

One

There are many skills I hoped to master in my professional career. Scrubbing chamber pots was not one of them, and yet here we are. Oh, I don't *need* to scrub chamber pots anymore, in recognition of the fact that I'm not a nineteen-year-old Victorian housemaid but a thirty-year-old modern-day Canadian police detective. A detective who found herself, through some inexplicable whim of the universe, stuck—temporarily, I hope—in that maid's body.

Having learned and accepted the truth, my employers have made it clear I don't need to scrub chamber pots or scour coal grates or even polish silver. I still do, at least when I don't have the excuse of being busy acting as an assistant to my undertaker/forensic-scientist boss, Dr. Duncan Gray. Believe me, I am much happier studying wound patterns. But I'm in the body of his maid, living in the house he shares with his older sister, and I'm damned well going to earn my keep. That means perfecting the art of scrubbing a toilet in a world that hasn't discovered the wonders of latex gloves.

"Mallory!" Gray's voice echoes as his boots clomp up the stairs.

Those boots had better be clean. We've had a talk about *some* people walking in from the horseshit-laden streets and expecting other people to clean the floors behind them.

"Mallory! Where the devil are you?"

Before I can answer, Gray rounds the doorway and stops short to glower at me. He's really good at glowering, and will I seem like a swooning Victorian maiden if I admit he looks really good doing it?

Duncan Gray is a year older than me. With wavy dark hair, piercing dark eyes, and strong features, he's about six feet tall, which puts him above most Victorian men, particularly the lower classes. Wide-shouldered with an athletic build, Gray is a far cry from the stereotypical

undertaker. His brown skin also makes him, unfortunately, a far cry from most Victorians' idea of a physician with multiple degrees, an upper-class Scottish accent, and a town house in Edinburgh's New Town.

"I thought we agreed you did not need to do that," he says, lowering his voice so the other staff won't hear.

"It's Alice's half day. Who else is going to do it? You?"

To his credit, he pauses at that. Most Victorians would sputter at the idea, at least those wealthy enough to hire a servant, which in this world means anyone middle-class and above. This is what staff are for, and even when that staff person has a half day off, well, chamber pots aren't going to clean themselves, are they? Doing it yourself is twenty-first-century thinking, and when I suggest it, I see the wheels turning in Gray's mind.

"The next time Alice has her half day, I shall empty it when I rise in the morning," he says. "I am not certain it needs to be scrubbed daily, but I can at least empty it myself."

I push the pot back under his bed and rise. "Is there something you needed, Dr. Gray?"

He strides back to the door and shuts it. I open my mouth to say that's not a good idea. I don't want Mrs. Wallace hearing the murmured voices of her boss and housemaid behind his closed bedroom door. Gray can be oblivious to such things. He intends nothing untoward, so surely no one would imagine anything untoward.

"Do you have any experience conducting police work in disguise?" he says.

"Pretending to be someone I'm not?" I wave my hands down my uniform.

"Yes, but can you do it *well*?"

"Hey!" I say, and there might be a squawk in my voice. "*You* bought the act."

"I am hardly the most perceptive audience."

True. Gray was the only member of the household who didn't question my performance. His maid suffered a head injury that transformed a scheming thief into an industrious young woman with a keen interest in his studies? Huh. Well, the brain is a mysterious thing, and since he was in need of an assistant, he saw no problem with Catriona's transformation.

"You want a Victorian housemaid?" I change my tone to a sweet voice and lower my gaze as I curtsy. "Please, sir, might I know what you had in mind for this police work? I do not think I can help, being only a simple girl, but pray permit me the opportunity to distinguish myself."

I straighten. "Better?"

"If you are playing a maid in a theater melodrama."

I roll my eyes. "Fine. What sort of undercover work are we talking?"

"You'd be visiting a public house with Hugh. It is in the Old Town, and not in one of its best districts. Hugh would be a workingman, and you would be his . . ." He clears his throat. "Companion for the evening."

"His doxy? Please tell me I get to play a doxy?" I hike up the hem of my skirt. "Why, hello, good gentleman. Note that I am exposing a very fine pair of ankles, which can be yours for the small price of a few shillings. Pox included at no additional charge."

Gray shakes his head.

"I'm joking," I say. "With Isla gone, I'm bored and a little giddy."

And it's been weeks since you had any non-maid work for me.

A month ago, Gray learned the truth about me . . . and discovered that I'd told his sister Isla first. I'd withheld it from him even after he tentatively cracked open the door for me as an investigative partner. I might have had good reason, but he still felt the sting of it.

There have been times over the last month where I've glimpsed the real Duncan Gray, passionate about his work, brimming with enthusiasm, relaxed and confident, and as quick with a teasing gibe as I am. But those moments are rare, and then he seems to remember himself and shut that door. Not slam it. Just quietly closes it and retreats into my dignified and aloof employer.

"Okay," I say. "So I'm going to a pub with Detective McCreadie as part of an undercover assignment. Is this a new investigation? You haven't worked with him since the raven case."

He hesitates. When that hesitation stretches on, disappointment slams through me.

"Ah," I say. "You *have* worked cases together." *You just haven't brought me in.*

Gray rubs his mouth. "This one is still in the early stages. It is not entirely Hugh's investigation, and there are . . . complications."

"Complications?"

"Yes. You cannot tell Isla of tonight's adven—assignment. If you join us, I must be assured of your full discretion, particularly when it comes to my sister."

I stare at him. "You're kidding, right?"

He straightens. "Certainly not. Hugh agrees."

"Is Isla a suspect?"

He sputters before saying, "Hardly."

"Then you're putting me in the same position she put me in last month, when she asked me to keep a secret from you. We all saw how well *that* went over."

He pulls at his cravat. "It is not the same."

"No? Look, if it's a gory case, while Isla does have a weak stomach, you need to let her make those choices herself. Otherwise, you are treating your older sister like a child. I know

that's how things are done in this world, but I thought you and Detective McCreadie were better than that."

It's a low blow, one that strikes hard, Gray pulling back, his color rising even as his eyes harden.

"I would not do that," he says, enunciating each word. "I am keeping her out of this investigation because it touches on a delicate subject."

"Sex?"

More sputtering, and his color rises higher.

I lift my hand against his protest. "If it is sex, then *I'll* tell her about it. Otherwise, you really are putting me in a position I won't let myself get into again. Isla asked me to keep my secret for your own good. You didn't see it that way, did you? You saw it as a sign that your new assistant couldn't be trusted."

He glances away, leaving me with a hard profile. When he looks back, his jaw stays set, and he says nothing.

"What if I have a valid reason?" he says. "And if I am only keeping her out of it temporarily."

"Temporarily because she should eventually know? Or temporary because she's bound to find out?"

He doesn't answer.

"I will help you tonight because Isla is away," I say. "However, at the point where taking part in this investigation requires me lying to her, then you have to tell her."

He sighs. "How can I refuse when you are fair and reasonable? Go back to being silly. It is much easier to deny you in that mood. It is very difficult to remain angry with you."

“Ah, so you *have* been angry.”

“Occupied, not angry. Come along then. I will explain the case on the way.”

Two

I need to change out of my work clothing. When I'd first arrived, I'd thought it was a uniform. I know now that I'm in a time period that predates standard domestic staff uniforms, so what I wear is simply one of two outfits provided by Isla, which is not so much about appearances as having an excuse to provide us with working clothes rather than expect us to buy our own.

Changing in my time would have taken five minutes. Triple that here, and that's with leaving on my chemise, corset, corset cover, petticoats, stockings, and drawers. We're in the age of cage crinolines, but that doesn't apply to housemaids, and I prefer the layers of petticoats, mostly because it keeps me warm. June in Edinburgh is not exactly my idea of hot summer weather, especially when the wind is blowing, as it often is.

I don't mind the corset as much as I expected to, but it does take some getting used to, especially when I'm accustomed to being able to bend easily. I keep it as loose as I can while still fitting into Catriona's dresses. Tonight, I put on my outdoor boots upstairs. Then I tighten the corset to fit my going-out dress, which is tricky without Alice's help. When I can barely breathe, it's ready. The petticoats go on next.

Finally, I don Catriona's most fetching going-out dress: wine-colored wool satin, brushed to a shine. Even with the fancy—and obviously secondhand—dress, I'm not really dressed for the role of doxy. While Catriona wasn't shy, her middle-class Victorian upbringing kept her from highlighting her assets to an unseemly degree. Or perhaps it wasn't so much her upbringing as her own nature. Flashing her cleavage to distract a man was one thing, but she didn't want him thinking he might be able to buy a few hours—or even minutes—of her time.

Catriona doesn't have any makeup, and I'm not sure who in the household would. It's not like the modern world, where we're so accustomed to seeing women wearing makeup that if I go

out bare-faced, people tell me how tired I look. Isla doesn't wear any. The other options would be Alice—the twelve-year-old parlormaid—and Mrs. Wallace. I know Alice won't have any, and I'm definitely not snooping around Mrs. Wallace's room.

I don gloves and tweak my dress to be a little more revealing—which mostly just means rearranging the already low neckline. Then I arrange Catriona's honey-blond hair with more dangling tendrils. Mostly, though, it's going to have to be the attitude that sells it.

Gray is already in the coach when I arrive. I stop to greet Simon, the stable hand and coach driver. It'd be more efficient to just wave as I climb in, but waving—as I have learned the hard way—is not a thing yet. So I walk around to the front for a quick hello before hoisting my ankle-length skirts and climbing into the seat across from Gray.

The coach is a business asset. It's not the hearse—I've seen that, which is a carriage enclosed with glass so people can see the corpse within. Kidding. It's so they can see the casket, which presumably contains a corpse. This coach serves as a conveyance for grieving relatives, which means it's entirely black, with no metal or other flourishes. Gray would say that using it as his private coach is pure practicality, but it also suits his style, simple and utilitarian.

Once inside, I arrange my skirts on the leather seats. Then I peer out the window as the coach rolls forward. The stable is located in the mews, which is the land behind the row of town houses. It's an interesting setup, similar to developments in big cities where the garages are along a road in back. I imagine in the modern world, these have been converted to houses, probably priced far above my income bracket.

It's late June, and a wonderfully warm evening, still nearly full light, from the northern latitude. It's nearly ten, but looks like a summer's midevening, with residents enjoying the gardens and strolling along the roads to visit friends.

Gray lives in the New Town, with its gorgeous town houses and wide roads and gardens in bloom. Oh, there's still shit in the streets, but you can be sure most of it is equine, if that's any consolation, and while the air smells of coal smoke, it's not the thick blanket that stifles the Old Town.

The Old Town is where we're heading. For centuries, it was the whole of Edinburgh. As the capital of Scotland—with a castle once occupied by a king or queen—the city is a walled one. When the population grew, the wealthy did what they always do: abandon the increasingly crowded and filthy town center to the less fortunate.

In Edinburgh's case, that meant building outside the wall. Thus, the New Town was born. Oh, there are decent parts of the Old Town, where the working class and some middle class make their homes. But there are also tenements with a level of poverty beyond imagining.

As we head up the Mound into the Old Town, I glance at Gray. He's looking out the window, lost inside his own mind as his thoughts spin lightning fast. As much as I hate to interrupt, I know better than to presume he'll snap out of it on his own.

"You said you'd tell me about this case," I say.

It takes a moment for him to mentally transition. Then he nods and says, "There have been two recent poisoning deaths in the city."

"Right. I saw that in the papers." I pause. "Wait. *This* is the case you're not telling Isla about. Your *chemist* sister?"

"I said we are not bringing her in temporarily. We will, of course, as we may need her help. The problem for now is that it is a suspected poison ring."

"Poison ring?" My eyes widen. "Please tell me that's an actual thing. Fancy rings with little compartments of poison for killing off enemies and inconvenient lovers. Also, I want one."

I pause. "A poison ring. Not an inconvenient lover."

Gray shakes his head. "There is no such thing."

"As a ring full of poison? Or an inconvenient lover?"

"There is a fashion for rings with a small compartment in which women are said to carry poison. In truth, the small compartments are used to hold pills, perfume, and even mementos. Yes, I am certain some women buy them purely for their air of mystique and whiff of scandal, but that is not the sort of ring I mean."

"Which is . . . ?" I say.

"A ring of women who murder their loved ones with the help of another woman, who provides them with poison."

"Like a book club, but instead of sharing books, they share poison." I waggle my brows. "And murder."

He sighs, but there's a note of indulgence in it. Now that he knows my story, he's becoming accustomed to my modern language and sense of humor.

"Fine," I say. "Murder is never a laughing matter. But given what I've seen of some Victorian husbands, I wouldn't blame their wives for stirring a little arsenic into their tea. The same would go for some Victorian fathers. Possibly even some Victorian brothers." I raise my hands. "Present company excepted. You understand my meaning, though. If women in this time are imprisoned, the ones holding the keys are often their male relatives."

"I will not deny that. I would say that the situation is better in Scotland, but I understand that better is relative."

Coverture doesn't apply in Scotland—coverture being the common-law practice that says once a woman marries, control over everything from her money to her basic rights goes to her

husband. A married couple is legally one person, and that person is her husband.

I continue, “So a poisoning ring theorizes that women who want to get rid of an inconvenient family member find another woman who’ll sell them poison. Once they’ve offed their husband, another woman says ‘Oh, you lucky duck,’ and the killer provides the address of the poisoner.”

“Correct.”

I look out the carriage window, giving myself a moment to think. We’re reaching the top of the Mound. Even this late, children scurry about on errands, desperate to make a few coins before the sun drops. I catch a glimpse of a girl in a doorway. She’s no more than twelve, and when the carriage passes, she flips up her skirt, an invitation for the wealthy gentleman in such a fine coach.

Tenement buildings soar on both sides of the narrow road. Some reach ten stories, and the higher you go, the worse the living conditions. I’ve seen enough on lower floors not to be sure I can stomach going higher. What I’ve witnessed so far makes even me want to duck my head and pretend I don’t see it.

I glance over to see Gray gazing out as well. *He* sees it. Even when he’d rather not, he sees it, and he feels it.

He points out the window. “Over there is where the first victim and his suspected killer—his wife—lived,” Gray says. “On his death, she received a payment from the burial society.”

I don’t ask what a burial society is. I’ve learned a lot about the business of death, Victorian style. For Gray’s father, undertaking was only the public face of his business. The real money came by investing in the auxiliary trades. As kirkyards filled, the need for private cemeteries rose, so he’d invested in those. As the cost of funerals rose—largely *because of*

undertakers—grassroots organizations known as burial societies sprang up offering burial insurance, and Gray's father invested in those.

There's a good reason the poor are so eager to bury their loved ones: the Anatomy Act of 1832. Intended to stop the trade in cadavers, the act arose partly in response to the case of Hare and Burke, here in Edinburgh, where the two men not only sold corpses, but created them.

Until that point, British doctors could only study the cadavers of executed criminals. The act allowed the medical colleges to obtain cadavers in other ways. Most significantly, they could take unclaimed bodies.

Makes sense, right? Except that unclaimed bodies don't always belong to people without family. Mostly, they belong to people whose families can't afford burial fees, people who used to rely on the church to bury their loved ones. Now those corpses go to the colleges. Worse, it's commonly believed that if the body isn't intact, the soul won't be accepted into heaven. So by not being able to pay for burial, they doom their loved ones to purgatory.

Like so many regulations, the Anatomy Act was created to solve one problem and caused another, and as usual, it's the poor who get screwed.

The partial solution was burial societies, which allow people to pay into an insurance policy that will let them bury their loved ones.

"So the first victim's wife got a burial-society payout," I say. "What difference does that make?"

"She didn't use it."

"Didn't use—? Oh. You mean she allowed her husband's body to be taken to the medical college as a cadaver."

"Yes, and that might never have been discovered, if not for Hugh. While he isn't in

charge of the case—that would be Detective Crichton again —Hugh followed up on an informant’s tip.”

Detective Crichton is the senior officer who’d been in charge of our last case as well. I open my mouth to ask more, but the coach pulls to the side and Simon calls down. “Here, sir?”

Gray peers out to the darkening street beyond. “Unfortunately, yes. We must walk from here. I would have preferred to walk the entirety of the way, if someone had not delayed our departure with her ethical quandary.”

“Ethical? You cannot mean our Catriona, sir.” Simon’s eyes twinkle as he smiles at me. Then his smile twists into a rueful one as he says, “I mean Mallory.”

“Either is fine,” I say, returning his smile.

I would have been okay with sticking with Catriona, for simplicity’s sake. But Isla had understood that I was already uncomfortable in this world and using my own name would help.

As “Catriona,” I had suffered a head injury that supposedly explains my personality change. It was only a short leap, then, to telling the staff that I wished to be called by another name, as I no longer *was* Catriona.

“Mallory is what you wish to be called, and so Mallory is what I will call you,” Simon says. “And if you were delayed by an ethical concern, then you truly are not the Catriona I knew.”

While he tries to smile, there’s a sadness there. Catriona never met a person she couldn’t bully or blackmail or betray, but if there was an exception, it was Simon. Or I hope it was. He was her friend, and she better have deserved it.

The coach stops, and we alight. Yes, “alight” is a word I never had cause to use in the twenty-first century, but as the daughter of an English prof, I am in my element here, throwing

out all the archaic words I learned in a lifetime of reading. Admittedly, sometimes my enthusiasm gets the better of me. When I first arrived, I decided that to sound like I came from this time period, I should use all my five-dollar words. That would have worked much better if I weren't in the body of a housemaid who at least claimed to be illiterate.

Gray sends Simon home with the coach. We'll walk back afterward. I must say that's another thing I love about this time period. Walking. Oh, sure, the roads aren't exactly clean, and the air is definitely not clean. But most every place we could want to go is within a mile or two, and that walk is through an elaborate Victorian-world theme park, filled with wonder.

This entire world is filled with wonder for me. That doesn't mean I want to stay. My parents are at home. My friends and career are there. And when I left, I'd been visiting my grandmother on her deathbed, with only days left before cancer stole her from me.

Is Nan gone now? Do my parents think I disappeared—kidnapped and murdered thousands of miles from home, mere hours before my grandmother died? Or is Catriona in my body? And is that *worse* than thinking I'm gone, because their only child has twisted into a stranger who'll lie and steal whatever they'll give her?

Yes, these are the things I try very hard not to dwell on, and that's a whole lot easier on a night like this, when I can drown myself in a Victorian adventure.

When Gray said I'd be playing the role of *McCreadie's* girl, I presumed that was because Gray isn't the detective half of the duo. As we walk, though, I am reminded of the real problem.

This is the sort of neighborhood where people mind their own business. They pay attention to us, though. I'm a pretty blond nineteen-year-old who probably looks like a high-priced sex worker, out of place in this neighborhood. Gray looks even more out of place as an obvious man of means, and maybe that could be ignored—just another highbrow man with

lowbrow tastes—if not for his skin color.

People here might not be able to afford curiosity, but they'll make an exception for Gray. In undercover work, one cannot afford to be memorable.

We head downhill on one street and then turn in to a close. In Edinburgh, closes can be narrow lanes into courtyards or they can be equally narrow shortcuts between buildings. This is the latter—an established and official shortcut—but it's shadowed enough that I'd hesitate to enter even in daylight. I worry that going this way is another sign of Gray's obliviousness, but when a footfall squeaks behind us, my boss turns even before I do.

Gray pulls himself straight, his gaze fixed on the shadows behind us.

"May I help you?" he says, his tone clipped and confident with an undercurrent of annoyance.

Silence.

Gray sighs, the sound fluttering along the silent close. "I see you, lad. I am looking directly at you."

A young man steps out. He's about Catriona's age, average height and whip thin, his slight stature only accentuated by an outdated style of men's clothing still worn by some of the poor—oversized jackets and baggy trousers. The most crucial part of his appearance, though? What he holds in his hand.

A truncheon.

I tense, but Gray only drops his gaze to the baton, and the young man slides it down, like a schoolboy caught with a pocketknife.

"May I help you?" Gray says again.

The young man hesitates. To be fair, he's half a head shorter than Gray and maybe fifty

pounds lighter, but it's not just the size difference that gives him pause. It's Gray's complete lack of concern as he fixes the young man with a level stare.

"I will ask one last time—"

"I thought you might be lost, sir," the boy says, in the thick Scottish brogue that I've learned to smooth out mentally. "I was going to offer directions."

"I know precisely where I am going, though I appreciate the concern. In lieu of directions . . ." Gray holds up a coin. "Would you be so good as to ensure no one else delays my passage? I am in a bit of a hurry."

The young man's gaze goes from me to Gray. "I know a place you can get a few minutes of privacy, sir."

Gray's brows knit. "Privacy?" He follows the young man's gaze to me. "Certainly not. I am a doctor, attending to a patient, suffering from a—" He clears his throat. "—private ailment. Now, if you have the time and inclination?" He flashes the coin again. "If you are otherwise occupied, I will bid you good evening."

"I'll watch your back for you, sir."

"Most appreciated."

Gray deftly flips the coin. The boy catches it, and we carry on.

Now, as a cop who walked a lot of beats, I know there's a fifty percent chance the kid will *still* try to mug us . . . and a twenty-five percent chance he'll take the money and run. Yet Gray knows that, too, judging by the way he stays on alert as the young man falls in behind us.

We continue on for a quarter mile, approaching a better neighborhood, more working class. There, I spot a figure leaning against a shadowy wall, with his arms crossed. I slow until I recognize him. It's the sideburns that give it away. Detective Hugh McCreadie may be dressed as

a workingman—a far cry from his usual sartorial flair—but one look at those luxuriant sideburns and he is instantly recognizable.

“Have a care, Duncan,” McCreadie murmurs as we draw near. “You are being followed.”

“Yes, I know.” Gray turns and calls into the darkness. “Thank you for your services, lad.”

The young man steps out and tips his cap. “Pleasure, sir.” He eyes McCreadie. “This is your patient? I am sorry for your plight, mister. It’s a terrible thing.”

Gray flips the young man another coin, and he disappears into the night.

“My plight?” McCreadie says.

“I told him I was meeting a patient with a ‘private ailment.’ Do not worry. I have brought your mercury pills.”

McCreadie sputters.

“Mercury?” I say. “Please tell me that you realize mercury isn’t a medically sound treatment for *anything*.”

“Yes, it will eventually kill Hugh, but so will the pox, and he’d likely prefer the poison.”

Gray looks at McCreadie and deadpans. “The pox is a terrible thing.”

“Which I do *not* have.”

“Of course.” Gray adjusts his glove. “To contract it, one cannot live as a monk, pining for—”

McCreadie clears his throat.

“I have brought Mallory for you,” Gray says.

“But not to end your monkish state,” I say. “Sorry.”

McCreadie sputters again.

Gray shakes his head. “Be careful. Mallory is in a playful mood.”

“You make me sound like a kitten,” I say.

“More like a small tigress that is temporarily feeling playful, but is also likely at any moment to show her fangs and claws, should we mistake her gamboling for more than a temporary whim.”

“*Small tigress?*”

His brows rise. “That is the part to which you object?”

McCreadie clears his throat. “I see you are *both* in a playful mood. Might that have something to do with the prospect of adventure?”

“Yes, I am happy to be here, even if I feel a bit like . . .” I drop in a deep curtsy and look up at them. “Please sir, may I have a bit of respite from my daily cares, if you would be so kind.”

“She’s been feeling neglected,” Gray says. “I have told her that there have not been any serious crimes in which we might enlist her assistance.”

“Only common thefts and batteries,” McCreadie says. “If you are interested in helping with those—”

“Yes! Oh, yes, please.”

A passing woman glances over and then quickly looks away, seeing me half bent in front of two men, uttering exclamations of excitement.

McCreadie gives a soft laugh. As usual, Gray notices nothing and continues, “That is my oversight. I did not wish to bother you with minor crimes. I know better now.”

Didn’t wish to “bother” me? Or just wasn’t ready to work with me after what happened last month?

McCreadie puts out his arm. “Come, my bonny lass. A stout pint awaits us.”

I put my arm through his, and we proceed back to the road, leaving Gray in the shadows

to wait.

Three

The public house is, like most things in Victorian Edinburgh, both what I expect and not what I expect. My visual renderings of scenes like this all come from Hollywood, where I'm going to guess that—unless it's a mega-budget movie—there's a standard-issue “Victorian pub” on a soundstage somewhere. Or, at least, the blueprint for such a place exists, and the set designer makes a few adjustments. How much research did the original set designers do? Also, how readily can one even research such a thing? And what is more important for the audience: an authentic Victorian pub or what they expect from one?

If they're set in neighborhoods like this, they're usually dark and dingy, and that is accurate enough. The darkness comes from the inadequacy of the lighting—gas lighting is still too new for a working-class public house. It's all lanterns and candles, which lend both a wavering illumination and a miasma of smoke. The smoke does help cover the smell, which isn't the body odor and bad breath I'd have expected, but lemon and rose and what I've learned is bergamot.

In the modern world, we get the sense that our ancestors didn't notice bodily smells. The truth—at least in this time period—is that they sure as hell noticed and, worse, they recognized it as the smell of the so-called great unwashed. The obvious solution would be soap. That's less obvious in a time when soap is expensive, and hot—or even clean—water isn't easy to come by. While Victorians are much cleaner than I expected, they also use a lot of cover-up scent, and that's what I smell here, with only an undercurrent of actual body odor.

It's a mixed group of patrons. Based on whatever impression has formed in my brain, I expect only a few women, most of whom would be situational sex workers. As Isla has pointed out, the number of full-time sex workers in a neighborhood like this is low. Most are just women

willing to do that if it means having money for a doss-house bed . . . or money to feed an addiction . . . or money to feed their children.

While I spot a few women who'd fall into that category, there are overall more women than I expect, and most are just enjoying a drink, sometimes alone, sometimes with friends. Isla could never do that in our neighborhood. Here, the tight corset strings of Victorian morality are relaxed, and women can simply be out for a drink, same as I might at home. There are also children. Some are waiting for their parents, while others just seem to be hanging out, possibly hoping for a job—or hoping to pick the pocket of a patron too drunk to notice.

The place is crowded, I'll give it that much. The crush of humanity would exceed any modern fire code. We only get a table because someone's leaving, and McCreadie shoulders past a man who'd been waiting to snag it.

We settle in and play our roles by flirting. Luckily, McCreadie is very flirt-worthy. Handsome, bright and ambitious, with the progressive attitude that comes from a kind heart and an open mind. If Hugh McCreadie were a fellow detective at a training seminar, I'd have flirted with him for real. This is different.

The fact that I'm comfortable with McCreadie, though, means I have no trouble fake-flirting with him. Plenty of eye contact and smiles and giggles as we talk, but if anyone could hear our conversation, they'd get a very different impression.

"The second victim frequented the present establishment," McCreadie says as he leans forward, his hand on mine.

I pull back and rap his knuckles, and he grins for any audience that's watching.

McCreadie continues. "A few days ago, the man—Andrew Burns—complained of stomach troubles but brushed it off as 'feeling poorly.' Then, the night before last, he was visibly

unwell and told his companions his wife had made his favorite pudding.”

“Uh-huh.” I bat my eyelashes. “Tell me more.”

“The pudding was very rich, and he feared he’d been eating too much, which was upsetting his stomach. But he hated to turn it down when she’d gone to all the trouble—and expense—to make his favorite sweet.”

“Let me guess. She never had any herself? Insisted it was all for him?”

“He didn’t say. As he was drinking, he became violently ill. One of the lads”—he glances around, his gaze lighting on a couple of the children—“was sent to fetch Burns’s wife. By the time she arrived, he was in the roadway, nearly passed out from retching.”

“And her reaction?”

“Annoyance, according to the witnesses. She said he was going to drink himself to death and she wouldn’t make it easier on him. She stalked off. Two men carried him home and put him to bed.”

“Did his wife say anything to them?”

“Unfortunately, they were not among those willing to talk to us.”

“Is that suspicious?” I say with a flirty giggle as I lean forward. “Or just the state of things around here.”

His lips quirk in a half smile. “The state of things around here. Is it the same in your time?”

“I’m sure it’s the same in every time. So you’re having trouble finding witnesses willing to talk.”

“We are.”

“And that’s why we’re here.”

“It is.”

“What happened after Mrs. Burns left?”

“The two men returned and spoke to others here, but our witnesses didn’t overhear what was said. The next day, one of the regular lasses”—his gaze crosses a few at the bar, suggesting he means a situational sex worker—“went by his house with a bottle of stomach bitters. Mrs. Burns ran her off. Created enough of a scene for a neighbor to take an interest and slip into the flat and check inside the Burnses’ apartment.”

The first time I heard someone here say “flat,” I’d been confused. In modern-day Scotland—like England—that means what I’d call an apartment. In Victorian Edinburgh, a “flat” is a level in a building of units called apartments, which makes more sense. And a “tenement” is simply an apartment building rather than a slum.

I say, “So the neighbor checked in on Burns. How was he?”

“Dead.”

“Ah. And the coroner, uh, police surgeon ruled the cause of death was poison?”

McCreadie gives me a look.

“Right,” I say. “You have Addington, and the only thing he can reliably be counted upon is to tell whether the victim is actually dead.”

“No, he got that wrong once, too. Twice, if you count the time he called Duncan in to remove the body, and there was no one there. We never quite determined whether the ‘corpse’ was stolen or walked away or only existed in Addington’s mind. He did have quite a lot to drink that evening.”

“Wait,” I say. “I know Addington uses Dr. Gray’s funerary parlor to conduct his autopsies, but I haven’t seen the victims of these poisonings there.”

“Because Addington didn’t conduct autopsies.”

I blink at him, forgetting our flirting.

“You do realize, Mallory, that when you give me that look, I feel as if you are judging our police system and finding it wholly inadequate.”

“It . . . is a work in progress.”

He gives a sharp laugh and taps my hand. “You do not need to be so circumspect. I recognize the inadequacies of our system.”

“But it really is a work in progress. You only have about fifty years of policing behind you. I have hundreds, and even then, so much needs overhauling.”

He sobers. “So we never do get it right?”

“We will,” I say, with more certainty than I usually feel. “But you’re saying that no autopsies were conducted because Addington knows it’s poison. How?” I pause. “Is it the Marsh test? You have that by now, right, to test for arsenic?”

McCreadie throws up his hands. “There is some sort of test, and presumably Addington conducted it, because he ruled arsenic. That is all I know.”

“Can we get Dr. Gray to examine—?”

I’m stopped by a voice over my shoulder. We both freeze, like bloodhounds catching a scent. Instead of a scent, though, it is a word.

Poison.

I wave my hands, as if telling a story, and while my lips move, I say nothing. Instead, we focus on the voice behind me.

“I’m telling you, she poisoned the pudding. Everyone knows it. If the police cared to catch her, they’d have taken it straight from her icebox for ana-lyz-ation.”

“Can they do that?”

“Did you not read about that English case last year? Scotland Yard suspected the poison was in the chocolates, and they had them tested, and lo and behold, they were stuffed full of arsenic.”

I glance at McCreadie, but he’s pulled into himself, gaze emptying as he focuses on listening.

A third person joins in as the two initial conversationalists debate whether the police are inept or simply don’t give a damn.

“It had to be the pudding,” the newcomer says. “You know why they haven’t arrested her, don’t you?” He doesn’t wait for a response. “They’re being canny. Watching her. Waiting for Mrs. Burns to sneak off to whoever gave her the poison. Then they can hang the lot of them.”

I glance at McCreadie. This time, he gives me a wry half shrug, one that says it wouldn’t be a bad idea . . . if they actually believed there *was* a poison ring.

Could there be? Oh, I understand why Isla would be furious at the idea. “Poisoner” is an easy charge to level at a female chemist. Clearly she is not a “real” scientist and is only producing poison to sell to her fellow deviant women.

But here’s the thing: Couldn’t the urban legend of poison rings implant the idea of *creating* a poison ring?

The three continue talking. It’s simple speculation, no clues embedded in the narrative, and I’m growing frustrated when I catch another conversation, this one coming from behind McCreadie.

It’s two women at a table beside ours, their heads together. I can’t tell who is saying what. I can barely pick up the conversation at all.

“I heard she got the poison from Queen Mab.”

“Who?”

“Queen Mab, over in—” The rest is drowned out.

“Does she sell . . . ?” The woman’s voice drops, and I catch part of an unfamiliar word.

“She does. How far along are you?”

“I missed my last monthly. Been poorly in the mornings.”

“Go see Queen Mab. She’ll set you straight. Tell her I sent you. Better be quick, though, before the police catch up with her.”

More whispers, and when I glance at McCreadie, he’s listening intently, his brow furrowed. I lean and whisper, “Did you get the directions?,” and he shakes his head.

The two women rise from their table. I glance at McCreadie.

“Ready to go, luv?” I say.

He slides an arm around my waist as we follow the women outside. I’m hoping they’ll pause to exchange goodbyes, and the one who gave the directions will repeat them. At the very least, I expect some hint as to *which* woman is heading to Queen Mab’s. But they walk out and go their separate ways with only a nod of farewell.

The dark-haired woman heads left along the street. The light-haired one turns down a side street across from the public house. McCreadie and I pause, giggling and swaying, as if we consumed far more than a half-pint of ale.

“Split up?” I whisper.

When McCreadie hesitates, I say, “Could you tell who was saying what?”

“No, but . . .”

“If you’d feel better with me to watch your back, just say so.”

He gives me a mock stern look. I take out Catriona's switchblade. He rolls his eyes. Then he catches sight of something down the road and relaxes. I glance to see Gray half exposed between two buildings.

"Good," I say. "You and Dr. Gray can follow the dark-haired one. It's a not the worst neighborhood, but you should still have backup."

"To be quite honest, I *would* rather have an officer at my side, but as I am currently without one, I will follow the dark-haired lass, who is walking toward a better area of town. You and Duncan shall follow the light-haired one, who seems to be heading into a neighborhood I would fear to tread alone."

I sigh. "Fine. Be all reasonable about it."

"You ought to thank me," he says. "For putting you into a situation I suspect you will quite enjoy, even if you would not admit it."

I follow his gaze to Gray and narrow my eyes. "Situation?"

"Why, an opportunity for danger and adventure, of course," he says. "Whatever did you think I meant?"

He tips his hat and sets out after the dark-haired woman. I head down the darkened street the light-haired woman took. I make it about ten steps before the cobbled lane ends and a narrow alley looms ahead. I slow and let Gray catch up.

"Going in there, are we?" he says.

"Apparently. We're—"

He's already striding down the alley.

We must enter a pitch-black alley at night? All right then. No explanation required.

I shake my head. I'm not the one who will enjoy this "opportunity for danger and

adventure.”

Okay, I’m not the *only* one who’ll enjoy it.