

WITH THIS CURSE

BONUS SCENE

Warning: Massive spoilers ahead!
If you haven't yet read *With This Curse*, you should ***not*** read this scene.

“Aftermath and Coda” takes place immediately after the action of chapter 26 concludes (thus, before the epilogue).

Content advisory: This scene includes sexual content. Although discreetly described, it is more explicit by its very nature than *With This Curse*. Reader discretion is advised.

Aftermath and Coda (Atticus)

The next few hours felt like an eternity. Making their way back through the underground passageway, waking servants to retrieve the body and ride out for the doctor and constable, explaining in detail when those gentlemen arrived how the thing had come about... Atticus was almost in a trance of weariness when Clara finally told the interrogators: "My husband needs rest. He is too cognizant of his duty to say so, but he must be feeling the effects of his injury and a physically exhausting encounter. I must ask you to draw this interview to a close for the night."

She was bearing up splendidly. She had remained by him throughout the questioning, a trifle pale but showing no diminution of her strength... or her beauty, even though she was disheveled from that ghastly, final struggle in the cave. Her masses of dark curls were coming loose from their hairpins, making him want to bury his hands in their softness, and there were reddish brown blotches on her dress bodice that had sent a flood of cold horror through his veins until he realized that it was not her blood. Not once but twice in twenty-four hours she had almost been killed, and the thought made him reach out for her, even as the doctor was speaking, and clasp her tightly to his breast.

After one startled instant her body relaxed in his arms, and she touched her lips to his cheek. Suddenly her words about ending the interview held an appeal he could not resist. He wanted nothing more than to be alone with Clara.

"My wife's solicitude for my health aside," he said, "her own injury puts her in need of rest. I propose that we suspend the questioning until Lady Telford and I have had the benefit of a few hours' sleep. I assure you that we will be entirely at your disposal then—and in my case, at least, my answers are likely to be more cogent."

To his profound relief, the local constable agreed readily enough to end the questioning for the night. He and the doctor, who also permitted himself to be steered to the door

by Mrs. Threll, seemed to harbor no skepticism toward their account of the grisly events. It seemed that, after great cost, Richard's career as a scoundrel and murderer was to be ended, with no further repercussions.

Except for Genevieve's feelings. "I hope she will not hear the news before we have the chance to speak with her," he said as Clara accompanied him up the stairs toward their rooms. "Perhaps we should have wakened her."

"I've asked Mrs. Threll not to let anyone inform her of tonight's events before you and I can do so," she said. As she often did, she had subtly adjusted her pace to make allowances for his limp, which was conspicuous tonight after his grueling experience. It was one of the thousands of things he loved in her—both that she took his handicap into account and that she did so without drawing attention to it, leaving his pride intact. "In the morning we can sit down with her and tell her all that happened and answer her questions."

"Those we know the answers to, at least," he said ruefully. Some things he felt he would never understand—such as how Richard could have abandoned not only any responsibility for, but any interest in, the daughter he had sired. Upon what Atticus still thought of as his return from the dead, Richard had shown no curiosity about Genevieve, only about how to gain access to the wealth of Gravesend... and the rank Atticus held.

"It is likely to be a difficult conversation," Clara acknowledged. "But nothing would be gained by disturbing her rest to have it now. The morning will come soon enough."

Indeed, it seemed to be hastening close. It was now almost three in the morning. When Clara made to part from him at the door of his bedchamber, though, he did not release her hand. "Stay with me," he urged. "Sleep by my side. As near as we came to losing each other, I don't want to let you out of my sight for one second."

She smiled, and the sight of it almost made his heart pause in its beating, as it always did. The curve of her lips and the warmth in her eyes always made him feel as if he was privy to something precious, something reserved only for him. As

perhaps he was. "I confess I would find it a comfort to be close to you, and for the same reason," she said. "I'll stay, and gladly. Perhaps I should withdraw to the dressing room when Sterry comes to help you undress, though. I don't want to shock the poor man."

"I've no need of Sterry," he said boldly. "In some households, a wife performs the office of undressing her husband."

He thought her cheeks took on a pink tint at that. He never ceased to marvel that this alluring woman was a stranger to the ways of love. The prospect of exploring with her what he knew would be the exquisite delight of union made his pulse quicken. Her hand still lay in his, and he drew his thumb over her palm in a caress that made her eyes widen. "Well?" he asked.

She seemed to choose her words with care. "I suspect that arguing with you would only postpone the rest you need," she said, and he wondered if under the decorous tone there was the hint of a smile. "If my presence will get you to bed sooner—"

"Oh, assuredly."

"In that case," she said, "it would be churlish of me to refuse."

Once the door had closed behind them, though, he relented. "You needn't truly help me undress, you know. I simply didn't want Sterry's presence just now. You are the only one I want at my side."

Again came that heart-stopping smile. "As you wish," she said, and perhaps it was wishful thinking that lent the words an undertone of coquetry. "I would make a poor valet, in any case, having so little acquaintance with gentlemen's clothes." "Another time perhaps we may remedy that." He sat on the edge of the bed to remove his shoes, and she turned and wandered away toward the fireplace. To preserve his privacy, or her modesty? In either case, as he wearily removed jacket, waistcoat, and the rest of his outer apparel, he reflected that it was just as well not to rush into intimacy. Tonight, after all, they both needed the healing properties of sleep. There would be time enough for loving during all the nights that lay ahead.

“It will be the first time I have fallen asleep with you in my arms,” he commented without turning. The mental picture charmed him: Clara’s curly hair draped across the pillow, her dark lashes lying in crescents on her cheeks, her hands curled on his chest. Perfection.

“So it will,” came the soft reply. “The first of many.”

When he looked around he saw that she had removed her outer garments and petticoats and laid them, folded neatly, on the divan. With her back still turned to him she was tugging at the laces of her corset. He must have made a startled sound, for she looked back over her shoulder at him.

“I shall not be able to sleep if I am laced,” she said demurely.

“I’ll only be a moment longer.”

The exhaustion fell away from him like another garment shed. He rose and went to stand behind her, sliding his hands around her waist until his fingers found the hooks at the front of her corset. He felt the jolt that struck her body at the instant he touched her. “I’ll help,” he whispered in her ear, then pressed his lips to her throat, drinking in the leap of the pulse there.

“I’m nearly done,” she said. Her voice was breathless.

Between them, the hooks were soon unfastened, and then she stood in only chemise and drawers. He could not resist touching her, feeling the heat of her skin through the thin fabric as he glided his hand down her side and over the curve of her hip. She drew a quick breath at the sensation, her eyes closing briefly, but did not draw away. He could see the rise and fall of her bosom more distinctly now as her breathing grew deeper. She felt it too, then—this passion that kindled his blood and made him reach for the ribbon bow at the front of her chemise.

This time there was no fateful violet between her breasts.

Only a tiny bead of perspiration that gleamed in the firelight as he slid the chemise off her shoulders, over her breasts, down to skim over her hips and then to pool at her feet. The drawers followed after, sliding to the floor nearly soundlessly, and she stood naked before him.

A small motion of her hands, quickly stilled, told him that she was fighting the instinct to cover herself. He turned her

gently to face him. “You’re magnificent,” he whispered. All the years of dreaming of her had not prepared him for the splendor of her in the flesh. The supple curves, the smoothness of her olive skin. The sight of her in all her unadorned glory made heat gather beneath his skin, and he was conscious of his own heartbeat thudding loudly in his ears.

“I feel very... exposed,” she said in a low voice.

“I understand, my love. You’re also seeing me at my most vulnerable.” He gestured to his right leg, bared below the knee by his underdrawers, and her eyes widened as she saw it for the first time. His foot and ankle were still misshapen even after all the braces and surgeries he had endured, and the old scars were plainly visible even in the soft firelight. He was accustomed to the sight, but he knew it might be shocking to another’s eyes, and he would understand if Clara shrank back or flinched.

But she did neither. Instead, to his consternation, her eyes filled with tears. Before he could stop her she had knelt before him to touch his scars with gentle fingertips.

“Clara, I didn’t mean—” The words were halted when she bowed her head, her soft hair spilling over his foot, to place a kiss on the distorted ankle.

“My dear love, what you suffered...” she whispered.

Overwhelmed, he stooped to draw her back to her feet. He had intended only to ease her self-consciousness, not to distress her. “It is all forgotten,” he assured her, gazing into velvety dark eyes that were still troubled. “There is no need to pity me. I feel myself the most fortunate man in the universe at this moment.”

“You are certainly the bravest,” she told him, but she blinked the tears away and tried to summon her composure. “Are you in pain?”

“I hardly feel it at all. There are far more alluring things to feel just now.” He bent his head to kiss her, and the responsiveness of her soft lips delighted him. Encouraged, he let his hands trace the shape of her body, marveling at skin as smooth as the silk garments she loved to wear. But when

his caresses ventured too far she caught his wrist and broke their long kiss.

“Atticus, wait.” Her face was flushed, but he did not know whether it was excitement or embarrassment that brought that beguiling color to her cheeks.

“What is it, my love?” He was careful to keep dismay from showing in his voice. He knew she was a woman who reveled in the joys of the senses, knew that he could bring her to a pitch of delight whose existence she had never known—but only if she was ready.

“I’m... afraid.”

The words emerged with difficulty. Naturally her pride would resist such an admission.

“Do you trust me?” he asked her gently.

She would not meet his eyes. “I do. It—it’s myself I don’t trust. My body seems to act quite independently of my control, and when you touch me like that...”

Surely they were not back to this, her flinching from his touch. He held back with a superhuman effort all the reassurance and persuasion that rushed to his lips. *Do not press her*, he counseled himself.

She took a deep breath. “I’m afraid I shall become quite wanton under your touch, Atticus,” she said in a small voice.

“And I could not bear it if that lessened your regard for me.”

“Dear heaven, Clara!” He cupped her face in his hands, seeking her eyes even as they evaded his. “Put all such fears from your mind. I could never love you less for paying me the compliment of showing passion for me. Besides, between husband and wife there is nothing amiss with what you call wantonness.”

“Truly?” The uncertainty in her eyes gave her a virginal quality that came near to driving him mad with desire. But at the same time it stirred all his protective impulses. He struggled to find the words that would help her understand what was in his heart and give her the assurance she needed... and deserved.

“I am your safe haven, Clara,” he promised. “With me you may be as abandoned as you feel—or as shy. Give me all of

yourself: your passion, your tenderness, even your ferocity. I will treasure them all, for they are all part of you.”

She looked at him for a long moment, her eyes filled with something that was still so new to him that he was almost afraid to name it as love. Then she put her lips to his ear and whispered, “Thank you,” as if she could not say it to his face. But when she slipped her arms around his neck and kissed him, she was not shy. She was bold, eager, even joyful. If he had thought himself aflame before with longing for her, he now felt his body a column of fire. Everywhere that her body touched his, even through the linen of his undergarments, he felt as if he were embracing lightning.

He could wait no longer. He bent to hook an arm behind her knees as his other arm slipped around her shoulders, and as he lifted her she gave a little gasp, which turned into a low laugh as he carried her to the bed. He laid her down and quickly divested himself of his underclothes, all the while relishing the sight of her. His beloved Clara, in his bed, her dark eyes soft with love and desire. A dream at last come true. Then he lay down beside her and took her in his arms. When he kissed her lips and felt the silken warmth of her body pressed against him, he thought he had never known joy until that moment. And he thought it again with every moment that followed after, as he loved her with his whole heart and body and she requited his passion with her own, until he joined her in a place beyond thought.

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Later, when they lay drowsily entangled and content, she asked softly, “How did you know to do that?”

“Which?” he teased, hoping to hear her frame their act of love in words.

“Well—all of it.”

He did not answer at once. The knowledge might hurt her, and it made him... not ashamed, exactly, but a little sad that he had not been able to come to her with a pure past.

“There was a girl from the village,” he said finally. “When I turned twenty-one my father insisted that I wait no longer to be with a woman. I needed to become a true man, he said. Since I had not wooed anyone on my own account, he made

arrangements.” He did not tell her about the constant browbeatings and bullying, weeks of it, that had weakened his will and, in the end, brought his capitulation. “He didn’t know that you had taken my heart with you when you were driven out of Gravesend, of course.” Not that it would have made a jot of difference.

“Who was she?”

“A publican’s daughter. I wasn’t her first—Father made certain to find someone wise enough in the ways of the flesh to teach me.”

“Oh.” She seemed to consider for a moment, and he could not tell from her expression if she was disturbed by this revelation. “What was she like?”

“Kinder than I expected. And patient.” For her patience, at least, he blessed her memory. That, and the realization that she had taught him the beginnings of how to bring Clara delight. He drew a fingertip down his wife’s cheek and gently turned her chin so that her face was fully toward his. “I didn’t love her—not as I loved you,” he told her. “I’ve never loved anyone as I love you. Nor ever shall.”

She laid her hand against his cheek, her dark eyes resting thoughtfully on his. “If she gave you some moments of happiness, I thank her.”

He covered her hand with his and turned his head to press his lips to her palm, unable to speak.

“And you had no one else to love during all the years before you found me?” she asked.

“Well... I did go courting once.” It was not a story he found easy to tell. “It was then that I discovered how undesirable a suitor I was to the young ladies of my circle. She and her friends were most definite about that.” He drew Clara closer to remind himself that all that was in the past. “I was not lying when I used that as a pretext to propose to you, although I let you think I had wooed more belles than just the one.”

“You must have been very lonely.”

Little tendrils of dark hair were curling at her forehead and temples where her skin was damp from their exertions, and

he wrapped one curl around his index finger. “I had thoughts of you to keep me company.”

Her smile was a little rueful. “I imagine the thoughts were more exciting than the reality,” she said. With a fingertip she traced the line of his collarbone, then ventured lower to stroke his chest. Already her caresses had grown more confident, and he reveled in this evidence of her trust in him. “You believed me to be wild, didn’t you, because of that day in the folly? Because I let you unbutton my dress. And yet you are the only one I ever permitted that liberty.”

“I am?”

She nodded, her hair brushing silkily against his shoulder. “I did not know it was you with me, but I knew something was different... in the best of ways. For a long time I thought of that day as the last time in my life that I was happy—the last day my life was free from the curse.”

Troubled, he searched her eyes. “Do you still fear that the curse is hanging over us?”

She looked into the distance as she considered. “No,” she said at last, and her voice was tinged with wonder. “I’m not afraid of it any longer.” Her gaze returned to him, and she reached up to draw her fingers through his hair. “I suppose complete happiness leaves no room for fear,” she said softly. *Complete happiness*. That he had it in his power to grant her this filled him with a kind of awe. He touched her face, trying to find the words to say so.

But then he realized that he was neglecting more immediate considerations, such as the fact that her lips were rosy and tempting and very close to his. They were so inviting that he had no choice but to kiss them, which he did at length.

“Wicked man,” she said indulgently when at last he released her. Her eyelids were growing heavy, and each slow blink with its sweep of dark lashes enchanted him. “You are a demoralizing influence.”

The idea tickled his vanity. “Perhaps we should visit the folly again,” he said daringly, “and complete what we began that day.”

That opened her eyes fully. “Atticus, you don’t mean—but that’s shocking! Out of doors? Where anyone might come upon us?”

“Why not?” He grinned, made brave by the afterglow of love and the sight of the woman who lay beside him. “We’ll send the servants to town on a half holiday. As lord and mistress of the manor we may do as we like—where we like.”

She was blushing again, but when she caught her lower lip between her teeth he could have sworn that she was biting back a smile. “Let us wait for warmer weather, at least,” she said, and then burst into laughter when he rolled her into an exuberant embrace.

The dark history of Gravesend did not enter his mind again that night—nor, he would have said with certainty, hers. The house that had been host to so much tragedy was now welcoming a new legacy, a glorious happiness that some distant part of his mind knew would last as long as he and Clara lived.