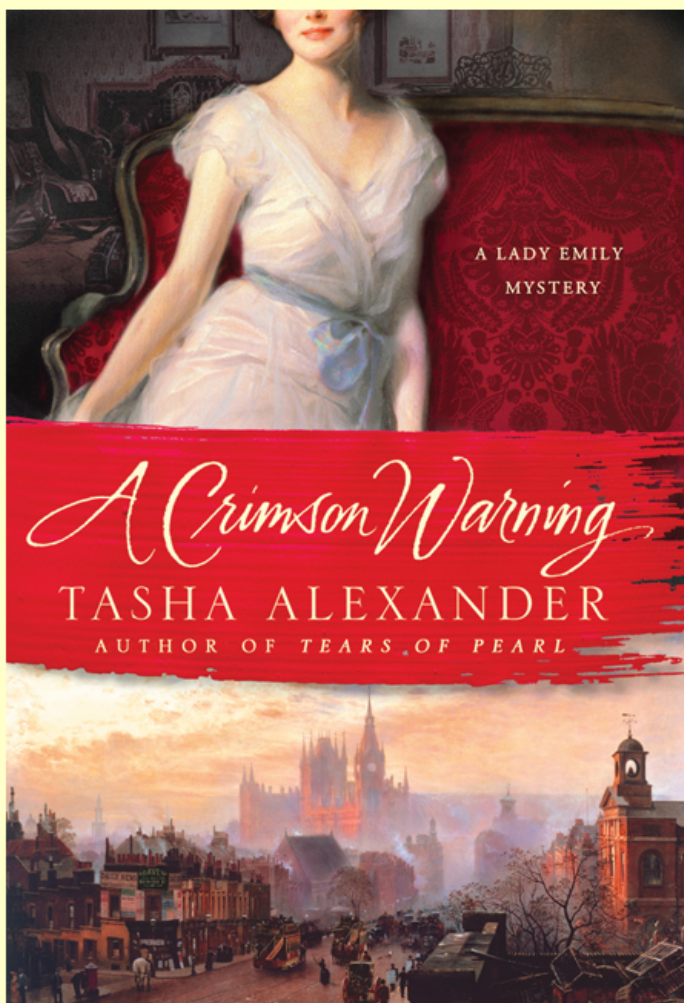


READ IT FIRST



This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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I was dancing while he burned, but I had no way of knowing that, not then, while spinning on the tips of my toes, my husband's grip firm around my waist as he led me around the ballroom again and again, glistening beads of sweat forming on his forehead. My heart was light, my head full of joy, my only complaint the temperature of the room. Its warmth was oppressive, humid and thick; the air heavy with the oil of too many perfumes. Looking back, I realize I had not even the beginning of an understanding of real heat, or of the pain of fire with its indiscriminate implacability. How could I? I was in Mayfair at a ball. The man meeting his fiery end might as well have been on the opposite side of the earth.

That evening, my side of the earth was Lady Londonderry's ballroom, one of London's finest, where I stood surrounded by friends and acquaintances, happy and safe, with bubbles of political gossip and society rumors floating around me. The ornately decorated room, with its columns and gilded surfaces, took up nearly the entire first floor, and was rumored to have been modeled after the site of the Congress of Vienna. Lord Londonderry displayed his collection of paintings on the walls. Marble statues, in the Greco-Roman tradition, stood in

regularly-spaced nooks. The house seemed to pulse as the orchestra began a waltz, my favorite dance.

“Shall we continue?” Colin asked.

I shook my head, out of breath. “It’s too hot, even for a waltz.”

Colin Hargreaves, a man always capable of anticipating a lady’s every need, whim, and—sometimes more importantly—desire, steered me through the crowds in both the main room and its antechamber until we’d reached the landing of the grand staircase. Here, leaning against the gilded railing, I was considerably less cramped. I could almost breathe.

“Better?” Colin asked, removing two champagne flutes from the tray held by a waiter who disappeared with swift precision before we could thank him.

“Much.” I lowered my fan—cerise silk to match my dress—and gulped the cool drink.

Colin touched my cheek. “Easy, my dear, or I’ll have to carry you home in disgrace.”

“The thought of you throwing me over your shoulder is hardly a disincentive.” I tilted the glass again and drained it, marveling at how handsome my husband was. His neat black jacket was perfectly tailored, his crisp shirt and narrow tie both spotless white, his skin tanned from the summer sun and flushed from dancing.

“I should hope not,” he said, his dark eyes full of the sort of heat to which, unlike that caused by extremes of weather, I would not object.

“If anything, it encourages me to overindulge. I may need quite a bit more champagne.”

“Champagne or not, I’ve plans for you when we get home,” he said. “Dancing with you always has a profound effect on me.” In the early days of our acquaintance, after the death of my first husband, Colin had inquired whether the conventions of mourning helped me manage my grief. I’d told him no, and admitted to keenly missing dancing. He’d taken me in his arms at once, there in my drawing room, and the waltz we shared left me breathless, tingling, and more than a little confused.

All these years later, the memory of that evening never failed to make me tremble with desire. My eyes met his and I felt the delicious anticipation that comes with waiting for a kiss.

The kiss did not come. The pleasant sounds that had surrounded us—the Highland schottische, laughter, and the rustle of silk skirts—faded to nothing as a voice boomed below us.

“I’ll kill you!” The speaker was standing at the bottom of the stairs, talking so loudly no one in the immediate vicinity need strain to decipher every syllable of the conversation. “She’s innocent in all this. I will not stand by and see her ruined.”

He looked like every other man at the ball, elegant in his evening kit. But the strain on his face—bulging eyes, cherry red splashed across his cheeks—came from anger, not from the exertion of dancing. The gentleman across from him stepped back, raising his hands as if to push away his companion.

“It’s not any business of mine,” he said. “I was only trying to warn you. To keep you from making an enormous mistake.”

“Speak of this to anyone else and you are a dead man. I’ll not have Polly’s reputation destroyed.”

He was already too late to save it.

“Emily!” Ivy Brandon, my dearest childhood friend and quite possibly the sweetest woman in England, tugged at my arm. “Have you heard? Polly Sanders, who’s to marry—”

“Shhh, listen,” I said and motioned to the gentlemen below.

“Oh. Oh, I say.” Ivy’s eyes widened and she lifted her hand to her mouth as she watched Thomas Lacey punch the other man square in the jaw. “It appears he already knows.”

Colin broke away from us and rushed down the steps, forcing himself between the fighters, ducking to avoid a blow.

“That’s enough,” he said. “Whatever it is, you’re causing more of a scene than it sounds like you want, Lacey. Walk with me and tell me what’s going on.” They hadn’t taken more than five steps when the

Londonderrys' butler approached and pulled my husband aside. Their heads bent together for only an instant as the servant handed Colin an envelope. He bowed to my husband and retreated but not before shooting a disparaging look at his mistress' recently fighting guests.

"Sort this out amongst yourselves in private if you must," Colin said to the gentlemen, folding the note when he'd finished reading. "I've no more time for your antics." He turned on his heel and took the stairs two at a time, reaching Ivy and me in a matter of seconds.

"Urgent business, I'm afraid. There's been a fire in Southwark. Forgive me? I know I can rely on the Brandons to see you home," he said, giving me a quick kiss on the cheek. "I'll meet you there as soon as I can."

One might have thought the ball would fall to pieces after such a scandalous interruption, but this was not the case. The orchestra continued to play, couples turned around the dance floor, and the guests consumed a steady stream of champagne. But Ivy and I had lost our taste for frivolity and asked her husband to call for the carriage and take us to my house in Park Lane.

At the end of festive evenings, my friends and I often retired to my library, with its tall windows, wide fireplace, and cherry bookcases that went all the way to the ceiling. I displayed my collection of ancient Greek vases here, and felt more sentimental about them than I did any of the other objects in the house. It was a Greek vase owned by my first husband that had sparked my interest in antiquities. As for the room itself, it had been my preferred gathering spot from the moment Colin and I were married. Tonight, however, it felt too hot and close. The night had cooled, but the air inside was still cloying, so we sat in the garden, Ivy and I perched on wrought-iron chairs while her husband, Robert, leaned against a large tree near one of the Japanese lanterns lighting the space around us. Behind him rose a sculpture of Artemis, her graceful

arm steady as she pulled back an arrow in her strong bow. An old friend of mine had made the piece, a modern copy of a Roman copy of the long-lost Greek original, fashioned by my favorite ancient sculptor, Praxiteles.

"I still hold out hope for Polly," Ivy said. "Thomas Lacey is a younger son. It's entirely possible his mother will let him go through with the marriage. It's not as if it would make any real difference to the family."

"There is no possibility that Polly Sanders is going to marry any son of Earl Lacey. The countess is far too proud," Robert said. Robert Brandon was a man of principle who had once been a great political hope for the Conservative party. A staunch traditionalist, he had seemed on a fast path to greatness until he was charged with murdering his mentor, a man universally despised throughout Britain. Desperate and abandoned by all his former supporters, he'd summoned me to his cell in Newgate and asked me to help clear his name. I was more than glad to assist. The fact he was with us now was a testament to the success of my subsequent investigation.

I pressed my hands against my temples. "Let me understand. A woman of ill repute steps forward to claim she is Polly Sanders's mother, and that Lord Sanders persuaded his wife to raise the child as her own?"

"It wouldn't be the first time such a thing has happened," Ivy said. "Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire, raised her husband's illegitimate daughter."

"Ivy." Robert shot her a sharp glare.

"It's true," Ivy said. The beadwork on her gown, made from Nile-green embroidered silk, sparkled as she moved to reach for her husband's hand. "Even if it was a hundred years ago."

"Why are we to believe this woman?" I asked. "What has Lord Sanders to say about the matter?"

"Unfortunately, he's chosen to remain silent on the subject," Robert said. "He left the ball without uttering a word. Which, naturally, leads those around him to assume the veracity of the woman's story."

“She decided to confront him in the Londonderrys’ ballroom?” I asked. “She couldn’t possibly have thought she’d gain admission.”

“She didn’t need to. She did a masterful job of causing a scene outside. More effective than if every guest in the house had seen her, I’d say,” Robert said. “Far better to let the story make its way through the crowd on its own.”

“Our old friend gossip,” I said.

“It was hideous,” Ivy said. “Half the room knew what had happened before the countess—and they were all breathless, waiting to see what she would do. I was standing not three feet from her when she turned on poor Polly. The girl withered in an instant.”

“Lord Thomas seems more concerned with defending his fiancée’s honor than in throwing her over,” I said.

“That will change as soon as his father’s through with him,” Robert said. “The family will not allow him to marry the daughter of a housemaid.”

“I’d imagine not,” I said. “Of course, if her mother had been a mistress of higher class, we’d all turn a blind eye, wouldn’t we?”

“We would not!” Ivy said.

“No,” I said. “You’re correct. Because a mistress of higher class would have raised the child herself and everyone would have pretended to believe it to be her husband’s, not her lover’s. Society prefers a fine, well-bred deception.”

“Emily!” Ivy’s smooth brow furrowed. “You know perfectly well that sort of thing hardly ever happens.”

“I won’t argue with you, Ivy. It’s too hot.”

The sound of crunching gravel announced the approach of my incomparable butler, Davis, who arrived carrying a tray heavy with a large pitcher of cold lemonade.

“Madam?” he asked.

“Please pour for us, Davis,” I said. “I’m exhausted and can hardly move. Too much dancing in the heat.”

He did as I asked, then bowed and turned to leave, stopping before

he'd taken more than half a step. Looking back at me, he raised his eyebrows and his lips quivered ever so slightly.

"Yes?" I asked.

"I left Mr. Hargreaves's cigars inside, madam, as the combination with lemonade would be rather atrocious."

"You're very bad, Davis," I said. "I'll expect an entirely different outcome the next time I call for port rather than lemonade." With another bow, he left us. "He knows Colin doesn't mind when I smoke, but dear Davis refuses to be an accessory to what he views as my ruin."

"A good man, your butler," Robert said.

"I won't take any nonsense from you, sir." I smiled. Robert had long ago given up on trying to influence me. He had come to tenuous terms with his wife's own small rebellions (drinking port with me, for example), so long as she restricted them to private situations. Decorous behavior, however, he required in public.

It was I who had corrupted Ivy, just as I'd corrupted myself. While locked up in mourning after the death of my first husband, I'd undergone an intellectual awakening and taken up the study of Greek. I'd learned to read the ancient language, reveled in the poetry of Homer, and become a respected collector of classical antiquities. As I became more enlightened, I'd also come to despise the restrictions of society, and in the course of rejecting them, had come to discover the simple pleasure one could afford from a glass of port, a drink ordinarily forbidden to ladies. Now, at the prodding of another dear friend, I'd expanded my studies to include Latin, and had convinced Ivy to learn it as well. She might not have been quite so enthusiastic a student as I, but she had a sharp mind and was learning quickly.

The lemonade cooled us and we sank into more relaxed postures as the blue light of dawn reached for the dark sky. I wondered how much longer Colin would be. His work as one of the most trusted and discreet agents of the Crown took him from me at odd times of the day and night, and I had come, after more than a year of marriage, to trust his

competence absolutely. His missions might be dangerous, but no one was better suited than he to handle them. When he at last staggered into our garden that night, his evening clothes were tattered, his face black, and the bitter smell of smoke heavy on him.

“Colin!” I cried, jumping out of my seat. He raised a bandaged hand to my cheek, a crooked smile on his face.

“Don’t be alarmed, my dear, I’m perfectly fine.” He dropped onto a chair and Robert poured a tall glass of the now lukewarm lemonade for him, emptying the pitcher. “But I’m afraid I do come with terrible news. Mr. Michael Dillman is dead, burned to death in his warehouse south of the river.” He swallowed hard and ground his teeth.

I hadn’t known Mr. Dillman well, but there was no one in London unfamiliar with his stellar reputation. He ran a successful export business and treated the men who worked in his warehouses more decently than was the current custom. He paid them generously and ensured his personal physician was on hand whenever their family members fell ill. Several charities depended on his generosity, and he was a great supporter of the arts. Yet, despite all this and a not insignificant fortune, he wasn’t much of a fixture in society. He could be socially awkward, not because he was unkind or disinterested, but because his personality tended to a quiet shyness rather than the buoyant joviality required during the season. I regretted that I had not taken the time to know him better.

“What happened?” I asked.

“Someone chained him to the bars on the office window and set the building on fire. I’m sorry, Robert, to speak of such horrors in front of your wife, but I see no point in disguising the truth. The newsmen were there almost as soon as I was. There will be no hiding from the story.”

“He . . . he was to be married next week,” Ivy said, her voice thin. “Cordelia showed me her wedding dress not two days ago.”

“Cordelia Dalton?” I asked. Ivy nodded. Cordelia was a quiet, thoughtful girl who’d made her debut the previous season. She’d not made much

of a splash amongst the fashionable set, but that was likely due to a failing on their part rather than hers. We'd discussed novels when our paths crossed at parties, and she always seemed more interested in reading and sketching than in dancing. I was quite fond of her.

"I'm more than sorry, Ivy," Colin said. "Your friend will need your comfort now."

I did not listen to the rest of the conversation; the words no longer made sense to me. I could not stop imagining the hideous scene, the terror the poor man must have felt when he realized what was happening, the pain he must have endured before succumbing to death.

I shuddered. And remembered that only a few hours earlier, I'd had the audacity to complain about the heat in a ballroom.

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