his lap, didn't notice.

"—came into my office, demanding I go into partnership with his boss. I refused, of course. I'd heard of Sable before. He is cruel and artless. A criminal who hides his illegal activities behind legitimate businesses. His presence and shadow darken the docks—"

"The docks?" Briscoe frowned. "I thought you said you worked in fashion. Shouldn't you be in Petticoat Lane?"

"I have a shop there, yes. But for the actual production of the garments, the best rent I could find was on India docks. I realize it's unusual, but it suits my needs. The lower price allows me to maintain a high standard of wages and quality."

I took a breath and chose my words carefully—it would not do to offend a potential client. "Considering the thefts and—er—the nature of some of the people who spend time there, do you not risk having your garments stolen and...other things?"

His lips compressed, but not in anger. "I had to make a hard decision. The majority of my workers are female, and I feel responsible for their well-being. However, I also feel obligated to ensure they are provided with a good wage." He sighed. "I want to treat my workers fairly. I give them Sundays off and keep to an eight-hour workday, but I had to cut costs somewhere. With a factory right on the docks, it's less expensive to export my goods or to have fabrics and product brought in. The building is in the Export Dock. There is a twenty-foot wall surrounding the entire complex, and that helps keep the riff-raff out."

My estimation of him rose—as did Briscoe's, if I could judge by the look in his eyes. "That is a generous workday, indeed."

He made a face. "I saw the dock workers strike and the incident with the match girls, and I took those lessons to heart. I do not believe crushing my workers or forcing them

to labor for twelve hours at a time, are honorable ways to conduct business.”

“Still...it is unusual for a someone of your station to be so benevolent.”

An emotion flashed across his face, one I could not name. I thought, however, I detected a trace of fear in his eyes.

“I have seen what extreme poverty and cruel working standards can do to the spirit. It doesn’t just affect them, it expands outward, like a pebble thrown into water, and affects all of us.” Once again the unfathomable expression swam across his countenance. “I will never sacrifice the condition of my factory for profit. There is more to life than money.”

Respect lightened Briscoe’s face. “Unfortunately, Mr. Tethers, the location of your factory presents us with a problem. The docks and the gangs are most assuredly the territory of the police. They have been trying to break up the criminal activity in that area for years.” He shook his head. “If our investigation into Sable bleeds into their work, it may not go well for anyone.”

The man slouched in his chair. “Does that mean you will not take my case?”

Briscoe shook his head. “Not at all. I only mean that if we take the case, we may have to get police cooperation on it. As a result, finding this Sable character could take a long time. You should be aware of this.”

“I’ll pay anything you wish, though police cooperation may not be easily attained.” He spoke then seemed to shrink into himself, as though his only safety laid within. “It is why I have come to you instead of them.”

“Why can’t we use the police?” I asked the question.

He gazed into the fire, his attention longing and faraway.

“I think they are working with Sable.”

His words rendered us silent.

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"If my suspicions prove true," said Cyril, "I fear it will only increase the danger to me and my family."

The kettle whistled, sharp and loud. I left them staring into the fire, and tended to the refreshments. Digging through our cupboards, I came across some cream and jam cookies. I placed them on the tray, made a strong brew of black tea, and took the lot back to the living room. Cyril and Briscoe remained as still and quiet as when I'd left. After pouring each of us a cup and directing them to the cookies, I asked, "Are you certain the police on the docks are corrupt?"

The poor man. He gave me a look of such dejection it seemed to take all his weight and color, and left him an empty, grey shell. "I have no proof, only suspicions."

"Like what?" Briscoe broke his silence.

"The Messenger claims there are cops working for Sable."

"That could be true," said my partner, "or it could be a lie to frighten you. What else do you have?"

"The police have always been good to those of us working on the docks. They've helped keep the area secure, kept troublemakers on a short leash. The constables were so good, they seemed to know a criminal's movement before the lawbreaker did. But Sable's been on the docks for three months, now, and no one knows anything."

"I understand why it leaves you suspicious," I said. "How can the police know so much about one criminal element and yet know nothing about another? There are too many possible explanations for this situation, though. Perhaps Sable came in with a large group working for him. If so, then the police might have their hands full just trying to keep up with Sable's underlings. Maybe the other gangs are becoming more active in their crimes. Plus, there's White Chapel..." I trailed off. Seven years ago, that area had been host to a series of violent murders. The police had never caught the killer. Last year, he'd struck again and killed three more females. "The police force has increased their

presence in this area, which leaves the other locations in the city struggling to fill the gap.”

Cyril dropped two lumps of sugar into his tea and took a long drink. “What about the rapid change of constables on the docks? I understand pulling cops to put in White Chapel, but why move the ones already on the docks and replace them with constables who don’t know the area or its culture? It makes no sense.”

In the grate, the flames blazed, bright orange-red, but a chill of foreboding crept from the back of my neck and crawled down my spine.

“There is only one way for us to find the answers,” said Briscoe.

Cyril straightened. Hope flared in his eyes. “Does this mean you’ll take the case?”

“Yes, but we must tread carefully. You have your suspicions...” He looked toward the fire, his gaze unfocused and continued in a quieter voice, “I have mine.” Briscoe took a deep breath, rubbed his hands together, and grinned at our client. “Together, we’ll track this Sable down. So, let us begin.”

I scrambled for my notebook.

“When did the bullying first start?” I asked.

“From Sable or the gangs?”

I looked up. “Both.”

Cyril’s face pulled into a scowl. “The dock gangs are always sniffing around. They’re annoying, but of no true harm to me—just a group of layabouts who dropped out of school and loiter on the wharf.” He gave a short, humorless laugh. “As long as I gave them items from my clothing line, they left me in relative peace.” He stopped, worry creasing his face. Cyril curled his hands around the cup of tea and stared into the fire.

I didn’t push him to continue, knowing he needed the opportunity to sit quietly. Setting down my notepad, I went to his coat. I turned it so the wet side had a chance to dry,

and the dry side didn't scorch. Then I resumed my place and waited.

Cyril nibbled on a cookie. "As I said, about three months ago, a mean-looking man came to my office. He had a scar that ran along his face and his teeth were stained and rotting. He was bones, bones and mangy, ratty, hair. He had a look in his eye that frightened me."

"The Messenger?" I glanced up from my notes.

Cyril nodded. "Such a mysterious name." He shuddered. "It makes him more frightening."

Briscoe, his eyes closed, asked, "Was there anything identifying about him—other than the name?"

Cyril's eyes widened. "Apart from the multitude of scars, the knotted hair, and missing teeth?"

"I must agree," I murmured. "Mr. Tether's description sounds quite specific."

Briscoe shook his head. "Not for the gangs—not for someone who runs this deep with an unknown assailant." He opened his eyes. "As we investigate, I assure you, we will find many who fit this description—even the scar along the face." He paused then asked, "Did it run diagonally?"

Cyril started. "Yes—do you know who he is?"

Briscoe shook his head. "No, but it tells me the gang he may have worked with. The East Enders. They like to scar their members with such a cut. It's part of their initiation into the criminal life."

My quill hovered over the paper. He was right, of course, and it underscored the difference in our pasts. Briscoe knew about these things because he had lived among them. I knew about them because he shared his stories.

"He had a raspy, hoarse kind of voice. Not very deep but not high." He looked at Briscoe. "The Messenger, he always sounded as though he was getting over a terrible cough."

My partner nodded. "Continue."

"He said he had a proposition from someone named

Sable.” Cyril turned round in his chair. “Sable isn’t his real name.” He sank back into his chair. “I only wish I knew what it was.”

“What makes you say this?”

A look of frustration came over Cyril’s face. “I don’t know. Something in the way The Messenger spoke about him...”

I nodded and wrote down the information.

Cyril took a breath, “The man said I was to make his boss my business partner. Sable had ideas to make us very wealthy and for his help, he would “only” take sixty-five percent of my profit. I refused, of course, and told The Messenger I already had an arrangement with the dock gangs and they were partner enough for me.” Triumph whispered in Cyril’s voice, but it disappeared as he continued, “I underestimated the ruthlessness of Sable. The leaders of the gangs came in three days ago to tell me that we no longer had an arrangement. They were now partners with this horrible creature, and would do anything he wished. Anything.” Cyril’s voice shook as he spoke.

“Which means,” said Briscoe, “that Sable owns the gangs, and thus owns the dock.”

The room fell silent, save for the scratching of my quill as I jotted this information down. Once I’d finished, though, the silence remained. Into our company crept the specter of Sable and the fears his power created. My knowledge of gangs was dismal, but even I knew the violence that they lived by. One man had made them surrender, and it said much about his personality and his might.

The fire burned low. Briscoe rose and placed more logs on the embers. The flames rose once again. “He will take over your company, one way or another.”

“I know.” Cyril took a deep breath. “Sable wants me to change my labor practices. He insists we hire children—” Revulsion scarred his face. “—and he will force me to cut my wages. He said these changes would increase our

profits.” Cyril’s face contorted with contempt. “As though I would pay wages so low my employees cannot afford food or shelter, or that I would make garments of such poor quality they present a fire hazard. It’s not just immoral, it’s illegal.” His contempt gave way to terror. “But if I don’t agree to have him as a partner, he threatens to damage not only my factory, but me and my family, as well!” His final words ended in a high-pitched squeak and he collapsed into himself.

The slums. This was where his employees would end up if they weren’t paid a “living wage:” an amount that would comfortably allow them to provide their families with clothing, food, and shelter. I shared Cyril’s strong distaste.

“I am sorry to hear of this,” Briscoe said. He rubbed the back of his head. If there was one thing that could ruffle my friend, it was extreme displays of emotion. He rose and awkwardly patted Cyril on the back, all the while, shooting me a beseeching look.

“Come.” I set down my quill and went to them. “You are not by yourself in this any longer. We will help.”

Cyril wiped his eyes. “I know and for that, I’m most grateful.” He gulped. “You must protect my family. I-I am expendable.” His voice dropped. “Sable will never leave me in peace, but you must swear to protect my wife and children.” He looked up. The earnestness in his eyes was coupled by fear. He gripped my hand. “I’ve made many mistakes in my life—times when I chose the easy path or given into cowardice. My regrets haunt me, but my family doesn’t deserve to pay for my errors. They should not be punished for my sins. You must protect them.”

“We will protect all of you,” said Briscoe. “But what do you mean, mistakes?”

For the first time, Cyril closed himself off from us. “I’ve tried to be good, to do what was...needed. I’ve tried to walk the fine line between honoring myself and those around me, and I fear, I’ve stumbled.”

“Your...stumbles,” I said, “How do they affect this case?”

“They don’t.”

I glanced at Briscoe. Cyril was lying. “We can only help you if you are truthful, in all matters.”

“I promise you, my mistakes have no bearing on this case.”

“That’s not true,” said Briscoe. “We will keep all your confidences, Mr. Tethers, but we are of no use to you if you bind us with lies.”

“But—” His mouth quivered. “Lady Coutreau said you were the one to see—that you would help. Immediately and without question.”

The mention of our most steadfast supporter and dear friend gave us pause. “How do you know Lady Coutreau?”

“Charitable works. She insisted I speak to you about my troubles.”

Briscoe rubbed his forehead. “I appreciate Lady Coutreau’s belief in us, and I am sympathetic to your plight, but you are withholding information.”

“Because it doesn’t matter. I promise you it doesn’t.” He pulled on his ear. “I have never done anything wrong, I swear it. But there have been lapses in judgment. Sable would use that information to bully and blackmail me, but I assure you, finding his identity has nothing to do with youthful, idealistic mistakes. Please,” he begged. “Do not ask me to humiliate myself to satisfy your curiosity.”

Briscoe sighed.

“There must be a compromise,” I said, with a quick glance at my partner. “We can take your case, and we shall not speak of this matter for two weeks. In that time, I hope we will prove our discretion to you, and then you must make the decision. You will tell us everything or find another agency to handle your affair.”

Emotions of reluctance, fear, and defiance warred within him, changing his expression from hesitation to

agreement. "That is fair."

"Good," I said. "Now, back to Sable. Tell us more."

He frowned. "I have told you everything." He paused. "Wait. There is one more thing. His carriage. It was very distinctive. It had a gold crest in a most unusual shape—like clouds on fire. The Messenger climbed into it after our last meeting." He turned to me. "I can draw you a picture, if you'd like."

I handed him the notepad.

Briscoe shook his head as Cyril sketched. "Even with a replica of the crest, it will take a long time to track down. Besides, I doubt Sable would be that irresponsible to fetch the man in the same carriage he uses. No doubt, there are intermediaries."

The man finished the sketch and handed me the notebook. I looked at the drawing and frowned. The image was abstract, but I couldn't shake the sense that the seemingly random whirls and swirls depicted a real-life item.

"You have nothing else?" Briscoe asked.

"Nothing. My time is dwindling. The Messenger came tonight and once more I refused his offer. You must find Sable's true identity. If he's doing it to me, then he's surely pressuring other business owners."

Briscoe nodded. He took Cyril's jacket from the rack and handing the material, frowned. "It's still wet." Crossing the room to where our outerwear hung on the pegs, he took down my cashmere scarf that was embroidered with my family crest, and handed it to Cyril. "Go to your family. Hug them tight. Come to us tomorrow morning at eight. We shall have a plan, then." And so saying, he dismissed him.

I closed the door behind him and stood for a moment, staring at the knots and whorls in the wood.

"Stop staring," he said. "Cyril's task is to sleep. Ours is to devise a plan of attack."

I gathered the mugs and saucers, and moved to the kitchen. "Our best action would be a trusted source within

the police, but we have no contacts.” I felt his hesitation. “Briscoe?”

“We may have a friend in the department.”

“Not ‘we,’ you.” The dishware clattered into the sink. “This blasted case of yours.”

Pain flashed across his face. “Boots—” he hesitated, “there are some things not even the best of friends can share with each other.”

I swallowed. “You do not trust me.”

He smiled. “I trust you with my life.”

His life, I thought, just not his confidence.

“Why don’t we get Mrs. Kessel to bring us dinner?” He asked it with forced good humor. “I can smell the roasted fish and on a night like this, food is always welcome.”

“So is help,” I said, glancing out the window and thinking of Cyril walking the dark, lonely streets.

Briscoe turned to the velvet rope by the mantle and rang for our landlady. “We shall attend to his issue over dinner and you will see, it will fall into place.”

Our landlady arrived, her bonnet still askew.

“Mrs. Kessel, would you please bring dinner up to us?”

“I would, Mr. Briscoe, but that dratted man set my dinner plans on their ears. The carrots are burnt, the fish—the fire was burning low in the oven and I was just in the midst of relighting it when he—”

“Of course, of course,” I said, interrupting her before she could get into the rhythm of her distress. “We can go to the club, instead.”

“You’ll do no such thing.” Her chest puffed up. “They’ll never feed you proper. I only meant dinner would be delayed.”

“That’s fine.” Briscoe rubbed his hands together. “I can dash out for a bottle of creamed apple cider.”

So saying, he donned his cap and cape, and escorted Mrs. Kessel out the door. He gave me a smile and left. While he was gone, I tried to think of ways to start Cyril’s case, but

no ideas came. So, I tried to lose myself in the writing, but the night's events had so unbalanced me, I could do nothing but stare at the blank page.

Briscoe returned from the store an hour later. I saw his cape had a rip in it and the edges of papers stuck out from its pocket.

"Did the store put up a fight?"

"I caught it on a fruit stand." His words came out clipped. He hung it up and went to the kitchen.

The cape slipped from its hook and the papers fell to the floor. I went, picked it up to hang it, and recoiled at the sharp, pungent odor lingering on it. "Your cape—"

"Pay it no mind."

I heeded the tone in his voice and did not pursue the matter. Mrs. Kessel arrived soon after with our meal. Dinner was a strained affair. We could not figure out the best way to start the case, and it was obvious that whatever he had done while he was gone, it had not been solely for purchasing cider. He was distracted and pensive.

We settled in for the night, both of us trying—in vain—to devise a plan to help Cyril. At one point, he looked up, gave me a half-smile and said, "Get back to your scratching—I find the silence deafening and I am so desperate, I will even settle for your confounded writing."

I did so, but with half a heart and even less focus. When a knock sounded at the door, I went to it, eager for the break in the monotony and frustration. Briscoe, newspaper in hand, followed. I opened it. On the threshold stood a medium-sized man, perhaps a few years older than us, dressed in a constable's uniform.

"Mr. Briscoe Sartes? Lord Boots Donovan?"

"Yes."

He shifted and taking his hat off his head, tucked it under his arm. "I'm Constable Caleb, and I'm here about the murder of Cyril Tethers."

Chapter Three

I swayed and gripped the door frame for support. The constable's badge shone in the gaslight of the hallway. His dark eyes were bright with intelligence. My mind and tongue, however, felt dull and dark.

"Please repeat what you've just said." I glanced to where our landlady stood, one hand on the banister, the other clutching her stomach. "Please don't feel obliged to stay, Mrs. Kessel. We will see him out."

She nodded but didn't move. "The man, you said you had information concerning the man."

"I'm sorry to inform you the body of Cyril Tethers has been found." He spoke with a northern accent, and it told of a childhood of farming and open spaces. "The inspector in charge of the case has questions."

"Oh!" Mrs. Kessel's hand went from her stomach to her mouth. "That poor man, and I was so rude to him."

"Hold on a moment, Constable—" I turned to Briscoe. "Help me."

He set down the newspaper, and ushered the man into the apartment.

I returned my attention to the older lady. "Mrs. Kessel." I took her by the hand and lead her to her room.

"That poor man," she kept repeating, "and I was so concerned with my woodblock floor." Her grey-eyed gaze turned from the floor to me. "What a wretched woman I am, to have done such a thing. One of his last memories was of my unwarranted rudeness."

"He understood your irritation with him completely, and took full responsibility for his insensitivity with your

property.”

“It was just a floor,” she said. “He was a human being.”

I opened her door and led her inside. After seating her, I went to the kitchen and set the kettle to boil. “Make yourself a cup of tea, and rest. I have to see to this matter, but we’ll talk about this later.”

She nodded, though her gaze and attention were far from me. I hurried back to the apartment and found the constable standing by the fireplace. Briscoe emerged from the kitchen.

“I felt we could all do with a strong cup of tea. We have not progressed in our conversation.”

“Of course.” I nodded. “Constable—”

“Caleb North.”

“Would you care for a seat? I think we have much to discuss.”

He sat down and I followed suit.

Briscoe stood by a chair. “You believe you found his body? That he was murdered?”

“There’s no ‘belief’ about it, sir. It is him—a constable who works the India docks identified his body.”

“The docks?” I asked. “He should have been home. What happened?”

“We don’t yet know why he was there at such a late hour.” He hesitated. “His strangled body was found floating in the Thames.”

I gripped the chair arm, grateful to be sitting. “Poor Cyril. He came to us for help this evening. I’m afraid we could offer him little immediate assistance. We were to meet tomorrow morning and proceed to the police—”

“A moment, please.” Briscoe turned to the officer. “How do we come into this? Cyril left our flat only a few hours ago. Surely, that was not enough time for him to have spread the news that he’d hired us.”

The constable looked my way. “The murder weapon was a scarf which bears part of your crest, Lord Boots. It

seemed only natural to come here to find our answers.”

I waved away the formal address. “Please, just call me ‘Boots.’ Briscoe gave that to him before he left.” I nodded at the fireplace where Cyril’s coat still hung on the rack. Pain compressed my heart. He would have no need of jackets and brass buttons, anymore. “His garment was still wet, so Briscoe gave him the scarf to help ward off the night’s rain.”

The officer nodded his acknowledgement and turned to my partner. “At this point, there is no more to be said. Inspector Hamish Sheppard will want to speak with you.”

Briscoe’s gaze flickered, but he said nothing.

“The inspector is at the docks, taking statements. He wishes you to meet him there.” With nothing further to be said, I moved to the rack where our coats hung. “Briscoe, shut off the kettle. There will be no time for drinks.”

“A moment, please.” Caleb stood. “The inspector requested only Briscoe’s presence.”

“What an extraordinary request.” My hand hovered over my jacket. “Why does he not require both of us?”

“I’m new to the force, sir, and it isn’t place to question my superiors.”

“Then I shall ask the question.” I grabbed Briscoe’s coat and tossed it at him.

Caleb stepped forward, then back, in a dance of agitation. “He didn’t request you. I must follow orders.”

“Fine.” I spat out the word. “Then take Briscoe, but you cannot stop me from following in another cab. It breaks no laws.”

“Perhaps the constable is right,” said my partner. “There must be some reason for separating us.”

My jaw clenched. “You cannot keep me from this case. Cyril was as much my client as yours.”

Caleb shuffled and stepped to the side, looking away, and pretending he did not hear our argument.

Briscoe shrugged. “Fine. Have it your way.”

We dressed and left the apartment. Mrs. Kessel cracked

At Dock's End

open her door, peered at us, but said nothing.

Outside, a police hansom cab—a black, covered carriage with two doors—waited for us, pulled by a large, dark horse. The sky rumbled, and with a flash of lightning, the drizzle of rain turned into a downpour. Caleb's presence in the cab precluded any real conversation about Cyril or the inspector's odd request. After giving the driver our destination, silence, as cold and comfortless as the rain pelting down, surrounded us. Briscoe faced the window, his face shaded by the night, his thoughts lost to all but himself.

The constable made no attempt at conversation. Occasionally, light from the lamps lining the street spilled from the window, and illuminated his face in shadowy reflection. I sensed his interest was more than an officer of the law watching over witnesses. Foreboding filled me, made my stomach feel like it was full of sour milk. Surely, he didn't believe we were suspects...but what part he thought we played in Cyril's unfortunate demise eluded me.

Chapter Four

Twenty minutes later, we arrived at our destination, the Import Dock.

“Curious,” I said to Briscoe. “I would have thought we would go to the Export Dock, to his factory.”

“Indeed. If our client was on the dock, one would have assumed it was work related. But here we are, with a new question. Hopefully, we will find the answer.”

Briscoe exited first. The constable and I followed him into the bitter night. Rain flung icy daggers that ripped past our umbrellas, found the openings in our clothing and drove the cold spikes down our necks. Water made my hair a sodden mess, and the knowledge of Cyril made me feel even more cold and wet.

The police had made a circle of lanterns around the crime scene. It cordoned off the space from non-police personnel. As well, constables bordered the circle, lamps held high in their hands as they walked amongst the bystanders, checking for witnesses or perhaps, the perpetrator.

The rain dampened and corrupted the light. Instead of brightening the area and the faces of those in the crowd, the storm left it soiled. The flame light oozed over the faces, casting an oily, orange-red glow. A group of onlookers stood in huddled masses watching the proceedings. Their excited chatter, the delight with which they gossiped and speculated made my lip curl in distaste. Even with the pelting rain and freezing cold, there was nothing like death and disaster to bring out a crowd.

A horse’s whinny sounded from behind and to my left.

Turning, I saw a grayling pulling the morgue wagon behind him. By the water's edge, three police men broke away and as they moved apart, I saw him. Cyril, his body covered by a black sheet too large for his frame.

The small bumps in the cloth signified where his legs and head were. I suppose none of us will be large in death, but to see his tiny body left to gawkers and subject to intense scrutiny left me feeling helplessness and disheartened.

A policeman who had been with Cyril's body made his way to us. He turned, his attention on a woman edging away from the group, and even in the dim light I could make out the glittering of his dark eyes that said he wasn't a man to be toyed with, or an officer who would leave a case unsolved. The rain dripping from the tip of his hat could not sway the agility or sophistication with which he moved. Briscoe and Caleb started toward him, and I followed.

"Inspector."

He turned at the sound of his constable's voice. His eyes widened at the sight of me. "Lord Boots, it is a pleasure to meet you." He had a deep, gentle voice, one whose softness hid a clever mind and tenacious attitude. Reaching out his hand, he said, "Inspector Hamish Sheppard."

I grasped his hand in mine. "Please, just 'Boots.'"

"I am surprised to see you."

"I don't understand why my presence shocks you," I said. "Cyril Tethers was my client as well as Briscoe's."

The inspector turned to my partner and a wave of unspoken communication passed between them. I sensed the cop's disapproval. Whether it was at me or an entirely different matter concerning Briscoe, remained a mystery. More confounding, was the obvious fact that they knew each other—knew each other very well, for it is only close friendships that can rely upon looks to communicate.

"Inspector Sheppard, why don't you want me here?"

He looked over at Briscoe once more, as if waiting for my friend to answer.

“Boots and I came as soon as we heard,” my partner told him, effectively ending my line of questioning. “We were both distressed to hear the constable’s news.”

“Yes.” The older man’s face softened with pity. “It is a sad affair. Thank you for coming. I value your input.” He glanced back at me. “Yours, as well.”

“There won’t be much to find in the way of evidence,” said Briscoe. “The rain has been coming down hard, and with Cyril being found in the water...”

They moved to the ocean’s edge. I stood, my mind divided between Cyril and Briscoe. It wasn’t just Hamish’s reaction that startled me, but Briscoe’s as well. My friend had grown up on the hard side of life and his experience with the police had been unpleasant in the extreme. Though he respected the work and the symbol of their jobs, he was mistrustful of them and slow to give his affection to those who had chosen to chase and harass him rather than lend a hand. That he should so readily offer his assistance put me on guard. That he had never mentioned meeting Hamish deepened the mystery of both my friend and his secretive nature.

From the corner of my eye, I saw Caleb’s watchful gaze on me. He turned and looked at Hamish and Briscoe. If he read beneath my silence to see the pain and confusion underneath, he made no mention. Instead, he said, “We best catch up,” and started toward them.

We came abreast of Hamish as he gestured to a point in the water by the piers.

“A passerby saw him floating over there,” said the inspector. “The scarf you gave him was caught on one of the pillars. Caleb dragged him out while another constable ran for help, but it was too late. He was already dead.”

He said it with sadness, as though Cyril was the first murder victim he had ever come across and I felt comforted that his years of service had not resulted in a cynical detachment from the victims he came across.

At Dock's End

"Was there anyone else on the dock?" Briscoe asked.

The wind ruffled my hair. I pulled my jacket closer to my body.

"After the sun sets, this isn't a place for law-abiding citizens to be. It's a working district, but with it being so close to the water, it invites a criminal element. One that wants to smuggle or steal."

I strained to hear his words amid the wind and rain.

"There are illegal card games and betting here, but their specific locations change. We've never been able to complete a successful sting." He looked out at the water and shook his head. "No, there was no one here tonight. Even if there was—" He gave us a cynical smile. "—they are blind, deaf, and dumb when it comes to crime."

"The tide," Caleb said, "it should have taken him far away from shore. If the scarf hadn't become snagged on the pile..."

No one would ever have known, I finished silently. I turned and looked at the dark buildings behind me. "Which one was his factory?"

Hamish pointed to the left. "That way. About a mile down."

"A mile? Was he heading home?"

Caleb shook his head. "His house was the other way."

I have never been good with geography, and so asked, "What's in this direction?"

"Black Hills," Briscoe said quietly.

Black Hills. The name alone made me shiver. It was part of White Chapel, and it branched off Mile End. It was a place so foul and full of despair, crime, and pain only the most hardened criminals crossed its borders.

The wind shrieked and a cold, pointed talon of foreboding ran along my spine. Why would Cyril have ventured that way? And his rash decision to take this road—was that what killed him? At the end of the day, was he the saddest of victims, the one who was at the wrong place at the

wrong time?

“I need to check his body,” said Briscoe. He looked at me and his eyes caught the flash of lighting. “Do you want to come?”

I shook my head. “I couldn’t bear it.”

He nodded and walked away with Hamish by his side. Their bodies were close together, their heads bent in conference. Caleb hung back. He looked at me and said, “I’ve seen him before—Briscoe, I mean. He and Hamish talk often. It’s to do with a case.” He stepped back, then forward. “I-I don’t think you should worry. He speaks highly of you, and sometimes...sometimes partners need to be separate in order to be a team.”

A small smile crossed my face. He was more perceptive than I’d thought. “That might work in the police force with its hierarchy and rules, but in a detective agency, all partners must be equal.”

“If I knew what they spoke of, I would tell you and put your mind to rest. Hamish is a good man, with an even-temper and a quick smile. The conversations he has with Briscoe leave him disturbed and quiet.”

We stood for a moment. I brooded on his words.

“If you will excuse me, sir, I should be there.” He went to Cyril’s body.

I watched as he checked Cyril’s hands and clothing. He took out a sharp instrument, scraped under the man’s nails, and caught the falling debris with a piece of paper. Fascinated, I saw him go over the body, and collect more samples.

When he came back, I asked, “What were you doing?”

He ducked his head and shuffled in an embarrassed manner. “I just have some ideas about bits of evidence that might be left on the victim’s body. Maybe it’s too small to see with the naked eye, but if I can access one of those compound microscopes...the Germans and Americans have made great strides with the design and lenses. If we can now

see bacteria and living creatures, who knows? Perhaps I will find something useful—a bit of evidence that will allow us to identify the killer. The captain thinks I'm daft, but Hamish believes I may be on to something."

"Mixing science with police work. Very clever."

He shrugged, still embarrassed.

I smiled. "Let's go to the dock. Perhaps we can see something previously missed."

We strode toward the pier where a crowd remained. At the forefront of one group, I noticed a man, taller than most, watching the police. He stood slightly apart from the rest. His expression was not one of voyeurism or the anonymous, mean-spirited excitement that strangers take in the traumas of others. Rather, he watched the proceedings with an air of a person who had a stake in the going-ons.

"Caleb." I tugged the hem of his jacket. "Come with me."

We started toward the man at a brisk trot. I was, I'm ashamed to admit, desperate to prove my worth as a sleuth. Despite what Caleb had said, I felt I was losing the confidence of my partner. With the agency's growing reputation, money was becoming less of an issue. Briscoe was keeping a case from me—perhaps he felt I wasn't good enough. If he was starting to rely on Hamish for information and help, then of what possible use was I? "Excuse me, sir."

The man turned, and with a faint frown creasing his forehead, acknowledged us with a curt, "Yes?"

"Do you know what happened here?" Caleb posed the question.

"Only that someone has been hurt." For his lean size, his voice was surprisingly deep.

"Did you see anything, anything at all?"

"No."

"Forgive me, sir," I said, "but your attitude is not one of a casual observer."

He started, then seemed to look at me as if for the first

time. The impassive expression on his face broke and revealed the deep sadness underneath.

“Cyril was my employer. I am—was—in charge of his administration. His second in command. He handled the finances and supplies. I dealt with the employees,” he said and nodded toward the dock. “I heard the commotion and followed the crowd. Someone whispered it was Cyril, that he’d been identified. I’m glad I wasn’t here to see them drag his body out of the water.” He looked over at where Cyril’s body lay, and took a deep, heavy breath. “I’m glad they’ve covered him, and I cannot see his face. I wouldn’t want that image as my last memory of him. I just wish I had walked by just a little sooner. Maybe I could have done something to prevent his suicide.”

“Suicide?” My voice jumped high with surprise.

He frowned. “Yes, I assumed when they pulled him from the water—what with him being so close to the pier—I thought...”

The darkness which surrounded us was partially broken by the lamps and lanterns, but I did not need bright light to know his face had drained of blood.

“Oh, no,” he whispered, “no.”

“I am sorry,” Caleb said. “Your boss was murdered.”

The man swayed. “He was a good person. I can’t imagine anyone who would have wanted to hurt him.”

“No one at all?” I didn’t want to pressure the poor chap, but people are always killed for a reason. “Please, Mr.—”

“Fenton,” he said, his voice faint. “My name is Fenton Hill.” He turned his gaze from the spot where Cyril had been found and faced me. His eyes were wide and clear with sincerity. “Who will tell his wife and children?”

“We will,” Caleb said.

He nodded. “They will mourn him. We all will.” The wind whipped around him, sent his coat tails snapping in the breeze. “He was an honest and kind boss, a good friend.” He hunkered into his jacket. “Perhaps, one day, I’ll have as

many to weep over my passing as he will." Fenton's gaze turned to the firelight and back again. He gave us a self-mocking smile. "As it is, I have only my bankers to mourn me. No family, few friends." He looked at the darkness where the ocean rolled. "Of all the people to die, he didn't need to. He should have been more careful."

I frowned. "What do you mean?"

He drew in a quick breath. "Only that it's dangerous on the docks. Cyril should have been more aware." He turned to leave.

"Fenton." Caleb's voice stopped him. "One more thing."

"Yes?"

"What were you doing here?"

His back straightened with surprise. "I work on the docks—the factory is just down there." He pointed in the direction.

Caleb nodded. "I know, but it is a mile away. It's late and work has stopped for the night. Why were you here?"

"Are you asking me if I had something to do with Cyril's demise? You think I would have done anything to hurt him?"

The defensive, aggressive tone in his voice caught me off guard. It seemed sudden and unnecessary, which could only mean—"Fenton, no one is here to get you in trouble. Cyril's death is the priority and the only thing the constable is concerned with."

The hard look in his eyes softened, but the wary light remained. He scuffed the ground with his shoes. He breathed in, out. "I was at the poker game." He nodded toward a group of buildings on our left. "I lost a few pounds, debated whether I wanted to lose the last of my shillings. It was then I heard the shouting from outside. I came out, to see what was going on. That's when I saw the cops." He dug his toe into the mud, then looked at the constable. "Are you going to charge me with illegal gambling?"

“No.” Caleb’s voice was soft. “Thank you for being honest.”

Fenton moved toward the crowd.

I looked over to where Briscoe and Hamish crouched over the body of Cyril and felt the now familiar stab of pain and guilt for having failed the man. Briscoe pulled the blanket and covered his tiny form. The morgue attendants lifted the body on to the gurney and wheeled him into the wagon. Caleb walked over to the group, and I followed.

“I questioned a man named Fenton Hill,” he told his partner. “He had some information concerning Mr. Tethers. He was at the docks because he was gambling at one of the factories. I chose not to charge him.” He straightened, bracing himself for Hamish’s reprimand.

The inspector nodded. “A wise decision. Thank you.”

Caleb’s shoulders dropped with relief.

Briscoe led the group to one of the makeshift tents, where a fire burned. We stood around it, grateful for its warmth. My clothing lay wet and heavy on me.

“Now comes the most terrible part of the investigation,” said Hamish, looking at the point where Cyril’s body had lain, “telling the next of kin.”

Briscoe said, “We shall leave you to it with our sympathies.”

“I prefer it if you would accompany us.” The inspector rubbed his hands together.

Caleb’s head shot back in surprise, and though he remained silent, I could fill in the words for him. It was unusual for non-personnel to accompany police on their rounds.

“I would appreciate the help and I’d be happy to listen to any of your observations.” Hamish said the words but there was a curious weight to them.

A brief silence settled over the group.

“Of course we’ll accompany you.” Briscoe looked around for a hansom, a covered two-wheeled carriage pulled

by horses.

"We can take one of the police cabs," said Caleb. He whistled and with a clatter of hooves, a magnificent horse with a sleek, black mane emerged from the shadows. We climbed into the cab and after Hamish gave the driver the address, we started off.

"There was some bruising on Cyril's knees," said Briscoe, above the clattering sound of the wheels on the road. "He may have fallen during the struggle, but apart from that, there is little damage."

"Which means—" Hamish continued the line of conversation. "—that Cyril never saw it coming. His assailant must have got him from behind."

I shuddered. No doubt, his last thoughts were of his family—and maybe, of our failure to come to his aid. I vowed to find his killer, both for his kin and myself. Though someone had murdered him, my hands felt wet with blood. If I had thought of a plan, asked him the hard questions, perhaps pressed him about his past, we would not be driving to Cyril's home, preparing to rend his family's life asunder and shatter any peace they may have had.

The driver dropped us at the door of a comfortable looking house. It had steep roofs, towers, turrets, and a wraparound porch. Cyril had lived in Apple Orchards, an upper middle-class neighborhood situated between Mayfair and Hyde Park. His home, bordered by a brick fence and wrought iron gate, stood on the corner. We disembarked from the cab.

The rain had stopped, and a full, bright moon illuminated our path. Hamish and Caleb led our damp party down the flower-lined lane of Cyril's home. We ascended the steps, clustered around the door, and Hamish raised the brass knocker, then let it fall. At first nothing happened, then a blaze of light lit the room to our right. Through the glass partitions in the door, we saw the hallway chandelier turn on.

From the corner of my eye, I saw Caleb straighten, shift

nervously and glance at his partner. I knew what he was thinking. Police were considered part of the trades professions, and thus, not worthy enough to knock on the front door. An officer who “knew his place” would know to use the back door, the entrance reserved for servants and social inferiors. Standing on the front entrance was scandalous and controversial, but I was glad that Hamish considered himself equal. Finding criminals and bringing them to justice was an honorable occupation, no less important than being a doctor or lawyer.

Still, I slid my hand into my pocket and pulled out the brass case that held my cards. When it came to upper society, appearances were everything. Those of status carried introduction cards—stiff pieces of paper that had our names and titles printed on them. As the son of an Earl, I would get us through the front door, one way or another. The knob rattled, and I braced myself to negotiate with the butler, should he put up resistance.

However, a young girl in a dark grey maid’s uniform opened the door. She wasn’t beautiful enough to be a parlor maid—those servants were hired solely for their looks. This one was pretty, though, even if her teeth were too large and her hair too thick.

Her gaze went from me and Briscoe, to Hamish and Caleb, and seemed to fixate on the constable’s badge. She choked back a sob, and taking a deep, gulping breath, steadied herself. Pulling a handkerchief from the front pocket of her apron, she said, “You best come in, sirs. We’ve been expecting you.”

Briscoe gave me a worried look, and followed the rest of us into the foyer. A round table with a bowl of peonies sat in the center of the room. The hallway stretched in front of us and a curved staircase arched gracefully on our right. The wainscoting walls held portraits of the family.

“I know it’s late,” Hamish said, his voice quiet and full of kindness. “My name is Inspector Hamish Sheppard. This

is Constable Caleb North, Mr. Briscoe Sartes, and Lord Boots Donovan. It's important we speak to your mistress. Perhaps you should call the butler and your mistress's personal maid."

"It's only me and cook here, tonight. The butler's off. Another servant comes in once a week to do the heavy..." She stopped, realizing she was babbling. Tears pooled in her eyes. "As I said, sir, we've known this day would come. Please." She gestured to the door on the right and walked toward it.

"Emily?"

We turned at the sound of a female's voice. At the top of the stairs stood a woman who could only be Cyril's wife. She wore a dress of antique yellow with puffed sleeves and a small bustle. Her hair was pulled back from her slender face and piled high atop her head. Her face did not hold traditional beauty, her nose a trifle too long, her mouth a shade too full. Yet, she possessed an individuality and strength that caught and held my attention.

"I am Molly Tethers," she said, her voice clear. The pronunciation of her words showed an upper class upbringing. "I am Cyril's wife, and I see by your faces you have the most terrible of news for me." She made her way down the staircase and came to us. "Emily, please fix them some tea and sandwiches, then see to the children." Molly's voice was steady, her eyes clear, but she twisted the handkerchief in her hands and her jaw trembled.

"We are deeply sorry to disturb you at such a late hour," said Hamish. "Please, we have no need of food or drink."

She said nothing, only nodded, and led us into the formal living room. "Please, go to the fire. You must be cold."

I glanced around the room. Though the lights were low, a book lay opened on a small, grey ottoman.

"You guessed correctly," she said, her gaze on me. "I was up, waiting and p-p-praying." With that, any composure

she possessed, vanished. She collapsed on the couch, and covered her face with the handkerchief.

I wanted to touch her shoulder, offer her comfort. To have done that, however, would have been presumptuous because she was female, and we did not know each other. “Mrs. Tethers, we cannot begin to express our sadness at your loss.”

“At least—at least you were willing to take his case.” She gave me a trembling smile. “You cannot imagine how much comfort it gave Cyril to know that you and Briscoe were on his side.”

Briscoe’s posture straightened and I knew we were thinking the same thing. Cyril must have come home after seeing us, how else would his wife have known we had taken his case?

“I know of your reputation from the papers.” She caught herself, and looked away, a charming embarrassment entered her face. Molly turned back to face me. With a proud lift of her chin, she said, “I know it’s unseemly for females to read the news because of the violence and spite, and we’re considered too weak to be handle such information, but—” A strong light colored her eyes. “—the hardships of life affect us all. Why should women pretend we don’t care? Why should we pretend we’re not resourceful and strong enough to know what goes on in the world?”

“Your curiosity speaks to your intelligence, ma’am,” I said, then looked at the constables.

Hamish took the cue. “Mrs. Tethers, do you have the strength to answer a few questions for us?”

She nodded and wiped the tears from her eyes.

“Your husband was out late tonight. Is this his usual routine?” Hamish asked the question. Caleb’s hand hovered over his notepad.

“I wouldn’t say “usual,” but he often w-walked when he had important matters on his mind.” She gave us a sad smile. “He said the motion started his brain.”

"You knew we had taken his case, so am I correct in assuming Cyril came home after meeting with us?" I caught myself and looked at the police officers. Hamish nodded, a small movement to say it was all right that I jumped in with my question.

"Yes." The weight of her loss and the pain of Cyril's passing made the word escape in a long, heavy hiss. "He came home after seeing you. We had a late supper, just the two of us. I had already fed the children. Josiah, our youngest, was in bed..."

None of us interrupted her, knowing her account of domestic affairs was her way of fortifying herself to discuss her husband, a way to distract her mind from the awful truth that dinner was the last time she would ever see him.

"Rachel was busy making plans for her party and writing letters, and Jonathon was out with friends. Cyril—he looked so tired. I asked him to tell me what was wrong, to share his troubles, but he said his issues had been handled." She looked at Briscoe. "I assume he meant your agency. We had a pleasant time. He seemed to take heart in knowing you were behind him—" Pain plucked the muscles of her face. "Later, we withdrew to the drawing room, but he couldn't settle down. He went upstairs, changed, and said he was going for a stroll." She stopped—more than stopped. She froze, so still she seemed to defy time and motion. Then in a hushed voice made jagged with terrible reality, she said, "It was the last time I saw him."

Briscoe left the room and returned a moment later with Emily.

"Thank you, Mrs. Tethers. We know how difficult it was for you." Hamish's gentle voice broke the pained silence. "Please, go to your children. We shall be back later for a more in depth discussion."

She took a deep, shuddering breath. "I am grateful for your kindness."

With her back erect and her head high, she led us to the

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door and bid us good night. I knew it wouldn't be a good night for any of us and wondered if I should ever again be able to close my eyes without seeing Cyril's face behind my lids.

A word about Natasha Deen...

Natasha graduated with a degree in psychology and before becoming a writer, she did everything from working for a security company to selling vacuum cleaners. These days, she gets to hang out with her four-legged coworkers—two dogs and two cats—eat copious amounts of ice-cream and chocolate, listen to music, make up stories, and visit schools to talk about how amazing reading and writing can be. Which is a pretty awesome gig for someone who never thought she'd grow up to be an author.

Visit Natasha at www.natashadeen.com.

