

MURDER IN POSTSCRIPT by Mary Winters

EXCERPT

Chapter 1

London, England
1860

Amelia Amesbury hated to admit it, but she was bored. Mind-numbingly bored. She supposed this was what contentment felt like: a beautiful young charge, bless her heart, playing the pianoforte; a governess, prim and proper, turning pages; and three tiers of cakes to choose from in a tastefully papered drawing room. But if she was so content, why was she itching for the afternoon's post?

She glanced at the portrait of her dead husband above the fireplace mantel. She could put the brunt of the blame on him, bless his heart, too. When they met, she had no idea who he was. He presented himself like any young man in Somerset, looking for a room at her family's respected inn, the Feathered Nest. Well, not exactly any young man. His manners were a little too refined, as were his features: smooth skin, straight nose, good teeth. When he revealed he was an earl, after she'd accepted his proposal, she was surprised, yes, but assumed that's how it was done. Wealthy aristocrats had to protect themselves and their fortunes. Like Lancelot, Edgar Amesbury had come in disguise, and the subterfuge hadn't bothered her in the least. In fact, it added to the excitement.

Amelia set down her flowered teacup with a plunk, earning her a glance from the governess. Despite her last name, Amelia was no Amesbury. Yet here she was, now the widow of one of the wealthiest families in London, with a country manor in Cornwall besides, responsible for the upbringing of Edgar's niece, Winifred. She was the reason he'd chosen a wife so quickly—that and his degenerative illness, which took him just two months after their marriage. He had wanted Winifred cared for when he was gone, and Amelia was doing a good job, if she did say so herself. Smart, well behaved, and kind, Winifred was, in every aspect except blood, her daughter. As Winifred tinkled her way through Mozart's Piano Concerto No. 21, Amelia was so proud. And yet, there was the afternoon post at the door!

"I'll get it, Jones," Amelia called to the butler. Winifred paused at the instrument. "Please continue, dear. You're doing wonderfully."

The letters she'd been waiting for all afternoon were here, the letters addressed to Lady Agony, her secret pseudonym and life-giving alter ego. Amelia's black dress rustled noisily as she alighted for the door. She opened it before the deliverer could knock.

"Good afternoon," greeted Amelia. "A lovely day to poke your head out for a breath, isn't it?"

The man blinked. "My lady."

Amelia inhaled the thick London air—and choked. It was no matter to her whether it was smoke filled, smelly, or rank, however. It was the thrum of the city that had enticed her to leave Somerset without protest. Mells, the small village where she grew up, delivered newspapers directly to the Feathered Nest—and into her small hands. She spent many afternoons poring over news from the city, young dreams arising in her heart even then, and when Edgar asked her if she would move to London, she answered with a resounding yes. "I'll take that, thank you."

The deliverer bowed wordlessly, and Amelia shut the door, returning to the drawing room as she opened the parcel and thumbed the correspondence: one, two, three letters. They requested advice on love, labor, and life. Well, mostly love, but letters all the same. Correspondents needed help traversing the murky waters of life's greatest unsolved mystery, and who better to guide them than a member of the social elite? Her title was the reason her responses were so popular—that and her honest advice. Times had changed, and readers were desperate to change with them, reaching for the next rung of the social pecking order. Plus, they and the ton wanted to know who Lady Agony really was and how she had become involved in writing in the first place.

It was her childhood friend and fellow newspaper fiend, Grady Armstrong, now an editor at one of the most popular penny weeklies in London, who put her in touch with the task. No one but he and Amelia knew the true story. A year ago, his office was flooded with letters addressed to the magazine's agony column, called such because of the angst in the letters. When the writer became discouraged with young people's outrageous behavior and quit, Grady had neither the time nor the talent to respond. That's when he asked Amelia—who needed something to occupy her hours after her husband's death—if she would be interested in the chore. He knew she enjoyed reading and writing. Would she enjoy a secret job at the weekly magazine? Did the queen enjoy tea? She agreed in

a heartbeat. Now Grady's office was busier than ever before, but in a good way. Her unconventional wisdom and mysterious identity kept readers hooked—and buying more magazines.

"Letters!" exclaimed Winifred, leaving the pianoforte. "Are any for me?"

Amelia slipped them into the crevice of the chair. "I'm afraid not. But your performance was top-notch. I've hardly enjoyed Mozart more."

"Really?" Winifred pushed a fair lock of hair from her face.

"Really." The Amesburys were known for their handsome hair, and Winifred's was no exception. Winifred would grow into a beauty before long, but for now Amelia was enjoying the plumpness of her cheeks, the crookedness of her smile, and her enthusiasm for life. At ten years old, Winifred was at that precious age between child and young woman, and Amelia was going to savor every moment.

Unlike Winifred, Amelia had long auburn locks with honey highlights that hung to her waist when it wasn't swept up, which was only at bedtime. Her hair, streaming behind her as she rode into the inn's stable, was the first thing Edgar had noticed about her. The second was that she wasn't riding sidesaddle.

The governess tsked from the corner. "Lady Winifred, you've not been excused from the pianoforte. The last page went dreadfully fast."

"That's all for now, Miss Walters," said Amelia. "I'd like to have a cup of tea with Winifred before I reply to my correspondence."

Miss Walters bowed deeply, her light brown bun a perfect swirl. "As you wish, Lady Amesbury. Please send her up to the music room when you're finished."

Winifred jumped into the patterned chair next to Amelia, her feet not touching the floor. She reached for a strawberry tart, then drew back her hand, waiting for permission.

When Miss Walters was gone, Amelia turned to Winifred. "Would you like a sweet?"

"Yes, please, and tea also."

Amelia poured out the tea. "Do you like playing the pianoforte?"

"Very much," answered Winifred. "Three sugars, please."

Amelia raised her eyebrows but dropped in the sugars. "I can tell. I can feel it when you play."

"Governess Walters said I played it too fast." Winifred took a bite of the strawberry tart, closing her blue eyes as she savored the sweetness. Only a child could enjoy the full pleasure of tartlets.

“She knows best.” Amelia placed the girl’s tea next to her. “She’s been classically trained.” It was one of the reasons Amelia had hired her; also, she was terribly good at French. Winifred had a talent for music, and Amelia wanted to make sure her musical instruction was taken seriously. Much to Amelia’s delight, Winifred performed for her every afternoon in the drawing room. Most of the practice went on in the music room, so the performances were a treat. They also helped Amelia keep an eye on her lessons.

“Amelia, may I ask you something?” asked Winifred. When no one was around, she called Amelia by her Christian name.

“Anything, dear.” Amelia took a sip of her tea.

Winifred leaned in. “What’s really in those letters?”

Amelia paused, her cup at her lip. Children were smart, and she and Winifred had spent a lot of time together since Edgar’s passing. In some ways, they’d weathered the tragedy together. There was no lying to the girl. First, she would know it, and second, Amelia respected her too much to deceive her. “The most wonderful things. Secret things that I cannot discuss with you today.”

“But someday?” Winifred gulped her tea.

“Yes, someday I will tell you. I will show you.” Amelia set down her empty cup. “For now, it must be enough to know they bring me pleasure, as your pianoforte brings you pleasure. And for that reason alone you must keep quiet. Can I trust you?” Winifred popped the rest of the tart in her mouth and nodded.

“I know I can,” said Amelia. “Now you had better be off to see Miss Walters. She’ll be wanting you to rework those last measures.”

Winifred gave Amelia an impulsive hug, and Amelia breathed in the beautiful strawberry scent of the child. Edgar hadn’t given her love—he wouldn’t risk passing on his degenerative condition—but he had given her his dear niece, and for that, Amelia would always be grateful.

When the girl was gone, Amelia took the letters into the library, her favorite room in the house. It was something else Edgar had given her that she’d enjoyed very much—a home with books. While the Feathered Nest had plenty of room for dining and entertaining, it did not afford much room for books, just the special theatricals the family loved and performed. One of her favorite performances was *Romeo and Juliet*, probably because she and Grady were central characters. Most times her eldest

sister, Penelope, took the lead roles. Indeed, Penelope was better at memorizing lines, but Amelia was better at improvising.

She stopped and inhaled a breath. The room smelled of cloves and paper and past cigars. Hundreds of leather-bound tomes filled the wooden bookshelves that lined the two-story room. She bypassed the books and made for the large rosewood desk, situated in a bright alcove of windows. It faced a dark green couch, striped chairs, and an ornate oval table. In a nearby corner was a smaller table, with heavy crystal glasses and fine liquor. And on the far wall was a grand stone fireplace, surrounded by two soft damask chairs, comfortable enough for reading and dozing. She'd spent many nights there doing just that.

Slice went the letter opener, revealing the contents for her eyes only. She scanned the penmanship: hurried, sloppy, and slightly smudged from tears. Definitely a relationship problem. Settling into her chair, she began to read the letter.

Dear Lady Agony,

You are a lady of repute. Please tell me what to do. I love the boy next door, but he's unaware of my feelings. I am certain we possess a special bond, for he smiles at me so. But he's going to ask another girl to marry him. He told me his plan on the way to the well. I stumbled away, confused, but how I longed to tell him the truth of my feelings. Am I too late?

Devotedly,

Too Late for Love

Amelia dunked her quill in the ink. This one was easy, a drop in the bucket of love letters. She began her response, which would be printed in the magazine. Readers' letters weren't included, and a good thing, too. Amelia had a feeling many writers would be embarrassed later by the emotion they'd poured into their requests.

Dear Too Late for Love,

It's never too late for love. In fact, I prefer the old, and perhaps wiser, adage, Better Late than Never. In your case, it cannot be truer. You love the boy and are late to admit it. Yes. However, there is still time. He hasn't asked anyone to marry—yet. Best he knows your true feelings before he proceeds. Even if he does not reciprocate them, you will feel secure in the knowledge that you told him. And that is a feeling you can live with. The other is not.

Yours in Secret,

Lady Agony

The next letter was just as clear-cut. It was from a reader who was jealous of her friend's hair, though she didn't say so outright. The letter accused the friend of spending too much time dressing her long, blonde, thick locks, but it was obvious to Amelia that the letter writer wished for the hair herself.

Another dunk into the inkwell, and Amelia was poised to respond.

Dear Hair, There, and Everywhere,

Some women are born with great hair. Others are born with great wit, vivacity, or kindness. Cultivate one of the latter. Or purchase a wig. The choice is just that simple.

Yours in Secret,

Lady Agony

She waited a moment before opening the last letter, savoring the unknown contents. It would be tomorrow afternoon before she received more letters, the mysteries that made up her day. Because of the popularity of the column, Grady made certain the letters arrived daily so that she wouldn't fall behind.

She turned the envelope over in her hands, positioning it in front of the light. A few drops of spring sunshine shone through the windows, making burgundy flecks on the wall as it bounced off the nearby decanter of brandy. Soon a housemaid would be in to start a fire, to warm the chill brought on by the late afternoon. Then Amelia would enjoy a glass of sherry before dressing for dinner, a complicated affair that she had never quite mastered.

She noted the seal of the envelope had been hastily done. Dashed out at the last minute, perhaps, the letter might contain time-sensitive information. Amelia unfolded the paper. The handwriting, no better than chicken scratch, was hard to decipher. Written at a slant, possibly in this morning's rain burst, it was wrinkled and marked. Yet the writer's desperation was clear from the first sentence. Amelia scanned the letter twice before dropping her quill, splattering ink on the desk. She grabbed her spectacles and read it a third time. Her eyes must be deceiving her. It was indeed dated this morning.

Dear Lady Agony,

You are my last hope, for I have nowhere else to turn. Could you meet me at St. James's Park at nine o'clock this evening? Make sure no one follows you. I believe someone is following me. I'll be at the bench by the pond. You will know me by my red hat. Please make every effort. I've witnessed something dreadful, and I fear the worst.

Devotedly,

Charlotte

Postscript: I think my mistress was murdered.