

Wanderwell, 1826

Thud. And again. Thud. My brain barely processing the consequences. And Father—what of him? Wife of four years beaten to death.

Her cruelty? Had he no inkling? Kezia's two left feet: a viable explanation for the scrapes and bruises ever present on her youthful body? Would he imagine this crone facing her attackers with the same measure of bile she oft spilled to counter any threat or offence, real or imagined, directed her way?

He may, I reasoned, resolve to believe she had it coming to her. That her vitriolic tongue had only sealed her fate.

"Bury her?" I searched John's face for cues. I tried to calm the shaking of my hands. Exertion—or the exacting of vengeance? Either? Both? I proffered the shovel out in front of me, palms up, as if the implement itself was considering its next assignment, manipulating an already dire situation.

"No. We'll arrange the scene as if the bitch was robbed for a few farthings. Redirect suspicion until we are well away. Drag her out to South Road. Whoever finds her will think it an impulsive act by some poor wretch that hasn't eaten in a week."

We pulled the bloodied frame out of the copse of oak at the top of Quarry Lane and left her in the swale near the Wanderwell Farm, shovel in hand.

A raven violently beat the branches overhead. John cursed. I shivered. The witness took flight with an accusatory squawk.

Rain began to teem, washing mud from Mary's face. Rivulets running down the cheeks now of a woman who had likely never shed a tear.

A haze began to form over the fields beyond the hedgerows and stone markers. Burned and rotting crop residue freshly dunged into the black soil permeated the air, hanging, bucolic.

John and I stood across from one another, feet planted in the carriage gulches of the rough track. The night fog grew a luminescent purple as somewhere the moon was pushing through unseen clouds.

The expression on John's face was not contorted with fear or regret over the act committed, but with the deep sadness of knowing he would likely never lay eyes on me again. He held me at arm's length with a hand on each of my shoulders, as if to burn my face into his memory. Then he pulled me close in such an embrace that I have never gathered from any man.

“There’s no returning from this,” John said quietly, his whiskers pressed to my ear.

“I know.”

“Quickly then. And mind ye don’t be seen.”

We parted without risking another word. I stood and watched my brother for a very short time before the blur of his frock coat disappeared into the gloomy tunnel formed by the roadside trees and low-lying fog. My entire being seemed an empty vessel. There was nothing left to trickle out. Then, upon the slow realization that I would be a fugitive from this moment on, I began down South Street, quickening my pace as I went.

By the time I reached West Bay, it was a full-on run.