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By ten am, the ragged diner near the docks had finished its morning rush. Gideon pulled out a seat at a table, dragging the chair over the sawdust strewn floor. He nodded at Brinker, his man, who reluctantly took a seat across from him.

Gideon had come to New York searching for new talent but this was for pleasure. The look and smell of the busy harbor reminded him of his native Liverpool more than London.

Though Gideon didn't mind the scent of danger and mud, Brinker made it clear he did. Those elegant nostrils flared as a worker pushed past their table on his way to the counter. No doubt the man stank of tar and river sludge like almost every man on the docks.

Poor Brinker. He undertook the work Gideon requested, but these interludes conducted in the seamier parts of the world assaulted the gentleman's personal gentleman's sensibilities. He had already made it clear he thought his employer's hands-on approach to work sullied Gideon's recently acquired nobility.

The brute returned from the counter, a cup of coffee clutched in a fist the size of cannonball, found a table near the door and glowered at the world outside the window where he sat. Then his frown faded—for a brief moment his mouth twitched into a smile. Gideon twisted to see what had caused the fleeting response. The hulk watched a man and a woman as they entered the restaurant. Gideon assumed the big man's near smile was for the young female.

She carried a portmanteau and nervously picked her way around the empty tables and chairs, following her companion. The thin gentleman led her to a table in the quiet far corner across the room from the bulky worker.

The girl had a slender figure and wore a plain dull green gown that seemed to have been made for a larger woman. Her lank brown hair was sliding from the bun at the back of her head. She looked the picture of the worn traveler just off one of the ships. Yet she was attractive with a wholesome pretty face with a tiny trace of freckles, large blue eyes that sparkled with excitement. Newly arrived in the big city, Gideon guessed, and taking it all in.

Taken in as well, he suspected as he examined the man she accompanied. Something about the over-dressed man seemed to far too glib. It wasn't just his big waxed mustaches or the suit shiny at the elbows, and garishly tight trousers. He wore the natural ebullience of a salesman selling something more dangerous than snake oil. Gideon saw other signs of danger. The man hadn't traveled with her, wasn't truly a companion, or he'd be carrying that bag of hers. And there was the undeniable fact that a girl that young and pretty didn't belong in this place.

Gideon straightened up. The ever-alert Brinker shuffled his own chair slightly to move out of the way and to get a better look himself. Under his mustaches, the dark haired thin man scowled at Gideon who smiled and shrugged in return. He picked up his mug of deplorable coffee, pulled the newspaper from his overcoat pocket and pretended to read it.

A public place. That man wouldn't try anything here, would he? Gideon got out his pad and pencil and sketched a profile of the man's face. That eyetooth that slightly overlapped the one next to it. The nose that ended too soon and the smile that took up just a bit too much of his face.

He wished he could move his chair so he'd see the girl better. The side view was in darkness. From his stealthy glances he saw she was even more attractive than he'd first thought though perhaps not as young. And somehow she had a familiar look to her. She must remind him of someone. A girl back in England? Some one's sweet younger sister he'd met on school

holiday? She laughed at something the thin man said. But there was nothing suggestive in that laughter or in the enchanting large eyes-- only the innocent flirtation of a sheltered girl.

She excused herself and apparently wasn't so completely the lost lamb because she took her bag with her.

Gideon held up the paper but peered around the edge. Seconds had passed before his last look, but he saw now that the girl's thin companion was stirring her coffee. Hers. And then he quickly slipped something into his pocket. A screw of paper, perhaps.

Gideon leaned close to Brinker and muttered. "I think he's done something to her drink." Something tickled his memory, a small story in one of his own papers. "The crazy woman found near Piccadilly, babbling and in tatters. Do you recall?"

"No, sir." Brinker wouldn't sigh, but perhaps he gave an exhalation that was slightly deeper than usual.

Gideon had been about to leave, but now he stayed in his chair. Waiting. Watching while pretending to read.

In the far corner, the big brute had finished his coffee and had pulled his tweed workman's cap down, covering part of his face. He appeared to be dozing, yet something about his shoulders seemed too tense. Was he in league with the oily man?

After the girl returned from wherever she'd gone, she carefully pushed her satchel under the table and sat. She raised her mug of coffee.

Gideon got to his feet, ready to speak even if he did sound like a fool. Hell, maybe it was poison. But before he could open his mouth he saw she'd drained the cup. He sat back down and shrugged at Brinker. Perhaps he'd only imagined the danger to the girl, but he'd take at least an

hour to find out. He suspected that if the man had slipped a drug into her drink it wouldn't take long to work.

“Keep your eyes open, eh?” He told Brinker. Gideon shook out the paper and began to scan the articles. Most of them were just as badly written as the stuff back home. All reports about reports, no immediacy.

“Sir,” Brinker murmured. Gideon folded up the paper at once.

The girl tottered to her feet. She swayed, hitting her table. A plate clattered to the floor and broke. “Oh, I'm so sorry.” Her words sounded slurred.

Gideon glanced around the room. Was anyone else going to do anything?

The big man wasn't pretending to sleep. He'd pushed his cap back and even watched, but he had a bored look on his face. His arms were folded over his massive chest. The two lacksidaisical waiters didn't move. One leaned against the wall studying a racing form. The other dreamily smoked a cigar.

The girl reached down for her bag. When she straightened, she groaned. “Oh, my.”

The thin man put his arms around her, and drew her close. She lurched and made a small protesting sound. He grinned around the restaurant not meeting anyone's eyes. “Whoopsie. Long voyage,” he announced in a loud, overly-cheery voice. He began to haul her toward the door. Her feet dragged every step as she stumbled along.

The man pulled her faster and spoke again to no one, “She'll be just fine. We'll get to the hotel—“

But Gideon had leapt from his chair and walked fast, in his direction. Brinker had already blocked the exit. “Let go of her,” Gideon said. “Now.”

The thin man growled. “Get away. It's none of your affair.”

Gideon spoke in a loud voice, so everyone in the small restaurant could hear him. Damn them for not caring, but they'd be witnesses anyway. "I think this young lady is none of your affair. I saw what you did to her coffee."

For a moment the whole place froze as if everyone in the room, the two waiters, the big man in the corner, even the woman, held their breath.

With a grunt of a curse, the man pushed the woman hard, in Gideon's direction. He shoved the astonished Brinker out of the way and ran out the door.

Gideon reached for the girl to grab her as she fell. Her face slammed against his shoulder. She gave a yelp. And suddenly she wasn't falling.

She was on her own two feet, glaring at him. "Damn, damn. Damn it." She twisted away. "Oyster--you follow him, right?"

The bruiser from the corner was already half-way out the door. "Maybe. He's fast. I still got the bum knee."

"Good luck," the girl shouted. The door slammed behind him and she sighed. "Bah. That's that. It's the second time and by now they gotta start being more careful." She rubbed her cheek where she'd landed on Gideon's shoulder. Her blue eyes still sparkled as she looked him over.

And then she smiled. A wide grin showing white teeth and dimples. That smile knocked his already befuddled brain into a full gallop of stunned confusion. Gideon just blinked at her. He was not used to being the one fooled and he wasn't sure he liked it. On the other hand, he didn't think he hated it either.

She wasn't mocking him though. In a perfectly friendly voice she said, "Sorry to curse at you when you were only being a good Samaritan. I don't expect that in these parts. Heck, I should know better. Our pal Sunny Jim or whatever his name might be should have, too. The

trick is to wait until the place is really dead or completely jammed.” That wide smile looked knowing. Not a trace of innocence in her lovely face now.

“Thanks,” she said to the glum waiter who’d ambled over at last. She pulled a bag from her pocket and extracted some coins. “Sorry about the plate. I added twenty five cents to the usual.”

“No more usual. No more of your stuff in here,” he said. “I don’t like you chasing out regular customers.”

“Aw, how was I to know these two were too alert? And anyway, you hear ‘em.” She directed her smile at Brinker. “They’re not just Brits; they’re upper crust English. Regulars at this joint they’re not, Bill.” She reached up and pulled off her hat. Then she removed the brown wig. Underneath, her hair was short, curly and very black.

Gideon at last found his voice. “Who the hell are you?” but he suspected he already knew. No wonder she looked familiar. She was one of the ones he’d been half-looking for.