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KAREN BROOKS

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—*The Australian* on *The Good Wife of Bath*

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—*The Sydney Morning Herald* on *The Good Wife of Bath*

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—*Australian Women’s Weekly* on *The Good Wife of Bath*

‘Karen Brooks’ funny, picaresque and clever retelling of Chaucer’s “The Wife of Bath’s Tale” is a cutting assessment of what happens when male power is left unchecked. It’s a rich, rollicking yet ultimately important read that finally reclaims Eleanor’s story for her own.’

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—*Family Circle* on *The Good Wife of Bath*

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—Darry Fraser, bestselling Australian author, on *The Good Wife of Bath*

‘Historian and novelist Brooks shows her research and imaginative chops in a luscious and astonishingly affecting chronicle of family scandal, political unrest, and redemptive hope in 1660s London.’

—*Publishers Weekly* on *The Chocolate Maker’s Wife*

‘Brooks masterfully deploys surprising plot twists, deftly pacing the opening of closets to reveal hidden diaries and family skeletons … A charming and smart historical novel from a master storyteller.’

—*Kirkus Reviews* on *The Chocolate Maker’s Wife*

‘*The Darkest Shore* is meticulously researched, taking a real historical event, and [Karen Brooks’] academic experience and merging it with exceptional storytelling. The characters are complex and compelling … a powerful novel, at times brutal, but always enthralling, *The Darkest Shore* is a major achievement for Karen Brooks.’

—*Better Reading*

‘Karen Brooks has handled such a dark history with care and empathy … I can’t recommend this one highly enough, it’s a brilliant read.’

—*Theresa Smith Writes* on *The Darkest Shore*

‘A compelling, fascinating, and disturbing historical fiction novel … Beautifully written, with authentic characterisation and vivid description … a captivating, even if sometimes confronting, read.’

—*Book’d Out* on *The Darkest Shore*

‘… a completely absorbing historical novel.’

—Other Dreams Other Lives on *The Darkest Shore*

‘Moving, tragic, frustrating and inspiring. *The Darkest Shore* is yet another triumph from historical specialist Karen Brooks.’

—Mrs B’s Book Reviews

‘Sensual, seductive, bold … A rich indulgence.’

—Booklist on *The Chocolate Maker’s Wife*

‘The latest from Australian author Brooks is an excellent option for reading groups that enjoy multigenerational tales and historical fiction … Your late middle English vocabulary will be sumptuously rewarded.’

—Library Journal on *The Chocolate Maker’s Wife*

‘Meticulously researched and historically compelling … this fast-paced novel is a dramatic spy thriller that shines a spotlight on the inner workings of Elizabethan England.’

—Books + Publishing on *The Locksmith’s Daughter*

‘Brooks’s attention to historical detail instils the novel with authenticity by including many historical figures and events, while Anneke’s lively voice keeps a strong grip on the reader as she works to overcome societal prohibitions against women in business and find happiness and contentment. Brooks’s immersive page-turner does not disappoint.’

—Publishers Weekly on *The Brewer’s Tale*

KAREN BROOKS is the author of seventeen books, an academic of more than twenty years' experience, a newspaper columnist and social commentator, and has appeared regularly on national TV and radio. Before turning to academia, she was an army officer for five years, and prior to that dabbled in acting.

She lives in Hobart, Tasmania, in a beautiful stone house with its own marvellous history. When she's not writing, she's helping her husband Stephen in his brewstillery, Captain Bligh's, or cooking for family and friends, travelling, cuddling and walking her dog, Bounty, or curled up with a great book and dreaming of more stories.

Fiction

The Brewer's Tale
The Locksmith's Daughter
The Chocolate Maker's Wife
The Darkest Shore
The Good Wife of Bath
The Escapades of Tribulation Johnson
The Whisky Widow

The Curse of the Bond Riders trilogy

Tallow
Votive
Illumination

Young Adult Fantasy

It's Time, Cassandra Klein
The Gaze of the Gorgon
The Book of Night
The Kurs of Atlantis
Rifts Through Quentaris

Non-fiction

Consuming Innocence



The *Extraordinary* FLORENCE STOKER

KAREN BROOKS

FICTION

HQ

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This novel is dedicated with love and gratitude to those who read, promote, sell and champion original works that spring from the imagination, heart and soul of creative minds.

You're not just book-lovers, you're the guardians of culture and art; the defenders of what makes us human and thus richer in ways that cannot be measured, but are priceless.

Thank you.

Florence [Stoker] had effectively captured the imaginations of the creators of Svengali, Dracula and Dorian Gray … Rarely, if ever, has a woman been the focus of so much literary demonism …

David J Skal, *Hollywood Gothic*

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PROLOGUE

London, 1927

They call me Mrs Dracula now. Once more I'm relegated to being 'the Wife', this time, to my husband's fictional creation. As I look back over the years, it's fair to say I've endured my share of monsters and unquiet spirits, all while striving to keep them at bay.

Ever since I married Bram on that chill December morn in Dublin, everything I've done has been in service to my marriage, to support my husband, his thankless labours for another, his dogged efforts to make a name for himself through his writing.

Surely, the choices I made, what *I* sacrificed, the secrets I kept, must be worth something too? If not, then what was it all for?

This is why I must ensure Bram's legacy: to prove that as his wife, his widow, *my* life also had meaning. It's all I want now.

That, and to forgive him.

And, perhaps, in doing so, forgive myself.



PART ONE

1876 to 1878

Build our castles in the air

Some day women must learn their own strength, as well as they have learned their own weakness. They are taught this latter from their cradles up; but no one ever seems to teach them wherein their power lies.

Bram Stoker, *The Man*

CHAPTER ONE

Dublin, Christmas Day 1876

Flurries of snow danced and twirled outside the bedroom window, turning the entire streetscape and the park opposite into a magical stage where tiny white ballerinas pirouetted. In the distance, church bells tolled merrily and the faint shouts of locals extending festive greetings rang out. Under normal circumstances, I'd have been beside my youngest sister Alice atop the window seat, face pressed against the glass, marvelling at the glistening vista, admiring the twinkling Christmas trees and candles in nearby windows, and pointing out which of our neighbours was abroad this lovely morn. Instead, I was staring critically at my reflection as my eldest sister, Phillippa, fussed and brushed, trying to style my unruly hair. It was important I looked perfect: it was Christmas Day and Oscar had sought my parents' permission to escort me to the morning service at St Patrick's cathedral. I was only eighteen and propriety must be observed, after all.

Much to my surprise, Mother agreed. Father (bless him) would have had little say in the matter. Absent for much of my life, having been mostly stationed in Bombay while I was growing up, my older sisters and I used to refer to him as 'the unicorn', so rare were sightings. Mother had virtually raised we seven surviving Balcombes single-handedly. Well, with help from our long-suffering cook, Mrs Gallagher, and the various maids who flitted in and out of our lives and left us broken-hearted when they moved on. Sometimes I'd see an expression on Father's face as he regarded us that was a mixture of wonder and horror, as if he couldn't quite work out how we all came to be here. When Mother saw it, she'd drop a kiss on his balding pate, pat his shoulder soothingly, and pass him his pipe.

Ordinarily, Mother (and indeed Father) wouldn't have entertained the notion I desert the family Christmas morn – that was sacrosanct – let alone

with a young man. But Oscar had become an exception to many established rules since he'd entered our lives. Able to charm with a smile, draw conversation from my usually taciturn father and coax a laugh from Mother, he enchanted all who came into his orbit. A smitten Kitten, Phil called me, deploying her nickname for me in a not unkind way. Of all my siblings, only Phil remained reserved about Oscar. I understood why. Older than me, her heart had been broken many times; so much so, she'd sworn off men. Not wanting me to know the agony of unrequited love, she declared herself the guardian of my affections. Hence, she had bullied my brothers James and Billy into acting as chaperones for this outing. The boys objected, in the way that only brothers can – loudly and long, trying to make the arrangement transactional.

'We won't open the presents until after luncheon,' assured Mother, appeasing them somewhat. 'And,' she added, 'if you go with Florrie and Oscar, then you're exempt from attending the midnight service on Christmas Eve.'

The boys let out a whoop of joy (Father Bowan's sermons were famous for being tedious), earning a severe frown from Father. 'Not you, Florence,' said Mother quickly. 'You'll be coming with us, so wipe that smile off your face.'

I couldn't erase it now. Phil had done a marvellous job of arranging my thick chestnut curls. A few more pins, and the ridiculous little hat that matched the powder blue gown I'd finally selected would be secure. On the bed behind me lay all the other frocks I'd rejected – two of Phil's hand-me-downs, her best, and one of Maude's. All had been patched and mended so many times, it was a miracle the seams didn't unravel. Phil said she'd tidy them away after I left. I really had made a mess of our usually orderly bedroom. It was one of the reasons I was so glad I shared with Phil and not Maude, Catherine or Alice – they were terribly disorganised, to put it mildly. I watched Phil concentrating, a pin clenched between her lips, her deft hands selecting a jaunty angle for my headwear.

'He's here!' squealed Alice, making both me and Phil jump. To my dismay, Alice swept the curtain aside and, uncaring she'd be seen, struck the glass and waved frantically at the street below. 'Oscar!' she shouted. 'Oscar!'

'Alice!' I exclaimed, trying to sit still, even as my chest filled with butterflies. Butterflies, bees, and a murmuration of starlings. 'Move away

from the window, *now*.'

'Too late. He's seen her,' said Maude, who'd been quietly reading on the other window seat. She beckoned me over.

Cautiously, I approached the window, certain I couldn't be seen behind the lace curtain. There on the street below, just alighting from a glossy carriage, was Oscar, who raised his hat and smiled in my direction. My heart did that thing it always did whenever I saw him; took off like a falcon in flight, making it difficult to breathe, let alone think. Tall, handsome in a louche sort of way, with deep-set eyes, skin like alabaster and a mobile mouth with lips just made for kissing (so Maude said), I could hardly believe my good fortune that this man had set his sights on me. As the third of Lieutenant Colonel James Balcombe's daughters, I might have been educated, admired for my looks, and full of dreams and ambitions (Father blamed the novels and poetry I read voraciously) that had me chafing at the restraints life imposed, but I was also, like the rest of the family, penniless. Marriage to a man with wealth and prospects was my best, indeed only, hope of changing my destiny. I was pragmatic enough to understand that unlike Mr Oscar Wilde, I was no catch. Yet, here he was, behaving in the manner of a suitor … with me.

He stood in the softly falling snow, casually brushing flakes from his coat with a languorous hand, head tilted towards his audience, before he replaced his hat and strode to the front door. There was a rat-a-tat-tat, the echo of footsteps, raised voices, and laughter.

A mixture of pride and longing filled my chest. From the first time I met Oscar at one of his mother's rather quirky afternoon soirees where all Ireland's intelligentsia and artistes loved to assemble, Oscar had made his interest in me evident. Over the following six months, despite being absent from Dublin a great deal, as he was either studying at Oxford or gadding about London, he'd sent a torrent of beautifully composed letters, snippets of poetry he'd composed and copies of clever tracts he'd published, inviting my opinion. Naturally, I responded to all his missives immediately and ardently, keeping every single one he'd sent tied with a lavender ribbon and hidden in a special box under Phil's and my bed. He'd even done a lovely sketch of me and gifted a watercolour of his family's country house, Moytura, down in County Mayo. I cherished them all.

Each letter he wrote, each gift he bestowed, was greeted with increasing levels of excitement by Mother and Maude. I didn't dare express my

feelings on the matter – not then – but when my family, and Oscar's, as well as our neighbours, started referring to us as 'stepping out', it was hard not to feel a frisson of warmth, hope, and so much more.

There was not one person in my family who didn't think that today's rendezvous with Oscar, even if it was to church, didn't portend something serious in the future.

'Lord! Is that the time?' I gasped. 'Quick, quick. Do I look alright? Phil? Maude? Are my cheeks too pale? My lips? Oh, should I have worn the lilac gown?'

'Deep breaths, Kitten,' said Phil, placing comforting hands on my shoulders. She lowered her face until it was next to mine. Phil was the sibling I resembled most and was closest to. Not only did we share a bed, clothes and confidences, as well as blue-grey eyes with irises surrounded by a dark ring (like the planet Saturn, said Oscar), she was the only member of my family who knew how I really felt about him. The daydreams I had; prospects I'd never believed could be within my reach.

He rejected their bond. She chose a life beyond his pack.

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Only four nights ago, Phil and I had lain in bed talking. I'd once again shared my desire to leave Dublin, to see London, Paris, and so much more.

'It's not that I don't love you, Phil, or the others,' I said hastily, lest I cause hurt. 'I love the very bones of you, you know that, don't you? It's just that I feel there's so much more to life than … here.'

Phil had cupped my cheek. 'You don't need to explain, Kitten. We've always known you're an exotic flower that's been planted in the wrong soil. Stay here, and you'll gradually wither and die. Of course you must go. The question is, with whom? Though I'm pretty certain that's already been decided.' She'd given a knowing grin.

‘You look beautiful, Florrie,’ said Maude, bringing me back to the present. ‘That colour really suits you. Brings out your eyes.’

Bored with gazing on a street sans Oscar, Alice drifted over. ‘Aye,’ she drawled and plucked the bottle of perfume from the dresser, spraying a mist of violets and roses. ‘Brings out your eyes like a cat’s in the nightsoil man’s lantern. Ow!’ she squealed as the powder puff I threw landed on her head, leaving a pale splodge of talc. ‘Florrie! How can I face Mr Wilde looking like this?’ She stared in dismay at the mirror.

Ever since Alice was introduced to Oscar, she’d followed him around like our Irish Terrier, Captain Walton. She was only thirteen. I swear if my other sister, Catherine, had been much younger, she’d have done the same. As it was, she just sat quietly in his presence (a miracle in itself) and turned various shades of carmine. Maude wasn’t much better, not really, and she was recently engaged to Michael McCarthy. She’d bury her head in a book (not a page was turned the entire time Oscar was present), so it was left to Mother, Father (when he wasn’t at his club), Phil and me to divert him. Not that Oscar needed it; he was quite capable of amusing us with his endless tales.

‘Get yourself over here,’ said Phil, and began to comb the powder out of Alice’s hair. ‘He won’t be looking at you, not once he sees Florrie. There. You’ll do. Now.’ She held out her hand. ‘Come, my lady. Time to make your entrance.’

I examined myself one last time. The dress was a high-collared creation of velvet and wool, contrasted with black lace. Phil and I had copied the design from an old English ladies’ magazine. It clung to my breasts and cinched my waist before blooming in an elegant bustle, then falling in graceful lines to the toes of my black boots. Anticipation brought extra colour to my cheeks, and my lips, already atremble, were slightly swollen from being chewed. ‘Well,’ I said, smoothing the dress, frowning when I noted an errant thread, ‘it will have to do, won’t it?’

Alice’s eyes slid towards me. ‘You do look lovely, Florrie. Like an angel fallen to earth —’

‘What a sweet thing to —’

‘A wicked one who’s lost its halo,’ she added, and slapped my bottom with the powder puff. Hard. Clouds rose.

‘Why, you scallywag,’ I said, and to Phil and Maude’s ringing laughter, chased her out of the room and down the stairs. ‘Wait till I get hold of you.’

Halfway down, probably because she was looking back at me and poking out her tongue instead of watching where she was going, Alice lost her footing and would have taken a terrible tumble except that Oscar, quick as a flash, mounted the stairs and caught her. I froze, aware that a tragedy had just been averted. The rest of the family stood in a semi-circular tableau, looking aghast and then relieved – Father, Mother, Catherine, James, Billy and Captain Walton, who began to bark excitedly. Oscar heaved Alice into his arms and carried her down the stairs, placing her gently on the floor. Father clapped him on the back; Mother kissed his cheek. Alice stared up at him in adoration.

‘You saved me!’ she declared breathlessly, her eyes shining.

Oscar grinned. ‘One can survive everything, nowadays, except death, my dear.’

There was a beat, then everyone laughed.

‘And live down anything except a good reputation,’ I added, descending slowly, gripping the railing. Phil and Maude were trying surreptitiously to swipe the powder from my rear.

‘Exactly,’ he said, regarding me with those twinkling eyes. ‘A good reputation inevitably means one is popular, which also suggests mediocre.’

I laughed as he brought my hand to his lips. ‘And you, Florence Balcombe, are anything but mediocre.’

In Oscar Wilde’s company, I believed it.

CHAPTER TWO

The cathedral was crowded. I spied some of our neighbours, noting how they nudged each other when they saw who accompanied me.

Instead of joining anyone we knew, Oscar led me to the far end of a pew just below the List of Deans. We bowed our heads for the prayers, sang carols with the choir, and tried to see who else we recognised. A few rows in front of us, James and Billy were stifling yawns and casting resentful looks in my direction until James noticed the pretty lass who lived at Number 11, Cecilia Doyle, was also present. After that, I think James's thoughts were on anything but God.

James wasn't the only one distracted. Throughout the sermon, Oscar patted his pockets, wrung his hands and rubbed his chin. I'd not seen him so fidgety before; he was always brimming with confidence. It wasn't until we rose to receive the final blessing that he regained his usual composure.

He gestured for my brothers to proceed us out of the church. 'We'll be right behind you,' he assured them as they hesitated. I went to follow, but he grabbed my wrist. 'Florrie, Florence,' he said softly. 'Wait a moment.'

'But …' I glanced towards the church entrance. 'The boys …'

'They'll be fine. Come,' he commanded, twining his fingers through mine. 'Back here where it's a tad more private.'

'Why?' I resisted.

'Trust me.'

'I do … but …'

Oscar gave a crooked smile. 'But? You express uncertainty about my romantic intentions?'

'You consider dragging me into the shadows of a church romantic?' I raised a brow.

He chuckled roguishly. With a throat tighter than Granny Moo's stays, I allowed him to lead me towards the darker recesses near the side wall. I willed my heart to steady. It was impossible.

When the congregation had shuffled out and we were alone, he spun towards me and rested his forehead against mine. I could smell a mixture of cloves, musk, and something that was peculiarly Oscar; it made me think of leather chairs, fine wine and a good book. His eyes were such a deep, profound blue. The shape of his lips, their fullness, was as if they'd been carved by a master.

'Face the aisle, Florrie,' he commanded and placed his hands on my shoulders, encouraging me to twist around.

There was an elderly woman tidying a large floral arrangement across from the Lady Chapel. There was the rasp of fabric, movement behind me. A little hammer began to pound my temples. Oscar's fingers brushed the nape of my neck, sweeping aside the tendrils of hair that had escaped Phil's careful ministrations, leaving a trail of fire.

Just as I wondered if anything more was going to happen, something cold struck my chin, then slithered down my dress. I gave a little cry, and before I could see what it was, Oscar's fingers circled my neck.

'This is for you,' he whispered against my ear, his lips caressing the very edges of my lobe; the brush of a faery's wing. 'A necklace to wear and think of me. If I can't literally be in your heart, I want to be as close to it as I can.'

I looked down and beheld a shining chain bearing a small gold cross.

Before I could examine it properly, his lips pressed against my neck. Warm, seeking, they nudged my head to one side and ever-so-gently explored, pausing at the top of my collar. I stiffened, eyes flashing towards the oblivious old woman.

'Oscar, you mustn't.' I tried to wriggle away, but Oscar held me fast. His lips were silken ribbons, soft, caressing. My eyelids fluttered as his liquid tongue travelled back and forth, back and forth from my ear to my nape, filling me with a burning heat that surely had no place in church. 'What if we're seen? We'll cause a scandal.'

'Hush. I never cause scandal,' he murmured. 'Only gossip.' His tongue ceased its exploration, only for his lips to replace it, insistent now, pushing the fabric of my dress down, down, seeking access to the soft parts betwixt

jawline and collarbone. Oscar groaned, a primal sound that found an answer in my molten centre. I felt his teeth, a pinch of skin, an exquisite pain. It was the most sensuous bite I could ever have imagined.

My head fell back against his shoulder, my lips parted, and my eyes flew open. Above, the stained-glass saints glowered in a rainbow of disapproval. All modesty fled. I tried to remember who I was, where I was, but sensible thoughts wrestled with yearning (for what? I had to put a stop to this …) and, as my eyes closed, were lost. Dear God, I'd become a blasphemous wanton with a heaving bosom, an angel who'd lost her halo indeed. Ungodly thoughts crowded my head and my body burned in my desire for more. *More*.

A wheezing cough drew us apart abruptly as the old woman shambled up the aisle. Whether or not she saw what we were doing, I don't know.

I flushed with guilt and Oscar began to laugh.

We walked up the aisle, our stifled giggles making us collide with each other and the pews. With no Father Bowan to explain to or even bid a merry Christmas, we ran towards where the boys waited by the Sir Benjamin Guinness statue, shivering and very annoyed.



Phil ushered us inside the house and helped me remove my coat, her face filled with questions as she tried to catch my eye. Hearing us, Mother came into the hall, hugged Billy and James and guided us into the drawing room and the crackling fire.

'How was Father Bowan today?' asked Father, rising to shake Oscar's hand.

'Like all people who try to exhaust a subject,' began Oscar, 'he exhausted his listeners.'

'Oscar!' I exclaimed in mock outrage as Father laughed, shaking his head and resuming his seat. He invited Oscar to sit opposite and poured him a brandy.

Alice pointed at my necklace. 'Where'd you get that?' She didn't miss a trick, that one. Setting aside the holly she'd been fiddling with, and with more delicacy than I expected, she picked it up in her fingers, turning it first one way, then the next.

‘Isn’t it beautiful?’ I said. ‘It’s a Christmas present from Oscar.’

There were quickly stifled exclamations.

‘Your name’s engraved on it,’ said Alice, turning to stare at Oscar. ‘You must really like Florrie.’

‘Alice …’ I cautioned.

‘Oh, but I do.’ Oscar launched himself out of the chair and came to my side. ‘Almost as much as myself.’

There were guffaws.

One by one, with barely suppressed excitement on the part of my sisters and Mother, and feigned indifference from the boys (Father didn’t leave his seat), they examined the necklace, Oscar’s presence restraining their comments.

‘It’s lovely.’

‘Very pretty.’

‘You shouldn’t have, Oscar.’ That was Mother.

‘Yes, he should have.’ That was Alice.

‘A special gift,’ said Phil, and looked meaningfully at me.

Everyone resumed their seats, Oscar too, helping themselves to more brandy, eggnog and mince pies as the conversation turned to our Christmas tree and the number of cards we’d received this year (twice as many as last year; the innovation was catching on). Mother made sure to sit beside Oscar, discussing the merits of Dickens’s novel *Hard Times*, which Oscar had loaned her a few months earlier.

‘I had to read it twice to really appreciate the satire. Mr Gradgrind is a wonderful parody of Utilitarianism.’

‘Can’t be a very good book if you didn’t grasp the author’s intention the first time,’ said Father.

Before Mother could reply, Oscar leapt to her defence. ‘If one cannot enjoy re-reading a book there’s no use reading it at all, I say.’

There was a collective intake of breath. No-one dared correct Father, especially in company.

Father narrowed his eyes, but before he could utter a word, I spoke.

‘Surely, that depends on the book. Like a person, literature often merits more than one chance to be fully appreciated.’

‘And some people only need one,’ added Oscar, gazing at me.

There was a moment of quiet before a debate began about the virtues of Charles Dickens versus Herman Melville. Phil looked at Oscar, then the necklace, then me, beaming.

Oscar departed soon after and the family eagerly gathered around our large dining table. Mother and Father had overlooked our usual austerity so we might celebrate the season, and a platter bearing a huge golden goose swimming in glossy juices was placed centre stage by Mrs Gallagher, who paused to accept compliments and admire my new jewellery. Plates with slices of boiled ham, roast potatoes, emerald peas drowning in lard and glistening carrots followed. Crusty bread, pats of butter, tureens of rich gravy all tempted. In between appreciative sounds, hungry oohs and aahs, the sing-song voices of Alice and Billy as they studied the laden table, and the saying of Grace, carving and serving commenced, as did discussion about the necklace.

'You know what that means, don't you?' said Phil, pointing at me with a fork claiming a slice of ham. 'You're as good as engaged.'

'No, no —' I protested meekly. 'It's just a necklace, not a ring.'

'Same thing if you ask me,' said Maude.

Mother nodded sagely. 'One doesn't give such gifts lightly, do they, James?' She turned to Father. At once, the clang of cutlery ceased. Alice sat back in her chair, renouncing the haunch of goose she'd speared. All eyes were upon Father.

'No, my dear,' said Father, in his gravelly voice. 'They do not. No gentleman, much less a student, gives a respectable young lady of his acquaintance jewellery of any description unless his intentions are honourable.'

Mother smiled approvingly and gave Father an extra pour of gravy. 'Exactly.'

Phil gave an unladylike whoop. Maude clapped delightedly. Alice bopped up and down on her chair while Catherine blushed and twittered.

Mother was forever telling us girls that being part of a large family of 'small means' (we all knew she meant destitute), the only dowry of any value we possessed was our looks. 'Florence,' Mother would declare, 'you have beauty in abundance; use it to your advantage' – 'your' meaning 'our'. One less mouth to feed. She would also remind us that the clock was ticking. Beauty, like milk, would sour eventually. All of us – me, Phil,

Catherine and Alice – had it drummed into us that we needed to find husbands quickly lest we turn into vinegar-tongued old spinsters, knitting socks and making endless cups of tea for our elderly parents, brothers, and their future brides. Naturally, none of this was ever said to Maude, who had the good sense to already become engaged. As for poor sweet Mary and Maggie, well, they died in infancy and never had to endure Mother's lectures or Father's speculative looks as he tried to measure our worth to other men. I could feel his eyes upon me now. Weighing up Oscar's gift, what it signified.

'Imagine,' said Phil, dramatically levelling her knife at each of us. 'Oscar Wilde is going to be our brother.' She stopped when the blade pinned young James and Billy.

'Good,' said Alice through a mouthful of goose, grease dripping down her chin. 'He can replace the scaldy ones I've got.'

Before a donnybrook could erupt, Father cleared his throat loudly, drawing all eyes to the head of the table. 'The main problem, as far as I can see,' he began, waiting until there was complete silence, 'is how on earth are we going to pay for another damn wedding.'

Dear Father; he could always be relied upon to put a dampener on the brightest moment. Not that anything could dull the sheen of this enchanted day. Not for me.

After all, one day soon I was going to be Mrs Oscar Wilde.

CHAPTER THREE

Dublin, March 1877

‘What are you smiling at?’ asked Phil as she entered the drawing room, Captain Walton at her heels. She removed her hat and flopped into a chair beside me. She’d just returned from walking the dog in the park across the road. I could smell the fresh air on her. Captain Walton shoved his head on my lap. I began plucking leaf detritus out of his fur.

‘Nothing,’ I answered, my smile widening. ‘Was Phil a good girl?’ Captain Walton’s ears pricked, and he looked in Phil’s direction. I swear that dog understood us. Tired of my fussing, he withdrew his head and slumped on the rug before the hearth. Though it was early spring, winter was still showing its teeth, and a fire had been lit.

‘You haven’t moved from where I left you.’ Phil had tried to persuade me to come to the park, but Mother had recruited me to help Alice with her French. We were all fluent in the language, except for Alice and Father. He refused to learn it; Alice found it boring and struggled.

‘Is that *another* card from Oscar?’ exclaimed Phil, plucking the latest one off the table, turning it first one way, then the other. ‘How many is that now?’

‘Hundreds,’ said Alice, without raising her head from her declensions.

‘Dozens, at least,’ answered Maude, emerging from the shadowy recess of our over-crowded bookshelves. I’d quite forgotten she was there.

‘He’s in Greece,’ exclaimed Phil. ‘Lucky thing. What’s he doing there?’

‘Studying the art, mainly.’ I snatched the card back. ‘Seeing the great antiquities.’

‘What for?’ asked Alice.

‘To increase his understanding.’

‘Of what, exactly?’ asked Phil.

‘History, art, literature,’ I numbered them off. ‘Ancient cultures. He can speak Greek, you know. Well, I think he can. But he believes that art is a necessity of human life.’

Maude looked pointedly at her skirt. There was another tear in the seam. ‘I can think of other necessities.’

I silently agreed. Only a man from a privileged background could make such a grandiose statement.

‘Is he coming home for Easter?’ asked Phil, kicking off her shoes and rubbing her feet.

‘He is.’ I was unable to prevent the silly grin spreading across my face.

‘Look at you!’ she laughed. ‘The giddy girl all over again. How long is it since you saw him?’

‘Weeks,’ I sighed. ‘But he writes the most beautiful letters.’ Ardent, too, I thought, aware my cheeks were reddening. God in heaven, I missed him. Ever since he’d given me the necklace at Christmas, we’d spent every spare minute he was home together. Walking, going to the gallery, the theatre, soirees at his mother’s. It was at those, more than anywhere, that I caught a glimpse of the wider world that being Mrs Wilde would open to me. It was thrilling, and such a contrast to my mundane existence at Marino Court.

‘Well, considering how moonstruck he was when he was last here,’ said Phil, resting her head on the back of the chair and staring at the ceiling, legs outstretched, ‘I’m surprised he’s able to stay away so long.’

Memories of the church, of his mouth on my neck. That bite. There’d been two other times we’d exchanged kisses; kisses that left my knees weak, and my body afire. I squeezed my thighs together, hoping no-one noticed.

‘He takes his studies very seriously,’ I said a tad defensively.

‘Hmmm,’ said Phil. ‘I would rather he takes *you* seriously.’

‘What’s that mean?’

‘Well, he could either come home to see you or gallivant around the Aegean.’ She flicked her fingers towards the card. ‘His choice speaks louder than any pretty words, Kitten.’

‘Not *these* words,’ I said, cross she’d spoiled my daydreams. Still, her observation wasn’t entirely unfair. Oscar should have been home by now. Word was he’d stayed in Greece beyond his allocated holidays and been

fined by his college. Rumour was, he was travelling with a particular professor who was perhaps exerting an unfortunate influence. What kind, I wasn't certain. Surely, it couldn't be harmful, let alone alter his intentions towards me.

Could it?



Oscar came home at Easter, rushing to my side the moment he'd greeted his family and deposited his bags. Our courtship resumed. Most days, we walked unchaperoned in Marino Park, enjoying the trees and blooming flowers. When we didn't bring Captain Walton with us, we'd feed nuts to the squirrels and breadcrumbs to the mallards waddling along the grass. We'd chat with people we knew and politely address those we didn't; rest in the shade of leafy boughs and recite poetry to each other.

'*Thou still unravish'd bride of quietness*,' Oscar would start as we rested against a huge tree, tucking a tendril of hair behind my ear.

'*Thou foster child of silence and slow time*,' I'd return. Like Oscar, I loved Keats's work and knew much of it by heart.

Other times, we'd take parts in a Shakespearean drama, *Julius Caesar* or *Henry IV*, or a Sheridan comedy. He would sing silly ditties, making me laugh.

'So,' he said one day as we wandered arm in arm along the Liffey, 'if you could travel anywhere in the world, where would you wish to go first?'

I didn't need to consider the question for long. 'London.'

'London!' exclaimed Oscar. 'Not Athens, or Rome? What about Cairo?'

'Oh, I'd love to see them too, but you did ask where first.'

'I did. Now, tell me why.'

'Why not?' I said glibly, earning a stern look. I laughed. 'Because there, possibilities begin.'

'And what could Florence Balcombe possibly want?'

I stopped and faced him. 'Everything.'

'Greedy girl,' he said and kissed the tip of my nose. 'My favourite kind.' He squeezed my hand as we resumed our walk.

On days like those, it wasn't such a great stretch to imagine a life together – Oscar Wilde, the most eligible bachelor in Dublin, and me, the

third daughter of the impoverished Balcombes.

‘I don’t think I’ve ever seen you so happy,’ said Phil one night as we lay, pillows close together. We’d been planning my wedding gown. Blue and silver, with a headdress of violets and a shimmering veil.

‘I don’t think I’ve ever been so happy.’

Phil rolled over onto her back and sighed. ‘I just wish he’d hurry up and ask you formally so we can all relax. Work out how to “pay for another damn wedding”,’ she said, imitating Father.

‘He’s waiting to finish his studies,’ I explained. Not that Oscar had said this. ‘He wants to stand on his own two feet. The death of his father last year was a terrible blow, and now that his older brother, William, is a journalist and sometime poet, Oscar is determined to make a name for himself too.’

‘I think Oscar will make a name for himself wherever or whatever he is,’ said Phil, turning her head and searching my face. ‘I just want him to give *you* his name.’

So did I. So did I.

CHAPTER FOUR

Dublin, March 1878

It had been an age since I'd last heard from Oscar. He'd gone back to England, and the usual flurry of letters filled with witticisms and anecdotes, declarations of affection and longing that I'd so cherished this time last year, had slowly reduced to a trickle. Promises to return home, write more, send word of his whereabouts, were broken repeatedly. Then, sometime after Christmas, he ceased to correspond altogether.

It was humiliating dealing with all the questions from family, friends and neighbours.

'How's Oscar?' they'd ask. 'When's he coming home?' Or worse, 'When's the wedding?'

As winter gave way to spring, I pondered whether this was his way of releasing me from a commitment that had only ever existed in my imagination. I'd no answers, only a deep, burning pain in my heart, which slowly transformed into a fierce anger.

Now at last, after protracted silence, a letter arrived. I seized it from the pile of mail on the salver in the hallway and, with a heart fit to burst, fled to the privacy of the bedroom. I perched on the window seat and tore it open, devouring the words.

'What does he say?' asked Phil, bounding into the room and holding out her hand.

Was nothing sacred in this house? Reluctantly, knowing Phil would persist, I handed over the one-page letter.

'*My dear Florrie*,' she began, using the voice she'd adopted lately when talking about Oscar. Her eyes scanned the single page.

'*I miss you terribly*,' continued Phil, '*but I'm enjoying the company of a delightful friend (a new friend)* —' Phil raised her head. '*New?* What the hell does that mean? *Delightful?* I'll give him fecking delightful. Is he deliberately trying to hurt you by telling you this? Who's this *friend*?'

Bands of pain tightened my chest. 'I don't know. But he says he won't be coming home for Easter. He's staying at the Royal Bath Hotel in Bournemouth instead.'

'With this delightful new friend?'

The look of disdain on Phil's face undid me. I hated myself for my earlier selfish thoughts. My sister was marvellous. The anger that had bolstered me dissolved. Tears began to fall.

Phil cast the letter aside and gathered me in her arms. 'Oh, Florrie.' She kissed the top of my head. 'Please, Kitten, don't cry. Oscar's an eejit. A damn wretched one who's thoughtless and cruel.'

'After nothing from him for so long, he writes that,' I sobbed. 'I loved him, Phil, *love* him.' I hiccoughed. 'I thought he loved me too. That we'd get married. But he can't even be bothered to come home, not now he has someone else. It's me that's the eejit, Phil. Not him, *me*.'

Phil held me as I blubbed, the noise bringing first Maude, then Mother to the door. Phil shooed them away wordlessly. As I wept for what I'd had, what I believed with all my heart might have been, I thought about how the family had protected me from the truth I was only now seeing. Whereas Oscar's name used to punctuate every conversation, news of his exploits demanded, his few publications and awards shared with pride with visitors, subtly, but with a deftness I hadn't grasped until now, his name had slowly been withdrawn. It was as if everyone else knew what I'd wilfully failed to realise. Oscar no longer wanted me. He'd changed his mind. Someone or something had altered it. I'd wasted almost two years of my life waiting for a man who'd never had any intention of arriving at what I'd persuaded myself was our natural destination.

Were people laughing at me for having the temerity to think I could be Mrs Wilde?

I must have said the last thought aloud, for Phil answered. 'No-one is laughing at you, Florrie. We all thought the same. Even me, the sworn spinster. Oscar had us all hoodwinked.'

‘It was the necklace,’ I said. ‘We read too much into it. *I* did. Interpreted it to mean something it didn’t.’ I held it up to the grey light. As if to mock me, a shaft of sunlight pierced the looming clouds, striking the gold and making it glow. Laughter drifted from the park opposite. I raised my head and saw a couple, tall like me and Oscar, strolling, arms linked, heads together. Two dogs gambolled after a ball, tongues lolling, ears flying. It was altogether bucolic and served to plunge me into deeper misery.

No. I wouldn’t allow it. Self-pity was not my style. I was nobody’s fool. No-one’s. *Especially not yours, Oscar Wilde*.

Just thinking his name cracked my heart wide open.

With a deep, shuddering breath, I withdrew from Phil’s arms, sat up straight and blew my nose forcefully. I tried to give the kerchief back to her. She gave me a sardonic look, so I tucked it into my sleeve instead.

I slowly stood. ‘I must face facts. It’s over between us. I just wish Oscar had the courage to tell me, instead of these absences forcing me to draw my own conclusions.’

‘They tell their own sorry story, don’t they?’ said Phil.

‘You warned me once. You were right.’ I sniffed. ‘And now this.’ I flicked the letter.

‘He’s a fecking coward,’ said Phil.

‘He’s not the man I thought he was, that’s certain. I’ve had my eyes opened, Phil.’ I inhaled deeply and let out a shuddering breath. ‘From this day forth, I’m going to forget him; forget he ever existed. But not until I’ve told him exactly what I think about his behaviour.’ I rummaged in a drawer and found a pen and paper. ‘As far as I’m concerned, this *new friend* can have him.’

Phil clapped her hands. ‘That’s the spirit, Kitten. Show those claws. No man is worth such misery. Especially not Oscar. You’re worth ten of him.’

I gave her a watery smile.

‘Florrie, listen. Oscar *will* regret this. Maybe not today, nor tomorrow, but one day he’ll regret the way he’s treated you.’

‘I’m already regretting I ever thought I could be Mrs Wilde.’ I sat at the dresser, pushed aside brushes and combs, and readied the paper.

Phil scoffed. ‘He’s just one man. There are dozens out there who’d be proud to call you wife. Only —’ she paused.

‘What?’

‘Listen. You’re hurting. Hurting *and* angry. Just promise me you won’t marry the first man who asks you.’

I dashed my hand across my eyes and snorted. ‘As if.’

CHAPTER FIVE

Dublin, May 1878

Until the invitation to Lady Jane Wilde's soiree arrived, I'd managed to bury my humiliation and despair about Oscar, the fact he never replied to my caustic missive, and put on a brave face as if I'd not a care in Dublin. Nights at the theatre, concerts in the park, walks with my sisters, window-shopping in Grafton Street, afternoon teas on St Stephen's Green – I made sure to talk the most, laugh the loudest, dress with care, and do all in my power to hide my torment. Men lifted their hats, their eyes followed me, and I tolerated their sometimes clumsy efforts to engage me in conversation, their flowery compliments, but nobody captured my interest. The problem was, nobody compared to Oscar. How could they? I became an ice-maiden, unable to be thawed by even the handsomest and most attentive of men, which of course just increased their ardour.

When I saw the Wilde name on the card in the hallway, in a cursive reminiscent of Oscar's flamboyant style, I was quite undone. I quickly read the contents, reeling that not only were Phil and Maude invited to afternoon tea at 1 Merrion Square, but Mother, Father and me as well. It was too much. I fled to my room. Surely Lady Jane understood that the last place I wanted to set foot was Oscar's home.

I didn't hear the door open. It wasn't until Phil sat on the bed that I was even aware she'd entered. By then, it was too late to hide the precious stash of letters.

'What are you doing, Florrie?' She stared in dismay at the pages and cards spread across the counterpane. All from Oscar, they covered the time of our friendship – I couldn't, wouldn't, consider it as anything more.

My heart ached, my head, my soul. I still couldn't think of him without physical pain.

‘Oh, Kitten,’ said Phil in that pragmatic, sympathetic way she had. She began to fold up the letters, return them to their envelopes. ‘I thought you said you’d forgotten him, that Oscar was in the past. Instead, you’re like a flagellant of old, whipping yourself with memories. Seeking answers.’

I nodded miserably. ‘I know, only they won’t come.’

‘No. They won’t. The only person who can give you those is Oscar and he’s not here.’

Last we’d heard, he was in Rome. Or was it Greece? Or London?

Phil grunted. ‘If I knew where he was, I’d go straight there and give him such a kick in the bollocks, they’d be banjaxed. He’d have to buy a new pair.’

I gave a bubble of mirth. ‘Where from?’

Phil began to throw the letters back in the box. I wasn’t the only one hurt by Oscar. ‘The Bollocks Shop. He can purchase a pair of rat balls, or a flea’s; it would be more fitting.’

‘Do fleas have them?’

We stared at each other, then burst out laughing.

‘That’s better,’ said Phil, cupping my face, swiping an errant tear with her thumb. ‘There’s my Florrie.’

‘She never left.’

‘Listen, we’re going to Lady Jane’s. You and me. Heads held high and a mess-with-the-Balcombes-at-your-peril expression on our faces.’ She adopted a severe mien. ‘Come on,’ she insisted, ‘show me yours.’

I hesitated and then schooled my face into a look that would do Medusa proud.



Filled with bravado before we left the house, by the time I reached the doorway of the large drawing room where afternoons were hosted at Merrion Square and was confronted with strange voices, smoke, and a range of scents (not all pleasant), I lost my nerve. Hanging back, pretending to study the statuettes and paintings I knew so well, ignoring the peeling wallpaper and worn carpets that, far from indicating hardship, were a deliberate embrace of genteel shabbiness, I made Maude, Mother (Father went to his club) and Phil enter before me.

Lady Jane was a big woman with a long nose and Oscar's deep-set eyes. She continued to wear black more than a year after her husband died and had recently adopted a Spanish style of headdress. The mantilla made her tower over all and sundry. It was as if I was entering the presence of a giantess – though Lady Jane hardly needed to costume herself to make an impression. She was a giant of Dublin society – an accomplished poet, philosopher, translator, and a champion of women's rights and the poor. One of the tangential blows of the end of my relationship with Oscar was that I'd not seen nearly as much of his mother as I would have liked.

'Florence,' she said, sailing towards me and clutching me to her ample bosom. 'I'll never forgive that wretched son of mine for the way he's treated you.'

Shocked she would mention Oscar's behaviour and add thoughtlessly to my humiliation, it was all I could do not to recoil.

'As beautiful as ever, isn't she, Isola?' She turned to her daughter who, in her usual fashion, looked me up and down before recognition dawned on her face. 'Florence! Fancy seeing you here. For someone with a broken heart, you hide it well.'

Oscar's sister was a cold, strange woman. Desperate for her mother's attention, she treated other women the way Lady Jane had always treated her – with studied indifference. I forced a smile. 'Dented maybe, bruised, certainly, but nothing that hasn't already been repaired.'

Isola's eyes narrowed and then she leaned close. 'You're not fooling anyone.' Before I could respond, she flounced away.

The afternoon passed in a blur of faces, names and conversation. Artists, journalists, actors, actresses, poets and scientists, all graced Lady Jane's salon. One day, I hoped to be able to attract such remarkable people into my orbit. I'd worried that being in Oscar's house would be like picking the scab off a wound, but it was the panacea I needed. Phil stayed close the entire time, and I was grateful, particularly when a short man with a prominent stomach decided to flirt. Adopting our best severe faces, those and our monosyllabic answers finally deterred him, and he left us to go and bother a rather vivacious actress with the loveliest golden hair. He was replaced by a veritable streak of men, all demanding my notice. It was tiresome.

‘Would it be rude to depart before Lady Jane does her reading?’ I whispered to Phil. Lady Jane generally took advantage of a captive audience to read from something she was working on. We’d just managed to extricate ourselves from a rather dishevelled fellow with a filthy collar and nails who, ironically, waxed enthusiastically about a scientist named Louis Pasteur and his work on germs.

As Phil was considering how to exit discreetly, I glanced towards the doorway. Oscar’s older brother Willie had arrived with a companion in tow. There were friendly hails, a kiss from his mother. While lacking his brother’s height and presence, Willie Wilde had a lovely smile that, as his eyes caught mine, he bestowed and I returned, only to frown when he swayed violently. He was blathered. The man accompanying him caught him by the elbow and, holding him upright, led him to a chair.

I recognised the saviour but couldn’t quite place him as he asked one of the maids to fetch a drink, all the while chatting and nodding to two other gentlemen. Upon seeing him, Lady Jane crossed the floor and embraced him. Isola detached herself from the actor she was talking to and kissed his cheek.

‘Who’s that, Phil?’ I asked quietly.

It was Mother who answered. ‘That’s one of the Stoker brothers. Abraham, Bram, I believe he calls himself. They used to live in our street. Number fifteen.’

Tall, with an imposing build – I couldn’t recall ever seeing shoulders so broad – he had lovely umber-coloured hair and a neatly trimmed beard.

‘By all accounts, he was a champion athlete,’ continued Mother, noting my interest. ‘A rower, weightlifter, and apparently he excelled academically as well, holding all sorts of prominent positions in university clubs. He could have been anything, that young man, instead he chose to follow in his father’s footsteps and enter the civil service. Still, there’s worse things a man can be.’

‘Like a student,’ muttered Maude.

‘Or a cad,’ mumbled Phil.

I watched him with renewed interest as conversation swirled around me. Surrounded by men and one woman, he pulled out a pipe, tamped, lit it, and drew, blowing the smoke above people’s heads. In another fellow this may have appeared an affectation; with Mr Stoker, it looked natural, humble

even. Instead of using his considerable size to command the room and demand attention, he stood back. He listened courteously to Lady Wilde, spoke to the old woman draped in pearls sitting at the card table, and even spent time with a young lass who was standing next to her mother and busy tying ribbons in a dog's fur.

My ears tuned to what was being said, but my eyes were on the man gliding about the room.

'Lady Jane isn't doing a reading today,' said Phil, tugging at my sleeve. 'Let's go.'

Before we could, Mr Stoker approached.

'Mrs Balcombe?' he said to Mother. 'Bram Stoker. I believe you know my mother. How lovely to see you here.' He was talking to Mother but looking at me.

'Mrs Stoker and I have known each other many years,' Mother replied, offering her hand. 'How is your dear mother? And may I say, I'm very sorry about your father.'

Grief flashed across Mr Stoker's face. 'Thank you, Mrs Balcombe.' He gave a small bow. 'And you must be Phillippa?' He turned to Phil who curtseyed. 'And Maude, if I'm not mistaken?' Maude gave a bob.

I was holding my breath. 'And you must be the incomparable Florence.'

'Depends on what you compare me to, Mr Stoker,' I said.

Mr Stoker's eyes widened, then he threw back his head and laughed.

Phil gave me a not-so-subtle nudge in the ribs. Yes, I was rude, but I was tired of the flattery and the men who believed it would ingratiate them. My cheeks began to grow hot.

'Indeed, that's true, Miss Balcombe. Frankly, I cannot think of a suitable retort, for fear of offending you further. Forgive me, I meant it as a compliment. The Wildes speak often of your wondrous virtues; I was referring to those.'

'Wondrous virtues?' I looked at him askance.

'Intelligence, wit.' He numbered them off on his fingers. I closed my hand over his to stop him.

'You're quoting from *The Merchant of Venice*. Those attributes aren't mine. They belong to Portia.' I removed my hand.

He looked directly into my eyes. His were the most startling colour – a clear grey, like a silver-kissed storm cloud. 'She doesn't have exclusive

rights to them.' His mouth twitched. So did mine.

'You enjoy Shakespeare then?' Mr Stoker asked.

'Very much.' An image of Oscar reading the part of Puck bloomed.

'Did you happen to see the marvellous Henry Irving's Hamlet?'

'That was last year, yes? Alas, I didn't, but I recall your glowing review of his performance. Was Mr Irving really that good?'

'Incomparable,' said Mr Stoker, with a cheeky smile.

'You seem rather fond of that word, Mr Stoker.'

'Only when it's apposite.'

I was about to give a tart response when he continued. 'And in *Mr Irving's* case, it most certainly is. He's an actor on the rise, a fine performer. Talent like his appears but once in a generation. I consider myself most fortunate to call him a friend.'

'This Englishman has made a strong impression on you, Mr Stoker.'

'It would take a stronger man than me not to be impressed by his dedication to the stage.'

As we chatted, Phil, Maude and Mother discreetly removed themselves, leaving me and Mr Stoker to converse alone. All thoughts of leaving fled. The rest of the afternoon passed quickly. We spoke more about the theatre, which Mr Stoker not only enjoyed, but wrote critical pieces about for the *Dublin Evening Mail*. We shared a love of literature – especially novels featuring ghosts and vampires, like those of Sheridan Le Fanu (Mr Stoker's former editor on the paper). We spoke passionately about Mary Shelley's macabre *Frankenstein*, how thrilling it was, how original, before moving to Dickens, Keats and Coleridge.

'What do you make of Coleridge's 'Rime'?' he asked, referring to the famous Ancient Mariner poem.

'I think it very fine indeed but, if pressed, I prefer "Kubla Khan". The mystical, haunting nature of the poem, and how, like Miss Shelley, it describes an act of creation, albeit differently.'

'*In Xanadu did Kubla Khan / A stately pleasure dome decree*,' nodded Mr Stoker. 'It's fitting that this vision —' he gestured to me, 'favours Coleridge's.'

For some reason, this compliment didn't raise my ire.

'Did he not also describe the poem as a fragment? Perhaps that's what I am, Mr Stoker.'

‘What? A fragment?’

He said it with such horror, I began to laugh. ‘At least that’s something tangible.’

He regarded me seriously. ‘Vision or fragment, you’re very real to me, Miss Balcombe.’

We locked eyes. The room became uncomfortably warm.

‘So, tell me more about this American poet you’ve written to,’ I said, breaking eye contact. I wasn’t sure I was ready for this. Whatever this was.

I listened carefully as Mr Stoker spoke in deferential terms about a man named Walt Whitman and his work.

‘Are you a poet?’ I asked.

‘Me? No. I could not presume to such a skill, though I’ve had some short stories published … and a novella.’

‘But these are wonderful accomplishments,’ I exclaimed.

He lowered his head modestly. ‘Not when your dream is to write novels that attract both readers and admiration.’

‘Like Mr Dickens?’

He hesitated. ‘Can I make an immodest confession, Miss Balcombe?’

‘I’m afraid I left my clerical collar at home today.’

He chuckled. ‘One day, I hope to be held in more esteem than Mr Dickens.’

I stared into those glorious grey eyes, took in his earnest expression, heard the sincerity in his lovely brogue. Boldly, I reached over and covered his hands with mine. ‘If you remain as dedicated to your ambitions as your friend Mr Irving, then you will one day, Mr Stoker. I know it.’

He stared at me for what seemed an eternity. My heart didn’t flutter as it did when Oscar was present, but it did quicken.

‘That means a great deal to me, Miss Balcombe. Your faith in my dreams, clerical collar or no.’

We spoke a little longer before a loud voice interrupted. ‘Over here, Stoker,’ beckoned a fashionably dressed gentleman. ‘We need you to settle a dispute.’

With a regretful sigh, Mr Stoker stood. ‘It’s been a pleasure, Miss Balcombe.’

‘It has,’ I said.

‘You sound surprised,’ said Mr Stoker, eyes twinkling. ‘Were you afraid I might bite?’

A memory of Oscar’s teeth against my neck flashed into my mind. My face burned. ‘Oh no, Mr Stoker. I was afraid you’d bore me.’

Mr Stoker blinked in surprise, then guffawed. ‘Really? Well, I can safely say that no-one has ever accused me of that particular sin before.’

‘There’s always a first time,’ I said.

With a huge grin, he bowed and went to walk away but paused. ‘Excuse me, Miss Balcombe, but may I call on you some time?’

‘You may,’ I said, before I could change my mind.

As he joined another group, I wondered, was Mr Stoker the man to make me forget Oscar?



I was quiet on the way home, aware of Phil regarding me contemplatively. My thoughts spun as silver-grey eyes latched onto mine and didn’t let go. Mr Stoker *had* surprised me. Here was a man who displayed courtesy, humour and self-possession. He’d shared his interests with me and was curious about mine. *It’s been a pleasure, Miss Balcombe*.

Reluctant though I was to admit it, the pleasure had been as much mine. I found myself hoping that he wasn’t just being polite and would call.

Soon.

CHAPTER SIX

When I came downstairs for breakfast the following morning, there was a note awaiting.

‘It’s from Mr Stoker,’ said Alice.

‘You read my correspondence?’

‘You shouldn’t be such a lie-a-bed.’ She ran into the dining room before I could catch her.

Note in hand, I followed at a more leisurely pace. Sat around the table were Mother, Maude, Phil and Catherine. Father and the boys had gone for a walk with Captain Walton.

‘You made quite the impression on Mr Stoker,’ said Phil, nodding at the note.

‘Then he must be easy to impress.’ I sat down and reached for toast and jam.

‘When are you going to understand, Florence Anne Lemon Balcombe,’ began Mother in a tone that indicated a lecture. ‘You may not have a conventional dowry —’

‘Or any —’ muttered Phil.

‘But beauty, wit, style and —’

‘Wonderful sisters,’ added Alice.

‘Are priceless,’ Mother smiled. She waited a beat. ‘So, what does the estimable Mr Stoker write?’ She placed a cautionary hand on Alice.

With an indifference I by no means felt, I unfolded the note. ‘He’s invited me to go to the theatre with him tomorrow night. It’s hard to tell, his writing is almost illegible.’

‘Will you go?’ asked Catherine, glancing at Mother.

‘I’ll have to make sure it doesn’t clash with all my other engagements,’ I said wryly.

‘You could do worse than a Stoker,’ said Mother.

‘Mother! It’s an invitation, not a proposal.’

‘She could do better too,’ added Phil, giving me *that* look. One I knew cautioned against falling for another man so soon after a broken heart.

The grandfather clock in the hallway chose that moment to chime. Time was ticking; marriage was the only way to guarantee myself a life, a future, and a man to share it with.

I glanced down at the note again. Mr Stoker’s handwriting was truly terrible.



It was hard not to stare as we settled into our seats at the Gaiety Theatre. Though I’d been before, I’d only ever sat in the stalls. Mr Stoker had procured tickets for the balcony, which gave a completely fresh aspect. Phil and Catherine, who’d accompanied us, were seated a row behind.

‘It’s huge,’ I said, admiring the baroque features, the lavishly painted ceiling. I glanced over my shoulder at my sisters. Phil was grinning approvingly.

‘It can seat over two thousand people,’ said Mr Stoker.

‘Has any actor filled it to capacity?’ I asked, noting quite a few empty seats. Still, for a Wednesday, it was a respectable crowd. Women dressed in the latest fashions, glittering with jewels, moved between rows searching for their seats. Across from where we were sat, the elegant boxes were being filled. I recognised politicians, a gentleman I’d met at the Wildes’, a lord and a woman I assumed was his wife. The gentleman caught my eye and nodded.

‘Only the one I told you about,’ replied Mr Stoker. For a moment I forgot my question.

‘Mr Henry Irving,’ I said.

Mr Stoker turned slightly. ‘You *were* listening.’

‘Sometimes I do.’ I beamed. ‘Will he be performing tonight?’

‘Alas, no. He’s touring England, but when he returns to Dublin, I’ll make sure you witness his brilliance.’

‘I’ll look forward to it,’ I said. Mr Stoker was staring off into the distance and, for just a moment, I had the sense I’d lost him.

‘Thank you for inviting me,’ I said, regaining his attention. ‘And for such splendid seats; Phil and Catherine’s too.’

Mr Stoker chuckled and patted my hand. ‘I wish I could take credit, but they were given to me in the hope I’d review the play.’

‘Oh. So, you’re working.’

‘It’s not work when I’m with you, Miss Balcombe.’

‘I should hope not, Mr Stoker. That would be a very poor start to our … friendship.’

‘Friendship? I like the sound of that,’ said Mr Stoker. ‘Friendships can evolve, can they not?’

‘I like to think all relationships can, otherwise what does one have but something predictable and thus dull?’

‘I doubt you’d ever be predictable or dull, Miss Balcombe.’

‘Heaven forbid!’ A thought occurred. ‘Though, it would depend, would it not?’

‘On what?’

‘With whom one forms a relationship.’

Before we could continue, the conductor tapped his baton, the music commenced, and the gas lights dimmed. The audience hushed and Shakespeare’s *The Taming of the Shrew* started.

The rather dark comedy about the courtship of the cantankerous and intolerant Petruchio and the spoiled and ill-tempered Katherina might have seemed an unusual choice for a first outing, yet with Mr Stoker laughing beside me, leaning over to whisper snippets of information such as ‘See the young man playing Lucentio? He’s destined for great things, mark my words,’ or ‘Watch the way the background changes in this scene, it’s remarkably innovative,’ I was captivated.

During intermission, Phil and Catherine joined us, and we were introduced to acquaintances of Mr Stoker, including an old Trinity professor and his wife.

‘What a handsome couple you make,’ said the woman, whose name I didn’t catch. She had very crooked teeth and a warm smile. ‘You’re turning heads everywhere.’

People were whispering and pointing. A journalist who worked for the same paper Mr Stoker reviewed for, and even the politician Mr Charles

Parnell, who continued to fight for Home Rule, something Mr Stoker was also passionate about, came over to greet us.

'That's a fine man you have there, Miss Balcombe,' said Mr Parnell, after we'd been introduced. 'Hang on to him.'

'As I would a reticule?' I asked.

Phil snorted and Catherine reddened. Mr Stoker choked back a laugh. Mr Parnell was not so successful. 'I like her, Bram. I like her very much,' he chuckled.

The bell rang announcing the play was about to recommence.

'We'd best return to our seats,' said Mr Stoker. 'Misses Balcombe?' He offered an arm each to Catherine and me, inviting Phil to proceed us. 'What an enchanting evening. Three lovely ladies all to myself. I'm becoming quite insatiable.' He lowered his head. 'Especially for your company,' he added for my ears alone.

His grey eyes were soft, warm and filled with something I didn't want to name. My heart became an acrobat.

We didn't speak again until we were seated.

'What do you think of the play thus far?' he asked, watching as those around us fussed and chattered. He raised his hand to acknowledge another friend.

'I'm thoroughly enjoying it, though I'm not persuaded that Petruchio's methods for taming Katherina are sound.'

'Oh? And why is that?'

'I would think punishment might weaken a person's defences, but in the long run, kindness and tolerance are far more persuasive tools for changing behaviour, don't you think?'

Mr Stoker considered my words. I liked that he did, frowning, rubbing his beard. 'In usual circumstances, I'd agree they'd have a better long-term outcome. But this is essentially a battle, with only one victor. It's an interesting way to observe marriage, don't you think? As if there's an enemy to defeat and …'

The music started again. Mr Stoker put a finger to his lips ruefully. 'Later,' he whispered. I also liked that unlike other patrons who continued to converse, he respected the players.

It wasn't until we were heading home that we resumed our conversation. It was a mild night and Mr Stoker suggested we walk along

the Liffey. Tactfully, Phil and Catherine remained a distance behind us. Stars shone, the river reflecting their sparkle and the moon's beams. Others took advantage of the pleasant evening, strolling arm in arm. We even passed a couple locked in an embrace.

'Ah, young love,' sighed Mr Stoker.

'You say that as if you're not young yourself, Mr Stoker.'

'There are many who would argue I'm not, at almost thirty-one years old.'

He had eleven years on me. 'Some say youth is as much a state of mind as a physical reality.'

We paused by the railing, facing the river, shoulder to shoulder. Phil and Catherine stopped, pretending to be distracted by something on the water. There were shouts in the distance, the whistle of a policeman.

'How others treat you can also affect how old you feel; even how others perceive you,' he said.

'Much like being a woman then. How others see and behave towards us, how they judge us, determines how we're allowed to be in society – and within families.'

He turned to regard me. 'There's a lot goes on in that lovely head of yours, isn't there, Miss Florence Balcombe?'

I raised my chin and met his steady gaze. My body thrummed. Was he going to kiss me? Did I want him to? Yes, I did.

'You have no idea,' I said, ever so softly. 'It's uncharted territory.'

'Then, let me be the first to explore it,' he said, and captured my mouth with his.



Over the next few months, I saw a great deal of Mr Stoker, or Bram, as I came to call him. I was introduced properly to his family, and he was made welcome at Marino Court. When he went to London to help his friend, the actor Henry Irving, who was becoming famous, he wrote to me three times, though he was only gone a week. Bram even invited me to accompany him to his sister Margaret's quiet wedding at the beginning of summer.

I tried not to contrast Bram and Oscar, but since my experience with men was so limited, I'd no other point of comparison. Both were clever,

lovers of literature and the arts, aficionados of the theatre, and both dreamed of being writers. But there, the similarities ended … Or should have, I kept telling myself.

Bram and I shared books and discussed their merits, cut out pieces from the various newspapers and debated them. He began to join my family for meals, and I was invited to share his home. By late July, we were attending church together. Unlike Oscar, after that first kiss, Bram never attempted to kiss me again. Oh, he'd link arms or hold my hand when I alighted from a cab or help me over uneven ground on one of our many walks; occasionally, he'd throw an arm about my shoulders and squeeze, the way one might a sibling. Sometimes, he'd kiss my cheek, my hand, even the top of my head.

But I wanted him to kiss my mouth. The more time we spent together, I longed for him to caress me the way Oscar had. When we bade each other goodnight after he'd brought me home, I would lift my face expectantly, and he would gaze down at me with those twinkly eyes, and either press his lips to my hand, or stroke my face.

'You're ridiculously lovely, you know,' he'd say.

'Does that mean you don't take me seriously?' I'd ask playfully.

'Beauty, Florrie, is a very serious thing. It's truth, don't you know?' he'd chuckle, alluding to the line from Keats. Then he'd depart.

'I think his intentions *are* serious,' said Mother one day, hope creeping into her voice.

I didn't answer. I knew all too well what it was like to have hope cruelly dashed.



When I accepted Bram's proposal, everyone except Phil was both pleased and relieved.

'A civil servant trumps a student any day,' said Father. It was the first and last time he ever referred to the Oscar debacle.

It took a great deal to impress my father, a retired army officer who'd seen action in the Crimea. He had very fixed ideas about men and women, husbands and wives, and though he never expressed it, he was always afraid I would do something foolish, like elope, or run away to London with a

ne'er-do-well and ruin not only my reputation but the family name. Father didn't understand that was something I'd never do. Bram met with his approval because he represented solidity, stability. We were from the same stock. Bram would ground me, Father said, which really meant bestow his family name and keep me in Dublin.

Unbeknownst to Father or Mother, while Bram loved Dublin, he too longed to leave.

'London is where I want to go. If one is serious about being a writer, it's the only place to be,' he told me the day we went to the library.

'It's the city where dreams can come true,' I replied. Oscar had said that, and I'd no qualms repeating it. 'It's where I long to go as well.'

'One day,' whispered Bram, his whiskers tickling my ear, 'we'll both go.'

I think it was this conversation that changed the way I felt about Bram. Overnight, he went from being a well-liked suitor to a potential husband who shared my desire to escape. Shared my first choice of destination …

We celebrated our engagement with champagne and a small gathering of his family and mine. Like me, Bram was a third child. His mother, Charlotte, was a widow and a highly regarded activist who championed women's rights (though she was remarkably intolerant of her own daughters and other women in her sphere), and those of the poor and crippled. His older brother, Thornley, was married to a vivacious woman named Emily. His older sister, Matilda, an artist of growing repute, was a delight, as was his younger sister, Margaret. But it was his brother George, a doctor like Thornley, who I liked the most. Hard-working but keen to enjoy life, when he found out Bram and I were engaged, he whooped and picked me up and twirled me around the room. Tom, two years younger than Bram, and Richard (another doctor), four years younger, both worked in India.

We planned the wedding for December the following year and the girls and I lost ourselves in designing the dress and assembling some kind of trousseau, while Father and Mother were grateful they'd time to put aside money for the ceremony.

Basking in the approval of my parents, the well-wishes of neighbours and everyone who said what a grand couple Bram and I made, I tried hard not to think about what life as Mrs Stoker might entail. I was to be a wife, at last, but what if we never left Dublin? What if Bram couldn't fulfil his

ambition to be a writer? To go to London? Jesus wept. I'd be stranded here forever, in the same house, a brood of kids, maybe a holiday in county Cork, never moving beyond an ever-shrinking circle.

Bram, with all the thespians he knew, with Mr Irving as his closest friend, wouldn't settle for that, would he? Anyhow, it was too late to back out. I had the proposal, the ring, and a future to plan.

Just when I'd reconciled myself to what being Mrs Bram Stoker entailed, even relishing the notion (my own household!), Oscar spoiled everything.

He came home.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The first I knew that Oscar was back in Dublin was a letter. It was buried under others on the salver in the hall, but I recognised the handwriting immediately. My treacherous heart began to beat faster. I didn't open it then and there, but tucked it away to read later, in private.

A part of me dared to think (to hope?) he'd written to beg me not to marry, to return to him. The other part dreaded he had. I lacked the courage to examine my ambivalence.

What was it Oscar always said? *I like men who have a future, and women who have a past*. He was in mine now. Bram was my future.

After lunch, I escaped upstairs. Scrawled across two pages, Oscar claimed he'd been taken aback to learn of my engagement. *Really?* What did he expect? I was a woman of marriageable age. A woman whose family expected, needed me to marry. He hadn't asked me to wait for him; he hadn't asked me *anything*. He'd played with my feelings, then ignored – or, worse, forgotten – my existence.

Towards the end of the letter, he asked that I return the gold cross. I still wore it, beneath my dress. I lifted it out, my fingers closing around it.

> I wish to carry it with me at all times as a memento of two sweet years – the sweetest of all the years of my youth.

I stared at the words, incredulous; fury began to lick my ribs.

> I at least cannot be indifferent to your welfare, the currents of our lives flowed too long beside one another for that.

He dared to accuse *me* of indifference? The man who'd led me – and others – to believe I meant something to him and then didn't write a word for months? Was he so blind to his part in this? It was all I could do not to screw the damn letter up. Instead, I read it again, shifting between indignation and guilt. He'd had two whole years to propose and hadn't. What choice did a woman in my situation have but to accept who she could, while she could? After all, another offer wasn't forthcoming.

When Phil found me later, I wordlessly passed the letter over.

'He calls you Florence.' She quirked a brow. 'Not Florrie.'

'Seems he finally decided to make it formal between us.'

Phil harrumphed and kept reading. 'He's clearly hurting.'

'Least he deserves,' I said unkindly, wishing I believed it. I didn't want to hurt anyone. Not even Oscar.

'What are you going to do?' Phil sat beside me on the window seat, our backs to the world.

'What else but give the necklace back.' I gazed vacantly around the room. 'But not here. I can't bear the thought of him coming here. I'll pick somewhere else, somewhere there's no history between us.'

'Oh, Florrie. Are you sure about this?'

'Of course, I must return it.'

'You know that's not what I mean.'

I rose. My knees began to shake. I sat down again and buried my face in my hands. Phil rubbed my back. 'No, no, I'm not.'

Outside, there was the clop of horses, the rise and fall of people passing. A dog barked; church bells rang. The faint tread of footsteps in the hallway below reached us. Catherine called for Mother.

'Oh, Kitten,' sighed Phil finally. 'I did ask you not to marry the first man who came along.'

I raised my head. 'How can you say that to me? Now of all times. And about Bram. He may have been the first, but he's also the right …' I paused.

'The right one?'

'The right one for me.' I stared at her defiantly.

'Is he though?' she asked ever so softly. 'Do you love him?'

I groaned. Did I? I admired him enormously. I thought him in possession of everything that would make a fine husband: ambition, kindness, courtesy, a career. But love? Come to think of it, I couldn't recall

Bram ever saying he loved me. Oh, he admired me, I was in no doubt about that. As I knew from pained experience, actions spoke louder than words.

Oscar's certainly had, despite his protestations now.

'Not yet,' I admitted finally. 'But I think I could.'

'Is that enough? For you?'

I glanced at Oscar's accusatory letter. So petulant, so angry. 'It has to be, doesn't it?'



Oscar and I never met to exchange the necklace. When I told him where I wished us to meet – the Stoker brothers' medical practice in Harcourt Street – and expressed concern how a reunion might be construed (by Bram of course), Oscar was furious. A note arrived.

After all, I find you know me very little, he'd scribbled.

Well, that went both ways.

One part of me was deeply disappointed I wouldn't see him; another utterly relieved. I was not ready to test my resolve. Anyway, nothing was stopping Oscar appearing at Marino Court and demanding to see me, throwing himself at my feet and begging me not to marry. For a few days after our fraught exchange, every knock at the door, every cab slowing outside the house, had me rushing to see who it was.

Oscar never came.

I had to face the truth: far from being 'over' Oscar, as I declared, a little piece of my heart would always belong to him.

Minuscule, microscopic, I told myself. A flea's bollocks. The rest belonged to Bram.

Oscar never received the cross, but I did stop wearing it. I buried it among the few pieces of jewellery I owned and told myself sternly to forget all about it; all about *him*.



In mid-September, Bram received an urgent message from Henry Irving, saying he needed Bram in Glasgow. Bram dropped everything and went.

Naturally, I was filled with curiosity about what was so important that Mr Irving required a civil servant, albeit a very clever one, to attend him.

Over the years they'd been acquainted, it was clear the men had developed a strong bond. When Mr Irving had come to Dublin for two weeks in July, Bram spent almost every spare minute with him, apologising for neglecting me. Mr Irving was not only a visitor to our city, but being seen in his exalted company would enhance Bram's reputation. Mr Irving was celebrated, earning accolades wherever he performed. I couldn't pick up a newspaper without reading about him. It spoke well of the man that he never forgot Bram was one of the first reviewers to recognise his talents. Even so, I was a little piqued I was never invited to see Mr Irving on stage or to join them afterwards. In his desire to attend the actor, it seemed Bram had forgotten his earlier promise to me.

Not long after Bram returned from Glasgow, it was with news that would alter the course of our lives.

He came to the house one evening to share it with my parents.

'Colonel Balcombe, Mrs Balcombe,' Bram said, looking windblown and distracted. He nodded to my parents, who sat primly before the fire, cups of tea in hand. The girls had been exiled upstairs, but I knew they'd have ears pressed to doors. James and Billy were off playing sport.

Forewarned, it was all I could do to sit still and not interrupt.

'I wish to let you know,' he began, 'that I've resigned my position in the civil service.'

Mother's mouth fell open. Father choked on his tea.

'Florence,' said Mother, removing Father's teacup and slapping his back. 'Did you know about this?'

'Yes,' I said meekly. 'Yes,' I repeated more firmly. 'Bram told me a few days ago.'

'Why would you do such a thing, Bram?' asked Mother, pursing her lips and passing Father her handkerchief. 'I'm sure you must have good reason.' She calmly placed her cup and saucer on a small side table. 'I'm keen to hear what it is.'

Bram shot me a look, and I gave him a nod of encouragement. 'While I was in Glasgow, my friend, the actor Mr Irving, offered me a position that was contingent on him acquiring the lease of a splendid theatre in London. The Lyceum. While it has taken him a few weeks to secure funding, he

informed me he's now officially the licensee. I telegraphed him immediately and accepted the post.'

The grandfather clock chimed. Captain Walton, perhaps sensing tension, rose from before the fire and wandered over to Mother, who absent-mindedly petted him. 'And pray what is this post exactly?' she asked.

'I'm to be the acting manager for the Lyceum.'

Mother stared at Bram blankly. Father couldn't look at him at all.

'It means taking care of all the productions,' I said quickly. 'The actors, hiring and managing the front-of-stage and some backstage staff, scheduling shows, and so much more.' Bram had explained it all to me. Unlike Mother and Father, who were dumbstruck, and not in a good way, I was ecstatic at this turn of events.

When Bram told me the job was in London (*London!*), I'd flung myself into his arms and he'd spun me around until I was dizzy. To think, after thirteen years, he'd thrown away a boring civil service job and was stepping into the great artistic unknown – and taking me with him. My solid civil servant was full of surprises – wonderful ones. I wanted to burst with happiness. To his astonishment and mine, I kissed him.

Bram's eyes widened, then his face broke into one of his charming smiles. 'Why, Miss Balcombe!' He rubbed his nose against mine.

'Why, Mr Stoker,' I said, and went to kiss him again. He quickly put me down.

'Let's wait until you're Mrs Stoker before there's any more of that, shall we?' He then explained what this position would entail.

One minute, there'd been a secure, if dull, life in Dublin opening before me, and now, suddenly, here I was, destined to not only be the wife of the acting manager at one of the most prestigious theatres in London, but I was going to live in the city I'd longed to see. I'd heard so much about it – how cosmopolitan it was, how crowded, exciting, dirty, how anyone who was anyone flocked there. There'd be theatres, shops, gardens, concerts, all at my fingertips – not to mention the fascinating people who'd come into my sphere. How could Mother and Father not see what an opportunity this was? How it encapsulated everything I'd ever wanted? My dreams were becoming a reality. Bram's too – well, apart from writing. But being in London meant his chances of fulfilling that ambition came so much closer.

‘What about your pension?’ asked Father, his voice cracked and disapproving.

Bram shifted uncomfortably. ‘I’ve had to forfeit that, sir.’

‘Hmmfff,’ said Father.

‘There’s more,’ said Bram.

‘Oh?’ sniffed Mother. Father didn’t say a word; his gaze bored holes through Bram.

‘I’m hoping,’ Bram continued, ‘since the position starts in December in time for the Lyceum’s grand opening, that you’ll give permission for Florence and me to marry earlier, so she might accompany me to London as my wife.’

‘Bring the wedding forward an entire year!’ exclaimed Mother, looking from me to Bram and back again, panic-stricken.

I nodded excitedly.

‘She’s certainly not going with you in any other capacity, young man!’ growled Father and then, standing abruptly, left the room, muttering all the while about eejits, debt, prospects thrown away, actors and actresses. ‘Sleevens,’ he mumbled. ‘The lot of them.’

‘Well,’ said Mother, also standing and smoothing her skirts. ‘I’m sure you know what you’re doing, Bram.’ As she reached the door, she turned and looked emphatically at me. ‘I just hope you do, Florence.’

For such a big man, Bram appeared quite diminished. No doubt he was also recalling the formidable Charlotte’s reaction when he’d told her. ‘What?’ she’d sneered. ‘Manager to a strolling player?’

It didn’t matter that Mr Irving was far more than a strolling player; nor that this new position was better paid than any civil servant’s job.

I waited until the door closed and grinned at Bram. ‘That went well, didn’t it?’



With the date of the wedding brought forward, there were only weeks until I not only became Mrs Bram Stoker, but left Dublin – for good. The reality of what Bram had committed to, and what I had in accepting his proposal, was starting to become clear. I was like a Liffey tide, fluctuating between highs and lows, moving from despondency to exhilaration.

My sisters and brothers had mixed reactions to the news. James and Billy pretended it didn't change a thing, yet I noticed they spent a great deal more time by my side than they ever had before, as if they were collecting memories.

Maude, Catherine and Alice were thrilled for me and wanted nothing more than to imagine what my life would be like in a new city in a strange country as the wife of an acting manager.

'You'll come home though, won't you?' said Alice one day.

'Of course I will!' I said, pulling her close. 'Often. You'll think I never left. And you'll come to visit me.' Alice withdrew from my arms, shaking her head. 'I'll never cross the sea.'

'You won't get me on a steamship,' said Catherine.

'Me neither,' said Maude.

'We don't want to drown,' said Alice.

All of us were terrified of open water. The girls couldn't be persuaded to wet their toes in the local lake let alone cross a raging sea. The notion saddened me deeply.

Phil was her usual pragmatic self. 'You were marrying him anyway, so what's the difference if it's sooner rather than later. It won't change anything except …' she hesitated.

It was late. We'd been sketching dresses for days, thinking of ways to improve my existing wardrobe, and how to transform Mother's old wedding gown into something more fashionable. Both Phil and Catherine were expert with a needle and thread and already Mother's antique cream dress was turning into something I'd be proud to wear. Phil had fashioned a bustle, added some lovely lace we'd picked up from a tinker to the sleeves and frontispiece, and Catherine had salvaged some netting used on Alice's cot, turning it into a veil. We'd been discussing Henry Irving and how his offer to Bram had changed everything. I was so grateful to this man I'd heard so much about, who my husband-to-be clearly adored. I couldn't wait to meet him and thank him for believing in Bram, for giving us such a chance. In my mind, he'd become akin to Aladdin's genie, casting magical spells that made life glitter.

Once upon a time, Oscar used to make me feel that way …

'Except what?' I asked when Phil didn't continue. Jesus wept. Were those tears in her eyes? Her body shook. 'Phil, *mo ghrá* … what is it?'

She threw down the pencil she was using and roughly wiped her eyes with the heels of her hands. ‘Naught. It’s just … I’m going to miss you, Kitten. Miss this —’ She threw out her arms to include our bed, the glowing lamp, the strips of lace and fabrics draped over the stool, the dresser, the scattered pages, the pencils. She nodded towards our shared wardrobe, the open door revealing gowns hanging side by side, a faded palette of lilac, gold, powder blue, peach and emerald. ‘I’m going to miss *us*.’

I pushed aside the skirt I’d been darning and threw myself at her. ‘I’m going to miss you too. So much.’

How long we held each other, I’m not sure. I cried. For all my bravado and talk of wanting to leave, now it was on the cusp of becoming a reality, what I was forsaking struck me. I was turning my back on Phil, my family, Captain Walton, my home, my city, my country. In London, I’d be an outsider, and worse, an Irishwoman. I’d already discussed with Mother how the English scorned the Irish.

‘Why do you think we encourage you to speak like them? To learn French?’ she said. ‘So you won’t suffer the discrimination our countrymen and women have for centuries, that’s why.’

I thought of Bram. Would he tame his beautiful brogue? A rebellious part of me hoped not. I wouldn’t deliberately hide my origins, either. I was proud of them. Proud of being Irish; being a Balcombe.

‘Well,’ I said, drawing away from my sister, my cheeks wet with tears, my shoulder with hers. ‘You’ll just have to overcome your fears and visit me.’

‘That’s the problem; I’m not sure I can.’

‘Then, I’ll be sure to come home twice as often – and write. I will write, every week, you wait.’

Phil began to laugh. ‘You’re just as scared of the ocean as I am. I don’t expect you to make the crossing often. And you don’t have to write every week … just more than that gobshite Oscar Wilde did.’

There was a beat. Suddenly, he was there in the room between us. Part of us. Phil had loved him too. She’d never entirely trusted him, but she had loved him. We stared at each other, the knowledge of what I’d lost, but also what I’d gained, unspoken between us.

‘Be happy, Florrie. Please,’ she whispered, holding my chin. ‘No matter what the future holds, whatever life throws at you, please, be happy.’

‘I’ll be Mrs Bram Stoker. How could I not be?’



PART TWO

1878 to 1879

This strange night existence is telling on me

We women are such cowards that we think a man will save us
from our fears, and we marry him.

Bram Stoker, *Dracula*

CHAPTER EIGHT

Birmingham, December 1878

It was a cold, blustery day in early December when Bram and I arrived at the Plough and Harrow in Edgbaston, Birmingham, five days after we married. It had been an intimate service at St Ann's Church – intimate because, due to its rushed nature, hardly anyone came. Both my mother and Bram's mammy remained dry-eyed throughout. Alice and Catherine howled. Bram's brothers, Thornley and George, formed a small guard of honour with James and Billy; all the sisters tossed dried rose petals. Father remained seated.

Bram and I spent the next couple of days between the Stoker brothers' medical practice in Harcourt Street and my home, opening presents, packing trunks with gifted sheets, towels, linen, and other essentials to make a home. These would be sent ahead. Bram had taken a lease on a suite of six rooms in London's west, not far from the Lyceum.

Believing we still had a couple of weeks before we had to leave, I was discommoded when Bram bowled into the practice and told me we had to leave immediately – not for London, but Birmingham.

'Birmingham? Why on earth would we go there?' I asked, wrapping a vase.

'Because Henry requires me,' he said, the telegram containing the summons in his hand.

'But we've still so much to do.' I gazed helplessly at the half-packed boxes, the sorting to be done, all the while thinking that this Mr Irving was very needy. 'How can we possibly be ready to leave tomorrow?'

Bram frowned at the mess. 'I suppose I could leave you here, go on ahead —' He caught the look on my face. 'Or we can ask George to take

care of everything. Since he's coming to live with us, there's no reason he can't finish organising our boxes and cases.'

I stared about helplessly. This was so inconvenient. 'Do you think George will mind?'

'Why would he?' said Bram. 'I'll let Henry know we're on our way.' He dropped a kiss on my head.

I sighed. Could I trust all this to George? Keen to find a position at a hospital in London, George was to board with us and help pay the lease. Perhaps going to Birmingham wouldn't be so bad after all, I thought as I wiped my hands on my apron and went to finish packing my trunk. At least Bram and I would have a few days to ourselves.

Our arrival in Birmingham was met by squalls of icy rain, which meant we ran into the hotel, joining the other patrons milling about in the vast foyer, awaiting a break in the weather. Bram and I checked in at the desk. I was so busy looking around at the high ceilings, the ornate chandelier and grand staircase, listening to the English and other accents, I only partially caught what the harried concierge was rapidly explaining. Something about when breakfast would be served, what services were on offer, at the same time hailing a porter to take our luggage.

All I could think was, *I'm in England!*

The concierge slid an enormous room key across the desk. 'Enjoy your stay, Mr and Mrs Stoker.'

A dart of pleasure struck me. *I* was Mrs Stoker. I fiddled with the ring beneath my glove and flashed Bram a smile. He was craning his neck, searching the huge foyer. I turned in the direction of the stairs. Before I'd taken a step, Bram cupped my elbow and began to steer me in the opposite direction. 'This way, my dear. Henry's waiting.' He nodded towards an area at the rear.

'He's here?' I gasped. 'Oh, let's not keep him.' I swiftly tucked stray wisps of hair under my hat, tugged my coat cuffs. Side by side, we headed towards a fireplace surrounded by a semicircle of high-backed chairs; a sole occupant faced the burning coals. I spied crossed legs and a foot bouncing like a metronome. I was trembling with excitement. There was so much I wanted to say to Mr Irving, not only to thank him for employing Bram in such an important capacity at the Lyceum, and bringing us both to London (eventually), I also wanted to express my gratitude about his offer to

promote Bram's authorial ambitions. Mr Irving had promised to introduce him to some publishers.

Forced to halt as a bellboy carrying a great many suitcases staggered past, I took Bram's hand. This was the first step in a new direction – for both of us. The theatre, England, marriage.

We reached the chairs. The foot ceased its rhythmic movement. 'Henry,' said Bram, his voice full of warmth and affection. He released my hand and stepped forward.

Whatever I expected, especially after everything I'd heard and read about Mr Irving, it wasn't the sallow-skinned man who, with a dramatic exclamation, languidly unfolded himself from the chair and grasped Bram's outstretched hand enthusiastically. He was gaunt, taller than I expected, and slender. His cheekbones appeared to have been whittled from wood, and his nose was rather long and prominent. His eyes were dark, inquisitive; his surly brows a straight line above them. His hair was raven-black and unfashionably long, sitting untidily against his collar. His mouth, which was widening into a great smile for Bram, possessed thin but mobile lips. He was altogether striking.

'You're here!' he exclaimed in a voice rumbling with strange enunciation. He held Bram at arm's length. 'You're really here.'

Bram laughed delightedly, lowered his head modestly and his cheeks coloured. My stomach churned uncomfortably, and a high-pitched whine sounded in my ears. I knew that Bram admired Mr Irving, but this behaviour was so unlike him; why, it was almost coquettish. They exchanged more greetings and reassurances about convivial mutual travels – the ship, the train, the abominable weather. There was a real simpatico between them that should have been heartening to witness. I stood back and, as my stomach settled and the noise in my head dulled, affected a smile, quietly rehearsing what I wanted to say.

I waited, but when Bram failed to introduce me, when there was still no acknowledgement of my presence by either man, only a sweep of Mr Irving's hand inviting *Bram* to take a seat, I cleared my throat loudly. The men ceased talking.

'And who is this?' asked Mr Irving, noticing me for the first time.

I opened my mouth to explain when, with a guilty flush, Bram pulled me to his side. I reached for his hand, but it wasn't offered. Self-conscious,

I tucked mine into the folds of my skirts.

'This, Henry, is my wife.'

'Your … your *what*?' Mr Irving's dark brows met, and he stared at me in sheer disbelief.

Since I'd come of age, I'd grown accustomed to a range of men's reactions, but this was something altogether different. Almost as if my very presence was an affront. It confounded me. Refusing to be intimidated, knowing my new travelling gown fitted well and was appropriate for the occasion, that I was well within my rights to be there, I lifted my chin. 'How do you do, Mr Irving. My name is Florence —'

Mr Irving spluttered, then fell back in the chair as if pushed. '*The Wife*,' he gasped and clutched his chest. 'You've brought *the Wife*.'

Bram chuckled as if he'd told a great joke.

'He couldn't very well leave me behind,' I half-laughed.

Mr Irving crossed his legs first one way, then the other. He looked from me to Bram and back again with glittering eyes, resting his chin on tapered fingers. He shook his head. He behaved altogether like a villain in a pantomime. 'You didn't tell me you had a *wife*, Bram!' His laugh was hollow. '*Florence?* Your name is Florence?' His face screwed up in distaste.

My cheeks flooded with colour. While I could hardly fault Mr Irving for not knowing that Bram and I were wed – after all, everything had been conducted in such 'unseemly haste' as Mother put it – his rudeness was shocking. Incomprehensible. Perhaps Father had been right about actors. But the question I really wanted to ask Bram then and there was why Mr Irving didn't know about *me*.

Bram had talked of little else but Mr Irving for months. I knew he was born John Henry Brodribb, in Somerset, and that his role as Mathias in *The Bells* made him famous. I knew all the plays he'd performed in; read most of the excellent if somewhat gushing reviews Bram had written when he performed in Dublin. I knew how much money he'd invested in the Lyceum, that the fabulously wealthy Baroness Burdett-Coutts was a patron, that he'd recently hired the applauded actress Ellen Terry to join his company. Yet, as was becoming increasingly apparent, I had not featured in Bram's communications with Mr Irving at all. Not only was the man ignorant about our nuptials, he didn't know *I* existed.

Uncharacteristically, I bit my tongue and tamped down the confusion that climbed my chest and instead, held out a hand. ‘Florence Anne Lemon Stoker, to be precise. It’s a pleasure to meet you, Mr Irving. And yes, I’m Bram’s *wife* of five days. Though he didn’t exactly bring me here, like a piece of excess luggage. The credit for that goes to the steamship, the train and of course, these.’ I lifted my skirts to reveal my new boots. ‘Shanks’s pony, I believe is the expression.’ Dear God, I was blathering.

His eyes dropped to examine my well-shod feet before returning to my face. He took my hand, rising and bowing over it in a mannerly fashion. I withdrew my fingers as Bram swiftly carried over another chair. Taking time to sit, I rearranged my skirts carefully, then turned to Mr Irving who watched me in silence.

‘Makes it sound like a proper title, doesn’t it?’ I smiled, determined to alleviate the strain my unexpected appearance had evidently caused. His thoughtless reaction as well.

‘Eh? What does?’ Mr Irving reached for a glass of spirit at his elbow and took a long swig.

‘Putting a definite article before a noun.’ I signalled to a loitering waiter to bring more drinks. ‘Imbues little words with great importance. Instead of Mrs Stoker, I’m “the Wife”, and you, Bram —’ I turned to him, ‘are hereby dubbed “the Husband”.’ I laughed. ‘I think that’s how we should refer to each other from now on, don’t you? Only, no-one will know who we’re talking about since we’ve only been wed five minutes and nobody here,’ I swung my arm, ‘not even Mr Irving, knows we’re a couple.’ I gave Bram an emphatic look.

Bram flicked an apologetic smile at Mr Irving, then regarded me with some dismay. Mr Irving swirled the contents of his glass.

‘And what should I call you?’ I asked him with wide-eyed innocence. ‘Mr Irving? Or would you prefer “the Chief”? I believe that’s what Bram calls you, don’t you, dear?’

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Mr Irving's expression darkened. 'What a nonsensical conversation,' he scoffed, tossing back the remainder of his drink. 'I'm not *your* chief. That's Bram. A man rules his household.'

I couldn't help but wonder what Charlotte Stoker, who was the beating heart of her family, would have to say about that. I knew how I felt. I waited for Bram to say something, change the direction of the conversation. He remained mute, his eyes nervously darting from me to Mr Irving and back again. My inner voice was telling me to be quiet, let it lie. Only, I couldn't.

'I see no help for it, then,' I said gaily. 'I shall have to start a rebellion and overturn your authority, Bram, or demand we co-rule. I'll be the Chiefess. What say you, dear?'

Bram kept staring at his boss.

Mr Irving began to grow red in the face. The waiter tried to attract our attention so he could place the glasses and freshly opened bottle on his tray down.

'Forgive Florence, Henry,' said Bram, finally, his hand closing over where mine rested on the arm of the chair. He gave it a warning squeeze. 'She's young and a plain talker – comes from being part of a large family. And this —' His arm encompassed the room. 'This is all new to her, intoxicating. It's understandable her tongue would run away —'

Young? I might be young, but I was old enough for Bram to marry, even if he forgot to tell his employer. And I most certainly didn't need my husband to make excuses for me as if I was a naughty child. Heat climbed my chest, heat and fury. I didn't wed, or gird my loins to cross the Irish Sea, to put up with this – from either man. How dare Bram patronise me so? Where had my courteous, kindly husband fled to? Why, he was practically simpering over this ill-mannered man. I couldn't bear it. Before I said or did something I'd regret, I stood.

'I think you'll find my tongue is firmly in my young mouth at present, *dear*.' The smile did not reach my eyes. 'In fact, it's my feet that are looking to run away – upstairs —'

Bram leapt up, blocking my exit. 'Florrie! You can't … I mean, don't go …'

I patted his cheek, his soft beard tickling my palm. 'I'll leave you gentlemen to catch up. No. Please. We'll talk later. It's been a long day, I'm weary, and it's evident you both have many things to discuss that the Wife

will just impede.' I held Bram's gaze a moment. 'Good afternoon, Mr Irving. It's certainly been a revelation to meet the man I've heard so much about.' I hesitated. In for a penny in for a pound as they say. 'What a pity you can't say the same for me.'

As I turned to move away, I was already beginning to regret my sharp words. I'd intended to thank Mr Irving and instead I'd drawn swords. Before I'd taken a few steps, Mr Irving spoke again, his voice pitched so I'd hear.

'You need to take the Wife in hand, boyo.'

It took all my self-control not to bite. Instead, I crossed the foyer and calmly ascended the staircase, half-expecting, hoping, Bram would follow.

Much later, long after the moon was abed and I'd been reading for what seemed like hours, Bram returned.

'Nice of you to join me,' I said tersely. I was still cross about what had happened downstairs – Mr Irving's poor manners, yes, but I was more affronted that Bram hadn't defended me. I'd never been so rude to someone I'd only just met. But then, no-one had ever treated me in such a fashion. Were all actors like that? Or was Mr Irving the exception? I prayed that was the case.

Bram mumbled something then lurched towards the bed, plonking himself on the end. Spirit and tobacco fumes rose like a miasma. He clumsily began to remove his shoes.

I closed my book. 'In case you're wondering, I'd a lovely dinner, thank you for asking. I ate here in the room.'

'I guessed you must have,' said Bram, loosening his necktie. 'Henry and I dined in the hotel restaurant.'

'I guessed you must have.'

Bram continued to undress in silence. I waited a while. 'Bram,' I said, trying to soften my tone. I didn't want a donnybrook, but I couldn't let this go unremarked. 'I thought *we* might have shared a meal, you know, celebrated. After all, it's our first night in England.'

Bram spoke over his shoulder. 'Don't be like that, Florrie,' he said warily, unbuttoning his shirt. 'Henry and I had things to discuss. Important things. We've a lifetime together, what's one night?'

I inwardly sighed. 'I just thought that after the way Mr Irving spoke to me, you'd at least have come upstairs and checked I was alright.'

Bram's fingers hovered over the last button. 'The way *he* spoke?' He twisted around. 'Florence, I'm sorry, but you were insufferably rude to Henry. That's part of the reason I didn't. He was … most discombobulated by your hostility, I had to reassure him, make peace.'

I stared at Bram in disbelief. '*My* hostility. Reassure *him*.' Words became clogged in my throat.

'I think you need to apologise —'

'Me?' I could scarce believe what I was hearing. Bram had picked a side, and it wasn't mine. Admittedly, I had been confrontational, but I'd also been provoked, hadn't I? My hands balled into fists. Hot coals blistered my insides. Surely, Mr Irving wasn't really upset. He was simply making mischief, trying to set me and Bram at loggerheads. To what end, I couldn't fathom, but I wouldn't allow it.

I took a few deep breaths; unfurled my fingers. Be damned if I'd apologise to Mr Irving, but I could to my husband. 'If I spoke out of turn, I'm sorry. I was taken aback,' I huffed. 'Tell me, why didn't Mr Irving know about me?'

Bram shrugged, standing to finish removing his shirt. 'I'm sure I told him. He must have forgotten.'

I doubted that. Actors had formidable memories.

Bram finished undressing, pulled his nightshirt over his head and, throwing back the covers, climbed in beside me. The mattress was so soft, his weight caused me to roll against him, my book becoming jammed beneath me. I wriggled to pull it out. Thinking I sought to be near him when the opposite was true, he put an arm around me.

We lay beside one another, stiffly, like two strangers sharing a medieval bed. I tried to shift his arm so I might lever myself up, but it was heavy, awkward.

'Why did Mr Irving react the way he did to my name?'

'Oh. That.' Bram stifled a hiccough. 'He has a wife named Florence. Only, they're estranged. Apparently, she makes his life a misery.'

For a fleeting moment I wondered at both men being married to women with the same name. Did it signify anything? Other than how common my name was. Florence Nightingale had a lot to answer for.

'Look, it was all a misapprehension,' he said drowsily. 'Henry has a certain way about him. You'll get used to it and, in time, you'll come to

love him, just as I do.'

I pressed my lips together, made some sort of conciliatory noise.

'You'll apologise to him, Florrie? For me?' Bram tightened his hold briefly. 'I'd prefer the two people I care about most weren't at odds.'

Without waiting for an answer, Bram kissed my temple, withdrew his arm, rolled over, and promptly fell asleep. I retrieved the book from under my hip, replaced it on the stand with a loud thump, and extinguished the lamp.

I lay there, my thoughts heavy. I'd been so looking forward to making a friend of Mr Irving, making an impression.

Well, I thought sardonically, I'd certainly done that.

CHAPTER NINE

London, December 1878

When I first entered the top-floor flat Bram had leased for us on Southampton Street, Covent Garden, it was all I could do not to turn around and walk out again. If our boxes hadn't already been stacked in what was to be the drawing room, and George hadn't been by my side, I may well have. George had arrived in the city two days earlier and picked up the keys. He'd been at Charing Cross station to meet us.

In shocked silence, George and I wandered through the six main rooms. There was a bedroom each for me and Bram, one for George, a kitchen and scullery combined, and another room that would serve as a study. Not counted because they were so small, were two attic bedrooms accessed by a narrow flight of stairs. The entire flat was dank and dusty, littered with furniture in various states of disrepair. The mouldy wallpaper looked like it had been shredded by a maddened cat. More positively, there were lovely large windows, including a shallow bay in the drawing room. The view was limited to the almost identical row of businesses and flats opposite. The street below was busy, forming a wide thoroughfare between the main road of The Strand and Covent Garden. What swiftly became evident was that this place needed to be made habitable before I could do much unpacking or satisfy my urge to explore the city.

'The grand façade hides a shabby interior well, doesn't it?' remarked George, pulling out a large kerchief and wiping his hands.

'It does,' I said wryly, weaving my way between boxes and a couple of sad-looking chairs towards the window. 'Lures the unsuspecting. Do you think Bram would have taken these rooms if he'd viewed them first?'

'I think they're so convenient to the Lyceum,' said George, 'they would have been hard to turn down, despite their state. The theatre's just a couple

of streets away.'

Alternately daunted and gratified that the task of overseeing renovations to the theatre and ensuring it was ready to open after Christmas had been given to him, ever-conscientious, Bram had left me and George to take charge of the flat and raced off to attend his duties.

I stood in the bay window, peering out through the filthy glass before turning around and mentally tallying the tasks. A good clean was first on the agenda, followed by purchasing some decent furniture, curtains, rugs and new wallpaper. A painting here and there, some cushions, and a cabinet to display the china and silver we'd been gifted.

'I'll need help.' I pointed at rodent droppings in a corner, swiping a finger along the sill that was quickly blackened with dust and smuts. 'To get the rooms in order.'

'You will, Florrie,' agreed George drolly, peeling a strip of wallpaper away. We watched it float to the floor. 'I think hiring a maid, maybe two, should be a priority.'

'How does one go about such a thing here?'

George shrugged. 'Same as in Dublin. An advertisement, I imagine. Or maybe the solicitors in the office downstairs can offer advice or even a recommendation.'

I sighed and would have sat but didn't trust the threadbare armchair to hold me.

'Don't worry, Florrie,' said George, patting my shoulder. 'Until I hear confirmation about a position, I'll pitch in.'

'Thank you, George.' I began to rummage in one of the boxes. 'I'd better start making a list.'

'You'll need paper and pen.' George tore open another box. It was filled with books. Another item to add to the list: bookshelves. 'On the bright side, Florrie,' said George, lifting something wrapped in linen, 'think of the fun we'll have spending that allowance Bram's given you.'

We shared a smile. George already knew how to cheer me.



By the time Christmas arrived, I was proud of what had been accomplished, and in such a short time. George declared it a Christmas miracle as we sat

down to a delicious luncheon prepared by the marvellous Mrs Harriet Daw, the cook I'd hired, and served by her reliable niece, Emma Barton, our maid. I'd even managed to convert the upstairs rooms into two comfortable if bijou bedrooms – one for Emma, who lived with us, the other for Mrs Daw whenever the weather or time forced her to remain overnight.

George, true to his word, had rendered assistance until he took up a position at Chelsea Hospital, looking after old soldiers mainly. He also became the attending physician at the Lyceum. Mrs Daw and Emma and I had laboured for hours every day, cleaning, washing, stripping wallpaper, removing rubbish and rodents' nests, sweeping hearths and blackening them, repairing whatever furniture could be salvaged (George and Mr Daw proved quite dab hands at that), hiring chimney sweeps and other trades to help transform the flat into a home. At first, I'd despaired we'd ever get the place clean, as the moment dirt was wiped away, a floor swept or furniture polished, the endless smuts from all the city's coal fires would leave their hideous traces over everything. Keeping the windows closed didn't help either. The smuts were tenacious. At least I understood why the windows were streaked with grime – it was futile to clean them (I'd tried) as the combination of smoke from hearth fires and dirt from the roads was as constant as a heartbeat. The factories on the outskirts of the city ensured a miasma of odours and pollution insinuated itself everywhere. If we weren't tracking mud and other refuse into the house, we were trudging through it the moment we were out the door. I despaired the hems of my gowns would ever be clean again.

London may have been the centre of the world – noisy, full of life, colour and drama, with all sorts of wonderful shops and markets that sold anything and everything imaginable – but it was also filthy. And smelly. London stank. I'd begun to keep a scented kerchief with me to press against my nose when I went outside.

And yet, as I wrote to Phil, despite all this, I loved it. I missed Dublin, its clatter and pong, but I loved the clop of the horses' hooves as carriages rolled along The Strand. I loved the cries of the newspaper boys, flower sellers and milkmaids each morn and evening. The sing-song chant of the vendors, the cheeky winks and impudence of the entertainers in the vast market at the end of the street. There were jugglers, sword-swallowers, singers, puppeteers, people standing atop fruit crates proclaiming the end of the world or that Jesus saves. Some were more political, chastising the

prime minister, Mr Disraeli, or lamenting the offspring of Queen Victoria as ne'er-do-wells. These people weren't confined to the market either, but appeared on street corners. Stepping outside was like entering an outdoor theatre. I couldn't help but think of the character Jacques from Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, proclaiming that all the world was a stage. The world might not be, but London felt like one.

I adored the quirkiness of the knocker-uppers, paid to wake people by rapping on windows and doors at a set time. If I rose early enough, I'd see them with their long bamboo sticks or mallets. The chimney sweeps' sooty faces became familiar sights as they strolled up and down the street, long brushes over their shoulders, kerchiefs hanging out of their pockets. The young ones trotting along beside them with their vacant eyes and moist coughs were stark reminders that, for all the beauty, there was also great ugliness here. The drunken lads and lasses, the whores who paraded around the market and surrounding streets come nightfall, the toothless crones begging for coin, the barely dressed children pleading for a scrap of food. Not a day went by without an act of terrible violence being reported in the newspapers. I was warned never to venture to Covent Garden without George, Emma or Mrs Daw. Fortunately, they were always willing, which was just as well, because Bram was rarely home.

Each day he was gone by mid-morning, and I sometimes didn't see him again until the following one. I'd hear him return at three, four of the clock, sometimes just before dawn. He didn't deliberately disturb me, but I was still adjusting to being alone in bed after sharing with Phil all my life, so often woke. On the odd day he managed to be home for dinner or took a few hours off to relax, attend to correspondence, or pay some of the bills I was accruing, he'd be summoned back to Mr Irving's side courtesy of a note delivered by courier. Not even Sundays were sacrosanct.

Twice one Sunday – before luncheon – messages arrived. I was still trying to grasp that a new note had appeared within the space of a couple of hours, when Bram, cursing slightly as he tossed it on the second-hand sideboard, went in search of his hat and an umbrella (the heavens had opened).

George and I regarded each other in disbelief.

'Surely, that's not *another* summons?' I scooped it up. George lowered his newspaper.

‘What is it this time?’ He leaned forward conspiratorially. ‘Iron my shirt? Pick up a loaf of bread?’ He rolled his eyes.

‘*I need two fivers for a ten-pound note. H*.’ I threw it down in disgust.

‘Irving wants change?’ said George incredulously.

‘More to the point, he wants Bram to find him some.’ I clicked in annoyance. ‘Can’t the man do anything for himself? It’s Sunday.’

George returned to his paper, shaking his head. ‘What’s Irving about, treating Bram like his lackey.’ He flashed me a sympathetic smile. ‘I think you can forget your promenade around Covent Garden today, Florrie.’

‘I think the weather had already cancelled that.’ Rivulets dribbled down the window.

‘That’s beside the point,’ said George.

He was right. ‘Could you say something to Bram? About the notes?’

‘Me?’ George scoffed. ‘I’m only his *brother*.’

‘Ha! I’m *only* the Wife. Anyhow, you’ve known him years longer than me.’

‘Aye, but I don’t kiss him, do I?’

‘If you say so,’ I began, grinning. ‘Though you are *very* close …’

‘I’ll give you close, you hallion —’ began George, rolling the newspaper as if to thwack me with it.

Bram chose that moment to return. George abruptly tucked the roll under his arm. I gave him a pressing look. ‘Ah, er, Bram …’ began George. ‘Florrie has something she wants to say to you.’

I glared at him.

‘I’ll be on my way,’ he said, heaving himself out of the chair. ‘I’m expected at White’s.’

Coward, I mouthed. He winked.

Waiting until the door closed and I’d heard George bid Emma farewell, I held up the note. ‘Bram, surely, this can wait,’ I said gently. ‘It doesn’t need to be dealt with right now.’

Bram put on his coat. ‘I can’t simply ignore it, Florrie.’

‘I’m not asking you to *ignore* it. I’m suggesting you act on what Mr Irving asks later. When it suits *you*.’

Bram blinked. ‘It suits me now.’

I took a deep breath. ‘Really? It’s the second message he’s sent just this morning. The first had you racing to the theatre mid-breakfast to check you’d reserved seats for Mr Irving’s wife.’

‘It was important.’

‘What? The wife he abandoned when she was pregnant with his second child because she offended him.’ I’d heard the sorry story from George, who’d heard it at Boodle’s.

‘It was a bit more than that —’ began Bram.

I brushed it aside. ‘A wife he’s not spoken to since, never mind the two sons he has nothing to do with.’ My dander was up now. ‘Unlike Mrs Florence Irving, I’d at least like to share one uninterrupted meal, let alone *some* time with my husband – especially on the Lord’s day.’

Bram fussed with his gloves. ‘And you will, Florrie.’ He went to kiss my cheek. I stepped out of reach. ‘Florrie!’ He threw up his hands in exasperation, gave me a withering look, turned on his heel, and left the room.

I waited a beat, then strode to the drawing room door and wrenched it open. ‘Henry doesn’t always have to come first, you know,’ I shouted.

But he was already gone.

I slammed the door and fell into a chair. Rain battered the glass, accompanied by a loud growl of thunder, matching the tempo of my thoughts. The day had grown dark, thick, oppressive. The more I considered it, the more I realised only one cloud loomed over my new life in London. A Mr Irving-sized one that managed to not only douse every plan Bram and I made, but usher storms in its wake.

CHAPTER TEN

Christmas Day 1878 would have been perfect except for what George inadvertently revealed after one too many glasses of canary.

Full of festive fare and enjoying their cigars, the men were reclining in the chintz chairs, admiring how fine the drawing room looked. I'd festooned the mantelpiece with holly and ivy and decorated a young spruce in a pot. Cards from home were propped on the sideboard, a captive audience for the pre-loved nativity scene I'd picked up from a tinker near Covent Garden.

'I propose a toast,' said George, raising his glass. 'To Florrie.'

'To Florrie,' repeated Bram, smiling. They both drank. 'Homemaker extraordinaire.'

I basked in their approval. It was nice to feel appreciated. It was even nicer to have us together. We were a tiny branch of the Stoker family, a trio of Irish in a sea of English. My happiness briefly dimmed as I thought about everyone back in Marino Court. What would they be doing now? Had Alice found the pudding penny again? Did Father Bowan stay sober enough to deliver the midnight service? My heart grew heavy.

'And here's to being able to pay for Florrie's extravagance,' added Bram, observing the room with a slightly concerned expression.

George snorted. 'So long as Irving keeps covering expenses for all those nights you have at the Garrick or White's, carousing till dawn. They must cost a fortune.'

'What's this?' I asked. 'Bram doesn't have time for gentlemen's clubs, not when he's at the theatre all hours.' And just like that, I broke the promise I'd made to myself not to raise how much Mr Irving monopolised my husband, today of all days, lest an argument ensue. 'Tell him, Bram.'

Bram scowled at his brother, who gave a half-hearted shrug. Bram cleared his throat. 'Some of the work I do requires me to attend Henry

outside the Lyceum.'

'By outside, you mean in these clubs?'

He grunted. I inhaled deeply but didn't ask for an explanation, not then. I didn't want to spoil the day or embarrass George. But I wouldn't forget, and from the baleful expression on Bram's face as he regarded his brother, he knew I wouldn't let it rest either.

The following day, St Stephen's, Bram left for work before I rose, so I never had the opportunity to talk to him. After breakfast, I spent the morning unpacking the last of the boxes, including the one containing my letters from Oscar. I stared at the little wooden box for a long time. Flitting around the edges of my consciousness like a bat at a window was a thought I didn't want to entertain. It began 'What if …?'

I told myself I was only thinking that way because whenever Bram and I were together, all we seemed to do was exchange sharp words, then part on poor terms, even if the cause was always the same. Oscar and I had barely had a cross word our entire time together … until the end. Phil had written that Oscar was now living permanently in England. Oxford currently, but he intended to relocate to London. It was strange to think that one day he might be living nearby.

What if …?

Perhaps it was because I was still festering over what George had revealed: that far from working at the Lyceum constantly, Bram was being led astray by Mr Irving, spending money we didn't have, staying out until the sun rose. Whatever the cause, as I held first the lovely sketch Oscar had done of me, and then the watercolour of his family's holiday home, Moytura House, my thoughts took flight. Reluctantly, I put them aside. The sketch I slid into my underwear drawer. The painting, I carried about the flat, pressed to my chest. I still hadn't bought any art. The place most definitely needed some.

I roamed about the drawing room aimlessly. George had gone to the hospital to pick up some equipment, and I'd given Mrs Daw and Emma the day off. I was quite alone. Finally, I propped the painting on the mantelpiece, between a carriage clock and a statue of Aphrodite. I fell back in a chair and studied it, the modest white house with its rather pretentious arches, surrounded by lush lawns and rolling hills. I was trying to ignore the signature in the corner and failing dismally. There was a time I'd dared to

believe I would one day cross that threshold, no longer a Balcombe but as Mrs …

What are you thinking about at this very moment, Oscar?

A wave of shame washed over me. What sort of wife was I, thinking of another man? Daydreaming about an alternate future …

Guilt drove me to my feet, and I turned Oscar's picture to the wall.



It was past three in the morning when Bram finally came home. I'd lain awake, determined to ask him exactly what his work for Mr Irving entailed. I found him in the study, leafing through some papers on the desk. He greeted me as if naught was amiss.

'How was the Garrick?' I asked quietly, steadily. 'Or did you and Mr Irving entertain each other at White's tonight?'

'Florrie.' My name was a nuisance in his mouth. 'What's this about? Does it really matter?'

'It does to me.' I folded my arms. 'Where were you?'

'As it happens, we *were* at the Garrick, we were —'

'Drinking and feasting while I'm left at home believing you're at work.'

I despised myself for sounding so needy. But I wanted an explanation as to why this had been kept from me.

'You don't understand,' said Bram, slumping in the new leather chair I'd ordered for him.

'Give me a chance.'

Bram pinched the bridge of his nose wearily. 'It's not what you think; nothing like George implied. It's business, Florrie, not pleasure. It *is* work.' He lowered his hand. His eyes were deeply shadowed, his face pale. 'You think it's how I want to spend every night? Away from home? From you?'

'I'm no longer sure. Is it?'

A dying ember in the fire shattered in a cloud of sparks and ash. He gestured for me to sit. I pulled my dressing gown around me and sat, ramrod straight.

Bram looked at me for a full minute. 'You may not believe this, but I've no choice but to accompany Henry. He's introducing me to important people; men who will ensure that once the Lyceum opens, it becomes the

most sought-after ticket in town. They're key to the theatre remaining solvent and guaranteeing not only my position, but that of everyone employed there.'

'And these men happen to frequent the Garrick?'

'The Garrick, Boodle's, White's and other places. Sometimes, Henry invites them back to his home in Grafton Street. He'll entertain anyone who has the wherewithal to fund his productions, which means I must amuse them too.'

'I thought his baroness friend provided the funds.'

'She's invested a great deal and not only in the theatre.' Bram reached for the elegant box of cigars atop his desk – a gift from Mr Irving – and extracted one. 'But a major venture like the Lyceum is a hungry beast, it needs constant capital to feed it.' He used a cutter to remove the end, then roasted the foot over a candle. He sucked on the cigar a few times, smoke billowing around his head. Soon, its perfume wafted pleasantly. 'Our potential investors need to be both feted and reassured.'

'About what?'

'That they're vital to Henry, to the theatre; to the life of the city. That they'll have a good return on their investment, which will only happen if we're successful. To ensure that, Henry's star must continue to rise – and that's my responsibility.'

'Is it? You can't have much faith in Mr Irving's talent.'

He peered at me through a veil of smoke. 'I have faith in all Henry does. He's a sure bet; that's why I took on the job, Florrie; to be able to provide for you, give you the life you deserve.'

My anger cooled as rapidly as it had ignited. 'Oh, Bram,' I said, shaking my head. 'Why didn't you just tell me this sooner?' I felt foolish, guilty. Like a harridan. Then I remembered the reason he hadn't told me was because he never had the chance; he was so rarely home.

He watched my change of expression and rested the cigar across a large ashtray. He held out his palm, waiting for me to lean across the desk and place my hand in it. 'I know it's been hard. First, I leave you to your own devices in Birmingham while I'm at work, now here,' he began in a conciliatory tone. 'You've kept busy.' He gazed about. 'You've effected a wondrous transformation in no time.'

'George helped. As did Mrs Daw and Emma.'

‘Ah, but it’s all your vision. Your homemaking; you’re positively talented at it.’

I harrumphed. ‘There’s only so many chairs and curtains I can order, Bram. So many walls I can wash. Help I can hire. It’s given me a short-term purpose, and it’s practically at an end. Then what will I do?’

‘Whatever you want.’ Aware he hadn’t given the right answer, Bram swept on. ‘You’re my wife, thus you’re part of the Lyceum family —’

‘And yet, Mr Irving aside, I haven’t met them.’

Bram had the grace to look ashamed. ‘I promise, Florrie, I’ll take you to the Lyceum and introduce you to everyone tomorrow.’ He glanced at the clock. ‘Make that today. I mean it,’ he said firmly, seeing doubt on my features. ‘I assure you, once the Lyceum opens in just three days, and the pressure of these last few weeks lessens, the demands on my time will ease. You’ll see. I’ll be able to show you this marvellous city properly. Introduce you to the people I’m meeting, accept invitations that I know will be forthcoming. Then, not only can you issue your own in return, but I can escort you to teas, dances, shows and more. I know it’s difficult, that as a woman there are limits to your liberty —’

I scoffed.

‘But you’ll make friends, friends to divert and occupy you. Discover new interests to keep you entertained. We’re in London, after all. All I ask is that you be patient just a little longer.’ He squeezed my fingers and released them.

I gazed into those kind grey eyes. His request wasn’t unreasonable. ‘I’ll try.’



After our (well, my) bitter words that early morning, Bram kept his promise and later in the day took me to see the place to which we were both, in different ways, beholden.

Much to my astonishment, the building was unrecognisable as a theatre. It was a complete mess. To start with, the outside was covered in scaffolding and drop sheets, while the interior was more or less how I imagined an ancient city such as Pompeii, Athens or Rome to look: rubble, ruins, broken masonry, furniture askew, half-painted walls, and crawling with people. Rehearsals for *Hamlet*, the theatre’s first production under Mr

Irving, were in full swing. The actors and actresses were battling to say their lines above the ring of hammers, the grinding of saws, and the tramp of boots, as countless tradesmen clomped about the auditorium, replacing, repairing, building. The smell of paint and dust hung in the air, causing more than one person to launch into a volley of coughs and sneezes. I kept my trusty handkerchief pressed to my face. Only backstage was there some relief. There, I was briefly introduced to the acclaimed actress Ellen Terry.

Dressed in costume, she looked like a Grecian goddess fallen from the lofty heights of Olympus. Older than me by almost a decade, taller, too, she was lithe yet buxom. Her burnished hair fell in waves down to her waist. Her eyes, which danced with merriment, scaled me from top to bottom. 'Oh, my God,' she exclaimed in a wonderfully husky and surprisingly deep voice, 'you're as disgustingly beautiful as they say.'

Before I could utter a word, she grabbed my shoulders and kissed both my cheeks. 'You smell lovely, too.' She smiled, a huge one that brought out her dimples.

'Not as lovely as you, Mrs Terry,' I said.

She gave a delightful laugh. 'Ah, a woman who also says the right thing. I should probably hate you, but I can tell we're going to be great friends.' She took my hands in hers. They were cool, long-fingered, soft. I didn't want her to let go.

'Well,' I managed to say, dazzled. 'Hate is such a good foundation on which to build a relationship, I'm sure we will be.'

Mrs Terry baulked, then burst out laughing. 'I must dash – time for Ophelia to die.' She rested a hand on Bram's chest. 'Your wife is enchanting. Make sure you invite me to your flat soon.'

Quite overcome, I waved farewell, but as I was introduced to some of the backstage crew, I found myself thinking about Ellen Terry.

I was exchanging pleasantries with the stage manager, a personable stretch of a fellow with a ridiculous moustache, Mr Henry Joseph 'call me Harry' Loveday, when Mr Irving appeared.

'Ah,' he said, pulling up short when he saw me.

'Hello, Mr Irving,' I said sweetly. 'It's the Wife. Bram is showing me around your Lyceum.'

Mr Irving frowned. 'I don't like visitors backstage.'

‘Oh,’ I exclaimed merrily, ‘I’m hardly a visitor, am I? I’m part of the Lyceum family, surely?’ I shot Bram a conspiratorial look.

Mr Irving batted away my question, only to replace it with one of his own. ‘So, what do you think of my grand old lady?’

I took my time responding. ‘Like you,’ I began, ‘it’s not what I expected.’

Mr Irving turned to Bram. ‘I need you to supervise the chandeliers being hung.’ He flashed his teeth in my direction. ‘I’m afraid your husband is needed elsewhere, Mrs Stoker.’

‘He always is,’ I said agreeably to Mr Irving’s back – he was already halfway down the passage with Mr Loveday, who was more focussed on the rapidly issued instructions than saying goodbye.

Bram watched him leave, clearly torn. ‘Go, Bram, you’re needed elsewhere,’ I said. ‘Thank you for the tour; I enjoyed it very much.’ An image of Mrs Terry rose.

‘This way,’ he said, taking my arm and escorting me to the Wellington Street entrance. ‘The rain is heavy. I’ll hail you a cab.’

Once home, I thought back on my visit. It did give me a fresh appreciation of what Bram had been doing, the work involved, but it still didn’t entirely explain why it took such precedence over our life. Why Mr Irving did. Nor did it explain why Bram became a completely different person in his company. Where was the man who courted me? The charming, attentive one who was so assured, so determined to win my admiration? He’d been replaced by a man who bestowed nothing more than wholesome kisses and brotherly hugs. Did Bram regret marrying me? Would he have been so quick to propose if he’d known the life awaiting him in London? How much Mr Irving would want him? Was the Wife proving to be an impediment?

More importantly, knowing what I did now, would I have married him?

CHAPTER ELEVEN

30 December 1878

The gently falling snow gave the night a fairytale quality as we alighted the brougham. George held tight to my arm so I didn't slip on the icy surface of the road. Perhaps inevitably, Bram had been unable to escort me to the opening night of the Lyceum as planned.

He'd come home late afternoon for a bath, a quick meal, and to change into the suit he'd had tailored especially for the occasion. As he was dressing, there was a knock on the front door.

I was seated on the edge of his bed, nursing his jacket while he fastened his shirt. He'd been telling me about the final rehearsal, how well it had gone, how the last sawhorse and drop sheet had been removed.

Bram was in a fine mood – slightly nervous, but who wouldn't be in his shoes? Those few short weeks of long days and endless nights; all the planning, the expense, the labour, buttering up various lords, wealthy businessmen and members of parliament, influential men who would draw an audience in their wake, would culminate in a matter of hours. Though Bram looked handsome in his finery, his cheeks were colourless above his beard, his eyes shadowed. I don't think I was the only one who'd be grateful when the demands upon him eased.

Voices echoed in the hall followed by a light knock on the bedroom door.

'Sir? There's another message for you.'

Before I could react, Bram opened the door and retrieved it.

'Thank you, Emma.' He crossed to the window, flashing me an apologetic smile. Standing in what remained of the light, he unfolded the piece of paper and scanned the few lines.

‘It’s from Henry,’ he explained, as if he needed to. ‘I’m wanted at the theatre.’ He passed the note over.

Kyrle Bellew struck by hansom. Find replacement. H.

‘Who’s Kyrle Bellew?’ I asked.

‘The actor who plays Osric.’

‘Oh no!’ I exclaimed. I recalled meeting a broad-chested fellow with angelic curls and porcelain skin. ‘I hope he’s alright.’

‘Henry will be at sixes and sevens,’ said Bram, swiftly running a brush through his thick hair.

‘I meant Mr Bellew.’ I placed the note on the bedside table, on top of the three that had already been delivered since he’d come home.

‘Sorry, Florrie.’ He ducked to examine his reflection in the mirror on the dresser. He’d been to the barber earlier that morning and his hair and beard were neatly trimmed. ‘I thought I could relax while you dressed, that I’d be able to escort you, but I’ll have to make haste.’

‘It’s alright. I understand; this needs your attention. George will accompany me.’

He stretched out his arm for the jacket. I held it open, and he shrugged it on. I smoothed the sleeves and began rearranging his cravat into neater folds. I kept my expression neutral even though my insides were roiling. This was meant to be our big night – my first public appearance as Mrs Bram Stoker. It was hard not to feel as if the moment had been stolen.

At least, I consoled myself, this note had conveyed something critical.

It was just as well Bram couldn’t be my consort, for I’d no doubt this wouldn’t be the first or last time, so I’d better grow accustomed. Bram had worked hard for this night – and, in all fairness, so had Mr Irving.

I stepped back slightly to admire him, pinching the folds of the kerchief sprouting from his pocket. ‘Now I’ve more time to make myself beautiful.’

Bram’s hands folded over the top of mine, stilling them. ‘You don’t need another second, Mrs Stoker. You heard what Ellen said. And she hasn’t stopped since.’

How could I forget. *Disgustingly beautiful*. An oxymoron if ever there was one.

‘I doubt anyone will even notice the stage. Maybe it’s best you wait until the lights are dimmed before you make an entrance.’ He bent and kissed me chastely.

I stood like a stunned coney. Where had this flattery come from? Before I could wish him well, he departed.

I lay atop his bed and stared at the ceiling. The afternoon had become grey and dull as the light diminished and snow began to fall, striking the glass and leaving dirty streaks resembling tears. I rolled over, tucking my hands under the pillow. The clock in the hallway ticked loudly, its steady rhythm a contrast to my flustered thoughts. I could smell Bram in the bedclothes – a musky, earthy maleness.

Excluding the oft bitter words we'd have before he went to work each day, and the few we'd exchange when he came home (apologies, mostly), this was the longest we'd spoken. It was also the most time I'd spent in his bedroom and the first time I'd lain on his bed. Apart from our awkward wedding night, when we'd clumsily consummated our marriage, there'd been no more attempts at intimacy.

My body grew hot, not with lustful memories, but disappointment. What happened between us on our wedding night was worse than I'd ever imagined. The press and slap of flesh, the pungent smells, the involuntary wetness, the facial expressions, the odd noises. Once it began, I'd just wanted it over. The awkwardness afterwards, as if a dreadful faux pas had been committed, was even worse. Bram had thanked me – so formal after what we'd done – then, bless the Lord, rolled away.

It hadn't felt like love, or even lust. It was so … impersonal, perfunctory. A matter of duty. I lay awake for hours after, listening to his breathing, his faint snores, thinking about the time and effort that had gone into making my underclothes attractive – the lace, the satin ribbons – trying to look and smell heavenly. What a waste. He hadn't even sought to undress me. Neither had he removed his shirt or breeches. He'd snuffed out the candles so the room was dark, then, after a couple of kisses, where he pressed his lips to mine as one might a dear relation, raised my shift, found the gap in my bloomers and, after fiddling with the fastenings in his trousers, sought to put his not very hard member into my cunny.

I'd been very dry. He'd pressed himself against my inner thigh but was too soft to have any effect. He lowered his hand, gripping his cock, and began to move it rhythmically. After a moment, he was harder. Not a word was spoken between us. Outside the wind howled and shook the window. I could hear the faint wail of a baby; the lament of a tomcat. I bit my lip so as not to cry out as he breached my defences. I'd been warned it would hurt,

but not how much it would burn. Nor was I prepared for how ignominious I'd feel. Through half-closed eyes, I watched as he rose and fell above me, as if he was using his instrument to pump air into me. He looked … ridiculous.

Finally he stopped, shuddered, and I felt a rush of liquid warmth.

He withdrew, rolled off me, kissed me on the cheek and said, 'Thank you, dear. Now, you are truly my wife. We are one, Mrs Stoker.'

I think I mumbled something suitable in reply. After I was certain he was asleep, I rose, wiped away the mixture of my blood and his seed, the symbols of our union, and lay down cautiously, trying hard not to wake him lest he wish to repeat what he'd just done.

I recalled thinking, Is that it? That's what I'd saved myself for?

It was then my treacherous memory first invoked Oscar. Those chiselled lips, his passion-filled eyes, the involuntary moan he'd elicit whenever he held me. The church, the park, the long, deep kisses, the way he bit my neck, nibbled my ear, pressed me to him so I could feel *him*. How I'd melt into his embrace, throw aside my modesty and scorch and ache. I'd believed that it would be the same with my husband …

A few days later, we were in Birmingham. Nothing happened between us there, despite sharing a bed. Once we arrived in London, we had our separate bedrooms, and he hadn't attempted to make us one again.

A part of me was thankful. Another so damn uncertain. I'd hoped that caresses were something I'd enjoy with him. Bram Stoker was a handsome man. Everyone said so. Amiable, too. One had only to see the way Mrs Daw and Emma responded to him, not to mention Mr Irving. Did Bram not find me desirable? Or was it my oft strident words about his 'Chief' that deterred him? But I'd a right to speak my mind, surely? What if he regarded coupling with me an obligation he'd now fulfilled? Did marriage alter a man's desire?

The reprehensible voice in my heart said, 'Not Oscar's.'

It became a refrain I couldn't silence, one that grew louder, especially now I'd turned the painting in the drawing room around again and saw Oscar's name every time I sat before it. If Bram had seen it, he made no mention.

One evening, when Bram was with Mr Irving, Mrs Daw had left and Emma was upstairs in her room, I closed my bedroom door and, disrobing,

studied my nakedness in a mirror. I wanted to ensure there was nothing wrong with me. I lifted my heavy hair from my shoulders and dropped it again, stroking the line of my collarbone. My nipples grew when I tweaked them. I wasn't fashionably formed, being tall and slender; more Rossetti than Rubens. I ran my fingers lightly over my stomach, causing my flesh to goose, my lips to part. My mound was covered with a small but soft growth of chestnut hair. I tugged gently at the tiny curls, causing a tingling sensation deep in my belly.

As I lay alone upon Bram's bed, memories of Oscar filling me with torrid sensations, I was tempted to touch myself again. Until images of Bram rushing out of the house to be with Mr Irving extinguished any desire. Where was my passion for my husband? Was it my fault any spark between us was doused? Or was the real culprit Henry Irving?

Unable to sort my thoughts, I had begun picking up the clothes Bram had carelessly discarded. After all, whatever my conflicted feelings, I'd vowed to be a dutiful wife. *The Wife*.



Now the great day had arrived and I couldn't take my eyes off the building looming before me. The Lyceum was an altogether different prospect from when I saw it just three days ago.

Above me, soaring ivory columns rose to hold aloft the grand portico. The faces of the bedazzled patrons arriving reflected my own – open-mouthed, oohing and aahing with excitement. It was as if we were entering a Grecian temple, built to the gods of old, and I was a priestess about to worship at the altar of Dionysius. We crossed the threshold and passed through the ornate doors.

Though I knew Mr Irving had spent thousands remodelling the interior, pounds and pence couldn't convey the craft and finesse involved as George and I floated upon lush carpets, clutched shining bannisters, moved through carved doorways and into the vast auditorium. Gone was the dust, the dirt, the peeling paint and plaster, the faded palette of days gone by. In their place was glorious colour. Sapphire and emerald fabric, replete with ruby whorls, covered the rows and rows of seats. The expansive walls were resplendent with painted peacocks. Above, a duck-egg blue and gold ceiling stared down benignly, an old queen welcoming back her subjects. Scallop

shells encased the footlights around the stage, wine-coloured lampshades flickered between seats and brass railings glimmered, demarcating the stalls. Scents of lavender, lemon, beeswax and a slight hum of metal floated in the air. Gentle melodies escaped the orchestra pit, forming a perfect accompaniment. While reminiscent of Dublin's Gaiety Theatre, the Lyceum was an altogether grander prospect. It was completely breathtaking, like being in a fairytale palace.

A young usher in an Eton suit showed us to our seats, not too far above the stage. The moment we sat, I searched the auditorium for Bram.

'I don't know whether people are bewitched more by the interior or you,' said George, shuffling as close as our seats would allow. His whiskers tickled my ear.

I regarded him with astonishment, then immediately peered around.

'Don't stare,' hissed George, nodding and smiling at someone over my shoulder.

Of course, I did just that, gazing at the patrons manoeuvring between rows and boxes to their seats. People were gawking. Some were even standing and pointing. One woman in a large feather headpiece, which made her appear part of the muster of wallpaper peacocks, grabbed the sleeve of the nearest usher.

'Who, pray, is that young woman over there?' she boomed, aiming a heavily ringed finger in my direction.

'That's Mrs Bram Stoker,' said the usher.

My name echoed as other patrons whispered to each other. '*Mrs Bram Stoker, Mrs Bram, that's Stoker's wife*.'

My cheeks burned.

'Who's Bram Stoker?' asked the woman dismissively, before the usher pointed towards the top of the stairs. Ah, there he was, shaking hands, bowing, welcoming the throng. He looked magnificent. Important.

Who's Bram Stoker? The richly dressed woman with large bosoms had asked. I'll tell you. He's the man who day after day, night after night, prepared this theatre in record time for the likes of you, my lady, that's who. I took in the lights, the splendid decor, the appreciative murmurs and exclamations, the music, the filling seats. This was as much Bram's doing as Henry Irving's. An unexpected rush of remorse that I'd been so critical

of his long absences and the endless messages, followed by quiet pride, filled me.

I wanted to say something to George, but he was deep in conversation with a gentleman and his wife beside him. I opened my copy of the program. On the front page, there was Mr Irving's name: *Royal Lyceum Theatre Sole Lessee and Manager*. I turned the page, searching for Bram's. There was the cast, of course. Mr Irving's name appeared next to Hamlet. On and on the list of cast members went. There was Ellen Terry, starring as Ophelia. I wondered who Bram had found to replace Mr Bellew. The various acts and scenes were denoted, followed by the scenic artist, Hawes Craven. Even the stage manager's name was given prominence: Mr HJ Loveday.

I flipped the booklet over and, finally, found Bram. His was the very last name on the back page, at the bottom of the program.

As if he were an afterthought.

'Better get used to it, my goddess,' said George. At first, I thought he was talking about Bram's placement in the program. He gestured towards three men a few rows across who stood and bowed in my direction. He tucked my hand into his arm, laughing. It was so unfair, I thought, all but glowering until I remembered where I was. I smiled, a frosty one that seemed to please the gents no end. Here I was getting all this attention, and most didn't have a clue who Bram was or what he'd done. How those all-important first few weeks of a marriage, which Mother had assured me were when a husband and wife learned about each other, navigated differences and discovered commonalities, had been sacrificed to this theatre and Henry Irving.

I folded the program in half and stuffed it in my reticule. I hadn't uprooted my Dublin life and come to London to be the wife of an afterthought. I watched George poring over his copy of the program and made a pledge to myself then and there that one day, Bram's name would be known – not as a postscript, not on the back page of a playbill or as a jack-in-office to a 'strolling player', no matter how famous – but in its own right.

I was jolted out of my thoughts when George half-stood and waved towards the pits.

'You're enjoying this.' I chuckled as more people stood to gawp. I resisted the urge to fan my face.

‘Too right I am,’ he said, retaking his seat. ‘It’s not every day a man like me gets to escort the loveliest being in London anywhere, let alone to the opening night of the theatre his brother manages.’

I tensed, but George wasn’t being ironic.

‘Relax,’ he said, patting my arm. ‘Enjoy the notice. Bram’ll be chuffed when I tell him. Unless, of course, the unthinkable happens.’

‘What’s that?’ I asked, as the lights began to dim, and the thirty-piece orchestra grew in volume.

George leaned over and whispered conspiratorially, ‘The play’s a flop.’

CHAPTER TWELVE

The play wasn't a flop. It was a huge success with at least four curtain calls (not counting the times Mr Irving appeared before the curtains at the end of every single act). He was a marvellous Hamlet. Likewise, Ellen Terry was a magnificent Ophelia. I was enthralled not just by the performances and the music, but the way the actors breathed life into the words. I felt Hamlet's rage at his uncle and mother burrow into my soul, I flinched when the sword entered Polonius, and I wept for Ophelia's mute grief and Hamlet's tortured soul.

After the play finished and the thrilled audience made their chittering, shuffling way to the exits, Bram had an usher bring George and me backstage to join him. He was in Mr Irving's dressing room, which was crowded with those wanting to congratulate the man – not just on the theatre but his performance. Forced to wait in the corridor, listening to the rise and fall of voices, the shrill laughter, the deep guffawing, I could see Bram nodding and smiling, shaking hands.

Mrs Terry appeared briefly in a flurry of perfume and feathers, a sea of salutations inundating her. She saw me standing back and beckoned me forward with a warm smile.

'Ah, Mrs Stoker, how lovely to see you again. Did you enjoy the play?'

I took her outstretched hands in mine. 'I did, Mrs Terry. I did. You were simply remarkable as Ophelia. So convincing, I'm surprised to see you alive *and* dry.'

She laughed wickedly, a deep gurgle that drew one from me as well.

'An actress is only as good as her leading man —' She gestured towards Mr Irving's dressing room. 'And I'm blessed to have the best.'

'I think the blessing goes both ways, Mrs Terry,' I said, and meant it.

Much to my surprise, she kissed my cheek. Her breath was warm, and she smelled of happiness and grease paint. The hair against my nape

tingled.

‘Lovely in every way, aren’t you,’ she said softly, and only then released my hands. It took some restraint not to press one to my breast. ‘How are you settling into London? Bram boasts about what you’ve done to the flat in Southampton Street.’

‘You must come and see it,’ I said impulsively.

‘I will,’ she said, and before I could add anything else, or introduce her to George, who was clearing his throat and doing all in his power to attract my attention, she was led away by a short man with a pronounced limp and a booming voice.

‘The finest Ophelia ever to grace London,’ he declared, waving his hat about.

Oddly, I was almost shy when Mr Irving’s dressing room finally cleared and George and I could enter. George strode straight over to Bram, who was sorting through a battalion of cards – invitations mostly – piled on Mr Irving’s dresser. He slapped his brother on the back, then shook Mr Irving’s hand. I remained near the door.

Sat before the dressing table, surrounded by the subdued glow of lanterns, Mr Irving was wrapped in a shiny green robe and still wore his stage makeup. The air was ripe with tobacco, violets and sweat.

It’s one thing to feel indignant if not downright angry towards someone in their absence, it’s quite another to find yourself face to face with that person, especially when reluctant admiration is added to your otherwise ambivalent feelings.

‘Ah, Mrs Stoker,’ said Mr Irving, spying me in the mirror and motioning me closer. Bram nodded encouragingly, dropping a kiss on my cheek, before returning his attention to the invitations and cards. He tilted his head towards George who was muttering away. ‘I trust you enjoyed tonight’s performance?’

I stood behind Mr Irving. The top of his head came almost to my chin. ‘I thought it was splendid,’ I said. ‘I was just saying as much to Mrs Terry.’

He swiped a large cloth across his cheek, starting to remove the thick greasepaint. It was a strange sight, watching the Prince of Denmark smeared across both fabric and face, a co-mingling of man and character. His eyes locked on mine, waiting for me to say more. The silence grew heavy between us. George’s voice was a background drone.

‘I thought *you* were superb,’ I admitted.

Mr Irving gave an enormous toothy grin. He put down the cloth, now striped vermillion, charcoal and chestnut, and spun around, giving me his full attention. ‘How very kind of you to say so, Mrs Stoker.’

I was about to add more when he continued.

‘Did you know, it’s *Hamlet* that brought me and your husband together?’

‘Oh?’ I glanced at Bram, who remained unaware of the conversation beside him.

‘Bram saw me play the prince in Dublin – would have been over two years ago, well before he met you.’ Mr Irving stuck a finger in his ear and wriggled it a few times. ‘He was so enamoured of me, my performance, I mean —’ he chuckled, examined his finger then wiped it on the cloth, ‘that he wrote a stellar review —’

I didn’t admit I’d read it, nor that I’d found it bordered on obsequiousness. We’d made fun of it at home.

‘Well, I had to meet the man who clearly understood and appreciated my talent, the artistry involved.’ He gave a flourish.

I followed the arc of his hand, taking in the costume rack with its gilded jackets, dun-coloured robes, hats, furs, boots, various weapons, and jewels, the lanterns catching every surface, creating a landscape of shadows and glimmering light. The pots of face paint, brushes, powders, bottles of scent, nestled like a small village on a wasteland of fabric and wood. Piles of paper sat yellowing on a chair. A thick coat was draped across another. A chaise lounge against a wall was buried under swatches of glittering materials. Bram said that Henry’s goal was to bring real repute to the theatre, to have it upheld as serious art and its practitioners as bona fide artistes. Hence the fortune spent on sets, costumes and props. The jewels sparkling in the crowns that dangled from the hatstand near the door weren’t paste. Likewise, the kingly robes that hung on the rack were lined with real ermine, the gold and silver cups the Danish royal household drank from on stage were the genuine article. All that glisters in Henry Irving’s world *was* gold.

‘We’ve been inseparable ever since, really,’ he said, flashing a smile at Bram. ‘Haven’t we, Brammie?’

Brammie?

‘’Tis true,’ admitted Bram, beaming fondly at the man. How he could listen to both George and Mr Irving simultaneously might have been something to admire if he’d shown the same faculty at home. ‘I’ve said it before, and in print, your Hamlet was unparalleled. Still is. But it was your recitation of the poem “Eugene Aram” that I’ll never forget.’

Mr Irving nodded solemnly. ‘Nor I, dear fellow. Nor I.’ He turned back to the mirror, plunged the cloth into a washbasin and wrung it out before applying it to his face again.

I’d heard something of this recital from others – how Bram had become all but hysterical after Mr Irving finished and committed himself to the actor’s cause that very night. How had Bram explained it to me when we were courting? ‘Soul looked into soul.’ The description had rattled me, and still did.

From the sly gleam in Mr Irving’s eye, he was making sure I was reminded of Bram’s pledge to him, a pledge akin to a marriage vow.

‘Shall we leave Mr Irving to his toilette, Bram?’ I asked. There was a beat. Bram stared at me blankly. ‘It’s late,’ I added. ‘Let us go home, dear.’ I was looking forward to discussing the play, hearing any gossip, too. I also wanted to tell him that I’d met the wonderful librettist, William Gilbert, and his wife Lucy. Seated next to George, they’d introduced themselves during interval. Before I could change my mind, I’d invited them for afternoon tea at the flat.

‘Home?’ His expression would have been comical had he not been so obviously thwarted. ‘I’m afraid I’ve agreed to supper at the Garrick with George and Henry …’

Perhaps realising his mistake, Bram swiftly dissembled. ‘Of course. I’ll take you home, Florrie. I’ll join you gentlemen at the club later.’

‘Make sure you do. The adoring crowds are expecting us,’ said Mr Irving, trying to disguise his smirk. ‘*All* of us.’

‘Not all,’ I corrected with a syrup-smile.

I was about to take my leave when Mr Irving twisted about on his stool again.

‘Brammie tells me you’ve an interest in treading the boards, Mrs Stoker.’

Just as anger propelled me towards the door, hope, followed by suspicion, gave me pause. I slowly spun about. What was Mr Irving up to?

‘Someone once suggested I might consider it —’ I didn’t admit it was Oscar and his friend Frank Miles, the artist. They’d spent time with the actress Lillie Langtry in London. Seeking to flatter me, they told me that my looks meant I was also destined for the stage. I’d told Bram what was said, but not the source.

‘I think we might be able to accommodate you,’ said Mr Irving, his eyes raking me top to toe.

Despite my wariness, and the fact I’d never seriously contemplated acting, dreams took flight. The rack of costumes beckoned, the pastes and unguents, the dazzle of rubies and diamonds. The orchestra struck up another tune in my head. Applause drowned me.

‘Mention it to Harry, will you, Brammie?’ said Mr Irving with a sharp gesture. ‘As soon as a suitable play is being cast, we’ll arrange a part for your wife.’

My heart thundered. I could scarce believe what I was hearing.

‘It won’t matter if she lacks talent,’ continued Mr Irving, captivated by his reflection again. ‘She’ll give the patrons something lovely to look at. She’s quite a vision, *the Wife*.’ He gave a dark chuckle.

Before I could summon a suitable retort, Bram grabbed my wrist and rushed me from the room.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Hamlet ran for six months. Mr Irving's praises were sung across London. How he'd given the Bard a new lease of life. He was suddenly the brightest star in the London theatre firmament.

What so many failed to see as the dazzle grew – and Mr Irving did nothing to turn their eyes in a different direction – was that the main reason Mr Irving and the play shone was Bram.

It was Bram who came up with the idea of running advertisements in all the right newspapers, not just for the current show, but entire seasons. This meant, for the first time, advance bookings could be made. He ensured reviewers were looked after when they attended and tactfully thanked them when their critiques were published. He made sure playbills were posted about town and kept the actors enthusiastic and paid. He ensured the doors opened on time each night and that the play started at eight o'clock sharp. He used every connection he was making to keep seats filled. He also knew where everyone who was anyone was seated, greeting them by name and earning their admiration and respect. This made important patrons feel even more special because he welcomed and escorted them to their seats. Afterwards, these same folk were invited backstage for a personal tour and to meet the cast.

If he wasn't answering the multitude of letters Mr Irving received every day, or responding to his boss's constant messages, he was dealing with tradesmen, sending out invitations, accepting them, and even writing speeches for Mr Irving to deliver at the many functions they attended most nights after performances. Sometimes, Bram was asked to speak as well, something he enjoyed, but which absorbed more time.

Bram also made a point of reading every single play submitted to the Lyceum for consideration. I was astonished by the number. Who knew there were so many budding playwrights in London and abroad?

‘Most are rubbish,’ said Bram dismissively when I exclaimed at the size of the stack on his desk at home. ‘It’s no wonder Henry sticks to Shakespeare. At least that way, we’re guaranteed quality.’

‘Don’t let Mr Gilbert hear you say that,’ I said. Gilbert (as he insisted I call him) had made a name for himself with several successful comic operas. Since meeting him and Lucy, we’d visited each other’s homes and, sans Bram, taken strolls along the Embankment, and a trip to London’s Gaiety Theatre, where Henry Irving started his career and where Gilbert’s very first collaboration with his long-time partner, the composer Arthur Sullivan, had debuted. George and I had seen *HMS Pinafore* at the Opera Comique and adored it.

Whereas Gilbert was often quite prickly (though never towards me) and would make the most outrageous observations about people, making me chortle, Lucy was quiet and oh so patient, though according to Gilbert, she had a temper like a Pomeranian – sharp and snappy. They were both older than me and Bram, with eleven years between them as well. It was clear they were devoted to each other (he called her ‘Kitty’), and I would listen to their banter, see his solicitude towards his wife with a feeling akin to envy, wondering if Bram and I would ever be so loving.

Yet, as much as I enjoyed my burgeoning friendship with the Gilberts and was grateful for brother George’s willingness to accompany me on outings when he was free, it was the man I married, who was held in such esteem by those entering our orbit, I wanted to get to know, which meant spending time with him – not just at home, but at the theatre, the river, the markets, a salon … anywhere, really. Even bed.

Anywhere Henry Irving couldn’t find him for a while.



Bram was home briefly the day Oscar’s mother, Lady Jane Wilde, came for tea. She’d not long moved to London, and when I ran into her at Covent Garden, I was afraid our encounter would be awkward. But when she practically invited herself over, I worried what Bram would say. I needn’t have been concerned. He’d been friends with the Wilde family for years and was excited to see Lady Jane again.

She waltzed into the flat, flummoxing Emma and leaving Mrs Daw slack-jawed. Dressed head to toe in black, including that towering mantilla,

she had a slash of bright colour on her lips and cheeks and looked more like a music hall artiste than a titled lady. After making appreciative noises about the drawing room, the little cakes Mrs Daw had made especially, and the new tea set I'd bought for the occasion, when she saw Oscar's painting, she plucked it off the mantelpiece and pressed it to her considerable bosom.

'My boy has such talent,' she said. 'Except when it comes to recognising an excellent woman escaped him.' She gave me a pointed look. 'Mind you, Bram, as I told Florence,' she carefully replaced the painting and faced my husband, 'you were always the better bet. You're possessed of an excellent character, and you never get into debt.'

'Give me time,' said Bram, arching a brow at the expensive teapot I was pouring from.

I was still chuckling when I passed Lady Jane her tea.

After that successful visit, and following Lady Jane's advice, I began to extend invitations to some of the people I met at the Lyceum. My gatherings were always small – the flat wouldn't allow too many. The Gilberts became delightful regulars and, in turn, included me in their circle. I always looked forward to Ellen's visits, and as the months passed, she would come by every other Sunday. Not only did she have a sunny disposition, she was a repository of gossip about the Lyceum. With a knowing look, she'd sit on the sofa and regale me with stories.

'You met Baroness Angela Burdett-Coutts, Henry's main investor, yes?'

'I have.' A fabulously wealthy and generous woman, she was known for her sizeable donations to charity as well as her patronage of theatre and the arts.

'Well,' continued Ellen, 'she's a terrible flirt – loves the young men, but her companion of countless years, who only recently died, was a woman who used to be her governess. They lived together.' She paused. 'Just the two of them.' She paused again. 'For over fifty years. Makes you wonder, doesn't it?' Ellen waggled her brows.

'You think they were —?'

'Don't you?' said Ellen suggestively, and we both gave gasps of mock dismay.

While I knew love between two men was considered a danger to society, Sapphic passion wasn't taken nearly as seriously. Sodomy was a criminal act, a punishable offence, and those labelled sodomites reviled as

deviants. Something told me that in sharing this tidbit about the baroness, Ellen was testing me, a test that, as the afternoon wore on, I comfortably passed.

There was a time not so long ago when I would have failed. The notion of two women or men in love would have shocked me, until my attitude was forever altered by Oscar.

On one of his trips back to Dublin, Oscar had introduced me to his friend, the artist Frank Miles. The way Mr Miles looked at him, the way he flirted and gushed, made me both uncomfortable and slightly amused. I felt sorry for him, especially when it was obvious his feelings weren't reciprocated. Oscar was only being polite when he tolerated his touch, the shared smiles and soulful eyes. When I mentioned Mr Miles's behaviour the next time I saw Oscar, his obvious affection, and how kind Oscar was to endure his attentions, especially when such behaviour would be widely condemned, Oscar loaned me a copy of Plato's *Symposium*.

'Read this, Florrie,' he said, pressing the thin book into my hands. 'Then you will understand why it's not a matter of me tolerating anything, let alone having any right to judge. Frank has no more control over where he bestows his feelings than you or I. As Aristophanes explains.' He tapped the book. 'Read it, please. For me.'

That night, curled up in bed, Phil and I read it together.

The story takes place at a banquet where several Athenian men take it in turns to give speeches in praise of the god of love and sex, Eros. One of the men is Aristophanes, who describes how humans used to be ungainly spheres, comprised of four arms and four legs until one day, in an act of vengeance at mortal hubris, Zeus split them in half. From that day forward, the incomplete beings spent their lives searching for their other half. Mostly, men seek women, but sometimes divided creatures search for a member of their own sex to achieve that lost sense of wholeness.

Phil and I didn't speak for a while after we finished.

'So, according to Aristophanes,' I began hesitantly, 'we're all searching for our other half.'

'Our soul mate, whoever, he —'

'Or she —' I added.

'Might be,' completed Phil. She found my hand and held it tightly. 'I'd never conceived of it like that before.'

‘Me neither. How could we, when we’re told it’s wrong?’ I said softly.

‘That God punishes those who love their own sex.’

‘God?’ Phil queried. ‘Or man?’

‘Both.’

We fell silent again.

‘Do you think Oscar’s your other half?’ asked Phil eventually. ‘Is that why he gave you this to read?’

‘I don’t know. I hope so,’ I admitted. ‘Unless he’s Frank’s.’ I harrumphed.

Phil made a strange noise deep in her throat. ‘What if he was, Kitten?’

‘Don’t be ridiculous!’

I waited for Phil to offer a reassuring titter. Instead, she rolled towards me, a serious expression on her face. ‘Do you think we’re immoral for not condemning that kind of love? That Oscar is?’

I shrugged. ‘I don’t feel wrong.’

‘Me neither. Will God punish us, do you think?’

‘I don’t think so. I mean, the Bible tells us that God *is* love. How can He be only one kind of love and not … others? Perhaps that’s the point the story is trying to make, that Oscar’s making. God doesn’t condemn *love*, no matter who it’s directed towards. And if God doesn’t judge, then what right have we to?’

‘Amen,’ whispered Phil.



Love was again the subject when Ellen arrived for her sixth visit to the flat. She was in a peculiar mood, all rainclouds and mizzle.

‘Is anything wrong, Ellen?’ I asked after she’d spent more time gazing into the distance and sighing than chatting.

‘Everything,’ she moaned, and scootched up on the sofa, leaning heavily against me. It was hard to concentrate and not just because of all the claret we’d drunk.

‘Can you keep a secret, Lemon?’ When Ellen learned one of my middle names was Lemon, she’d adopted it immediately, telling me how much I resembled the fruit – sweet to look at with a tart bite.

‘I think so,’ I offered cautiously. *If you didn’t count my sister Phil*. There wasn’t much I didn’t disclose in my letters to her.

‘Well,’ she began, taking a healthy sip of wine. Her lips were stained cherry-red. ‘On the night *Hamlet* opened —’ She paused and drew closer, her breath hot on my ear. ‘Henry Irving and I became lovers.’

I recoiled in shock. ‘You *didn’t*.’

‘We did.’ She threw up her hands. ‘I don’t know what came over me, but I succumbed to his overtures faster than a Picadilly dollymop. Not even his ugly ear gave me pause.’

‘Ugly ear?’

‘Haven’t you noticed?’ She touched her own little shells. ‘It’s quite misshapen. Still, when I shut my eyes …’ She giggled and poured more wine. ‘I don’t think anyone knows yet. Well, maybe Bram —’

‘If he does, he hasn’t told me.’ Seems my husband was good at keeping confidences.

‘Really?’ Ellen expressed surprise, but I could tell she wasn’t. ‘I expect it will be common knowledge soon … Thing is, I’m worried how the players will react.’

‘If you were a chorus girl, they might not like it. But you’re the famous Ellen Terry, his leading lady.’ I gave her hand a reassuring squeeze. ‘You’ve just taken your onstage partnership offstage.’

Ellen bestowed a bright smile. ‘That’s true, isn’t it?’

‘Anyway, you’re not hurting anyone.’

Her smile dimmed. ‘No. *I’m* not. That’s Henry’s purview.’

Before I could ask how he was hurting her, she changed the subject.

It was hard to reconcile the relationship: the light-hearted, delightful Ellen, who was a joy to be around, and Mr Irving, the personification of a winter fog. Thank goodness he only visited the flat once. He much preferred Bram to come to him. Ellen explained that Mr Irving, for all his sociability when it was anything to do with the theatre, preferred his own company outside of it. This was offered as a salve lest I was offended he didn’t accept Bram’s invitations. I wasn’t. I was thankful.

The more I thought about the odd pairing of Ellen and Mr Irving (and I did a great deal), the more I became convinced Ellen was attracted not so much to Mr Irving as to his enormous talent and drive; the characters he played on stage, too. Perhaps it was the same with the baroness, Harry

Loveday, and Mr Irving's devoted valet, Walter Collinson, a strange little man, all of whom appeared to tolerate his rather shabby treatment. But didn't we all? Fall in love with the parts people played?

I wondered what part I was playing. Or was it my husband who was playing a role?

If he was, it was one being written by Mr Irving.



Late that winter, Bram's older sister, Matilda, came to live with us, squeezing into Mrs Daw's sometime bedroom until she found lodgings of her own. She spent most of her days in the drawing room, sitting by the window, composing wonderful sketches of the street and the people who inhabited it. I'd been quite concerned how I'd manage living in a nest of Stokers, but as the weeks went by and spring arrived, bringing with it longer days and endless wet, Matilda turned out to be both a good friend and confidante. She loved Bram, but she wasn't blind to his faults. When I inadvertently said something curt after Bram swept out of the house having received another scribbled note from the Chief, she smiled at me in the way slightly older women sometimes do, as if they're privy to some vast secret you've yet to learn. It was a cross between a schoolteacher and grandmother.

'If there's one thing you'll discover about Bram, Florence, if you haven't already, it's that he cannot keep still. He must be doing, doing, moving, moving, prove he's a man of action. Mammy is convinced it arises from him being confined to bed with illness throughout his childhood. Inert for so long, even sleeping is anathema to him. When he's awake, he's always making up for lost time. I think these endless messages from Henry Irving provide him with an excuse to keep active.'

I knew Bram had spent the first seven years of his life as an invalid, looked after by his beloved nurse, Ellen Crone, and his mammy, who filled his head with macabre stories of plagues and death and eerie folk tales. His uncle, a doctor, had treated him with everything from bloodletting (leeches!) and the kind of medicines that would be considered quackery today.

Perhaps Matilda was right, and Bram worried that if he stopped, he might never start again. I needed to be more tolerant. More supportive.

What did I know about men? About marriage? I was twenty years old. I'd been wed six months. My expectations were unrealistic. The last thing I wanted was to turn into a woman whose husband leapt out of a carriage rather than spend another second beside her, who chose not to come home because anywhere else was preferable.

But what did one do when your husband came to your bedroom only when drunk? And then just half a dozen times. Did he sense that for me, being left alone was preferable to what we'd do together? I grew hot with mortification and swiftly pushed the thought away.

While Matilda helped me understand Bram's need to always be working, I wondered would he ever have time to toil on his own behalf and pursue his ambition of becoming a writer. Matilda understood Bram's commitment to the theatre, but she didn't like his unhealthy dedication to Mr Irving. In Bram's sister, I found an unlikely ally.

'Watch that man, Florence,' she said one day, after a careworn Bram charged out of the house in response to yet another message. 'If you're not heedful, if Bram's not, Mr Irving will drain the bloody life out of him. There'll be nothing left for you.'

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

London, June 1879

I pressed my hand against my now thankfully empty belly while I used the other to blot the tears from my cheeks. Mrs Daw, who was holding my hair out of the way as I bent over a washbasin, passed me a wet cloth.

'Have ye told him yet, Mrs S?' she asked.

I drew the cool towel across my face, pressing it into my eyes. 'No, not yet.' My throat was raw. 'I wanted to make sure first.'

Mrs Daw made a clucking noise and, releasing my hair, draped a cloth over the pungent bowl. She looked pointedly at my swollen breasts and the slight swell of my stomach. 'If ye wait any longer, it'll trot over to the master and call him da.'

I released a very unladylike belch. She was right. But once I told Bram, my condition would be real.

The rattle of carriages and coaches, the low drone of street talk, interspersed with some sharp whistles, drifted in the open window. A dull, deep horn sounded – shipping upon the river. There was the faint trill of birds. Summer was upon us, not that the weather had been notified yet. The light delayed its departure a little longer each day, but the rain and cold decided to remain. It made shopping a singularly unpleasant task, especially as Matilda and I had to rely on the crowded omnibuses to take us to our preferred stores. How could I leave the house, let alone shop, when I had my own growing baggage to carry?

While Mrs Daw fussed, I sat in the chair by the window. Would this be my lot once my pregnancy was revealed? Confined to the flat, unable to entertain, to visit, to roam anywhere? My eyes alighted on the vase of geraniums upon the dresser. The scent had been faint, but with the door

closed, and mingled with the sickly-sweet odour rising from the basin, it was altogether cloying. My stomach flipped.

Carrying a child meant I'd be restricted in every sense of the word, and the life I was just starting to make for myself would become insipid, dull, and yes, cloying.

Mrs Daw had to understand, the longer I delayed telling anyone about my state, the longer I was guaranteed some freedom. Nevertheless, I gave her the answer she wanted to hear.

'I'll tell him soon.'

'Make sure ye do, Mrs S,' she said, lifting the basin carefully and screwing up her snub nose. 'I fear if ye don't, either his brother or sister will say something and that wouldn't be right.'

'You think *they* know?'

Mrs Daw chuckled. 'I think everyone except the dear master does, what with you barking like a seal every morn and looking so wan and pale. It's no wonder, mind, what with ye gaddin' about the streets, hosting your teas every other Sunday and the like. A woman in your condition needs rest, and lots of it.'

Mrs Daw had been so excited when she'd found me up-chucking three days in a row. Her reaction would have been heartwarming if I wasn't so afraid. Not just of being restricted, but of the birth itself. One didn't grow up in a large family in a busy neighbourhood like mine without being aware of what happened to a woman when she became pregnant, and the dangers of birthing. I thought of Mother's agony when Alice was born, her sorrow when first Mary, then Maggie, died. Then there were all the other babbies that slipped away in rags or the privy. Mother became so ill after each one. What if this baby never made it either?

When we were very young, Phil and I would ask what happened to the babbie growing inside of Mother, aunty or a neighbour, why it was that one day they were swell-bellied and the next they weren't. We were told the kiddykin was lost.

We'd lie in bed at night, faces close together, and whisper about lost babbies, wondering where they went. They must be very tiny to fall out of the woman, so we imagined them trapped in another part of the body – under the arm, behind a rib, or perhaps escaping out of the belly button or another orifice, the most obvious one not occurring to us then. We decided

lost babbies must go to a special place in heaven, not where Great-grandma and Grandpa, Maggie, Mary or Cousin Bobby Balcombe went, but one with fields of flowers, carpets made of dewdrops and windows of ice-lollies; where angels with rainbow wings would feed and care for them.

Then there was what childbearing did to women. My trim mother gradually turned into a sagging, depleted sack of flesh with heavily stretched breasts and a flabby stomach. It was the same for the women in my Clontarf neighbourhood. Bearing more than two children altered them beyond recognition, stole their youthful svelteness and beauty. Their bodies ceased to be their own and were surrendered to the will of others, to motherhood, before, as time passed, they became invisible.

And what did motherhood mean but a body that oozed, leaked, bled, stretched, ached, was torn asunder and then never put back the same way again? Maybe it was the expression on my face, or my pallor, but Mrs Daw suddenly took pity on me.

'How about I fix ye a nice cup of tea and some toast afore Mr Stoker rises?'

Before I could answer, bile flew into my mouth. In a flash, Mrs Daw had the basin under my chin.

Just in time.



'I'm with child.'

It was midday, Saturday. George was at the hospital; Matilda was in the kitchen, talking to Mrs Daw. Emma was cleaning Bram's study. He'd be leaving for the Lyceum shortly. We'd a moment alone. It was the opportune time to tell him.

That and the fact Mrs Daw threatened to if I didn't.

Bram was enjoying a late breakfast, early luncheon. I blurted out my news then studied his face to gauge his reaction; the burnished whiskers, the shiny hair brushed back from a wise forehead, those clear grey eyes that even now were looking at me as if I'd spoken in a foreign language. Or with forked tongue.

Would our child look like Bram? Or me?

‘Did you hear, Bram?’ I asked as he stared at me uncomprehending. I tried not to look at the kippers floating in some kind of sauce on his plate. I was already breathing through my mouth. The smell alone had turned my stomach over faster than a Covent Garden tumbler. ‘Come Christmas, we’ll be a family of three – or five if George and Matilda are still with us.’

He slowly closed the paper he’d been reading, put down his fork, and dabbed his lips with a napkin.

Outside, a quarrel erupted between two cab drivers. I could see them out of the corner of my eye, flapping their hands, whips waving like ribbons above their heads. Men gathered, the horses uneasy, disliking the raised voices, the flicking switches and shouts. There was a sharp whistle, and a peeler in his smart uniform appeared. As quickly as the affray began, it broke up.

‘I … I … oh my,’ said Bram and blinked furiously.

Any time I’d seen Bram with young ones, he’d been so kind and thoughtful. Ellen’s two children, Edith and Gordon, were often at the theatre and Bram made a great fuss of them, allowing them to play with the paints in the props room, or pull on the ropes that lowered the sandbags and adjusted the flats. I thought then what a good father he’d make. He also did a lot for Mr Irving’s sons, Harry and Laurence, more than their father ever did. As for me being a mother, well, I hadn’t paid the notion any heed and with good reason.

I knew a baby was inevitable. One couldn’t have conjugal relations, even as rarely and uneasily as we did, and not expect consequences. I just hoped we’d have a little longer as a couple; that I’d have more time to grow accustomed to being a wife before I was also a mother. A *mother*!

‘Oh my, indeed,’ I repeated.

He slowly stood and, taking my hand, helped me rise. Then he pulled me into his arms. His heart was beating faster than Hamlet’s drummers at Elsinore Castle.

‘There’ll be much to consider,’ he said.

‘There will.’ I broke free of his hold and moved to the window, where I couldn’t smell his breakfast. I began to number off on my fingers. ‘We’ll need a midwife and doctor, furnish a nursery. Then, there’ll be a nursemaid __’

‘They will cost,’ he said grimly.

I wanted to wipe the frown from his brows. ‘But we can afford it, can’t we?’

‘Yes. Yes, of course.’ He flashed what passed for a reassuring smile, but I could see the calculation behind it. ‘Have you told Phil?’

I shook my head. ‘Not yet.’

‘Your mother?’

‘I haven’t told anyone, except you. Though, Mrs Daw knows, and she suspects your brother and sister might. I … haven’t been well most mornings. You generally weren’t around to hear. Or asleep.’

‘Oh. Forgive me.’

I shrugged. ‘It’s not your fault.’

Bram sat and slowly resumed his breakfast. ‘I suppose we’ll have to tell folk.’

I bit back a laugh. ‘Having a child isn’t exactly something I can hide.’ I smoothed a hand over my stomach.

Bram finished eating in silence.

Cutlery clattered on the plate, and he joined me by the window. We looked down upon the street, side by side, shoulders and arms touching. Below, a parade of people and animals passed. A chimney sweep shedding soot. A child with a kite. A maid with a basket of wilting flowers. Vendors wheeling half-empty carts. Shopkeepers in white aprons standing in doorways with folded arms, surveying the street. Men leading horses, avoiding the puddles or stamping through them. Broughams jounced along The Strand, two diverging to allow an omnibus passage. Life. Together, Bram and I had made a life, one more to join the throng. Surely, this was a joyous occasion, something to celebrate. Why wasn’t I happier? Why wasn’t Bram? Was he as scared as I was? Did he also think we weren’t ready?

‘We don’t need to tell anyone else just yet, do we?’ asked Bram quietly in his lovely brogue.

Relief made my knees weak. I turned to him. ‘No, not yet. We can keep this to ourselves a little longer, though I might have to explain why I can’t abide —’ I waved my hand towards his empty plate. ‘Certain smells and foods.’

‘Ellen is no fool,’ said Bram.

‘Nor Lady Jane nor the Gilberts.’

‘They can have their suspicions.’ He put a finger under my chin, tilting it upwards. ‘We’ve made a baby,’ he whispered, his eyes full of wonder in the rain-pearly light. Wonder, fear and something else.

‘We have,’ I said, and drew his hand down to rest over my midriff. ‘Another Stoker to add to the cast.’

Bram touched his lips to mine briefly. I braced myself lest the kiss deepened, but he drew away.

‘Thank you, Florence. Thank you.’

At last, I thought, I can give my husband something that Henry Irving cannot.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

London, August 1879

‘Bram,’ I said, knocking on his study door gently. ‘This just came for you.’ I pushed the door open to find him bent over his desk, scribbling away. I watched him a moment; the loosened necktie, the tousled hair, his pen moving swiftly across a page. It was Sunday, and at my insistence, Bram was home. But was this writing Lyceum work or the short stories he’d begun to compose?

Bram held out his hand. ‘Henry?’

‘I can’t think who else would send you something on the Lord’s day.’

He read it, then issued a long sigh.

Despite being away for several weeks on a Mediterranean cruise with the baroness over summer, and handing responsibility for the Lyceum to Bram, Mr Irving couldn’t help himself. Every day, letters, telegrams and notes arrived with instructions. If they weren’t delivered to Southampton Street, they were sent to the theatre – I know because an actress who was a longstanding friend of Bram’s from Dublin, Genevieve Ward, told me.

Older than me and Bram, Genevieve had once been an acclaimed opera singer, but a terrible illness had destroyed her voice, so she’d turned to acting. I was quite intimidated at our first meeting. Raven-haired with pale green eyes and very striking, she was also friendly. I wondered if it was because she was born in New York and lacked the arm’s-length attitude of the English. By the time we met, it was impossible to trace her origins through her accent. She’d lived in so many different countries and even been married to a Russian count – a noble who, though he failed to arrive at the church on the wedding day, was later hunted down by her parents and forced to wed her. Immediately after the ceremony, she deserted him. Imagine! Bram had known her for years and leased the Lyceum to her while

the company was in summer recess so she could perform a particular play she had her heart set on. It only ran for four disastrous performances before it was cancelled. Genevieve was devastated. Determined to help, Bram persuaded her to stage another play he thought better suited to her talents, *Forget-Me-Not* by Herman Merivale and FC Grove. It had been a resounding success. Bram convinced her to buy the rights for five years, so when her Lyceum lease ended, she could tour everywhere, including faraway places such as Australia and South Africa.

To celebrate the success of her new play, I'd invited Genevieve to luncheon and asked Bram to ensure he was present. Bram had been at the theatre even more than usual of late, sometimes failing to come home at all. When I asked what was keeping him there, he was offhand. 'Henry might not be around, but the theatre doesn't run itself,' he'd say. Or, 'I'm taking advantage of Henry's absence.' I tried not to dwell on what else Bram was taking advantage of – my gullibility? The other actresses? If I didn't know Genevieve better, I might have been more concerned about that. Bram's distracted air, the heavy pouches under his eyes, his sometimes-unkempt appearance, the fact he'd sleep at the theatre, continued to gnaw at me. What was going on?

'Shall I make your excuses to Genevieve?' I didn't even have the energy to sound cross anymore.

Bram re-read the note. 'If I leave now, I can be back in time to join you both.'

'Really?' I asked, disbelief making my question sharp.

Bram chuckled. 'Really.'

When Genevieve arrived, Bram still wasn't home. I should have known. I apologised for his absence and explained about the note … the *notes*.

We were sitting in armchairs, me with tea, Genevieve with a glass of Cypriot.

Genevieve huffed in exasperation. 'It's the same at the theatre,' she said. 'Couriers arrive with messages from Henry telling Bram to do things he's already taken care of. I don't know how he tolerates such interference. I swear I'm far more upset by them than he is.'

'It's been like that even before he started at the Lyceum.'

'They must drive you to distraction,' said Genevieve. 'They do me.'

Silence was my answer.

‘All I can say is,’ said Genevieve, ‘your husband has the patience of a saint.’

Or the backbone of an eel, I thought uncharitably.

‘And so do you.’ She raised her glass in a toast.

If only she knew.

There was a loud voice in the hall and the drawing room door flew open.

‘Genevieve,’ cried Bram and drew her to her feet, kissing her soundly on both cheeks.

‘You came,’ I said, putting down my tea and standing.

‘Don’t sound so surprised,’ Bram admonished with a smile. ‘I said I would, didn’t I?’ He held me briefly. ‘Come, Mrs Daw tells me lunch is ready. Shall we? I’m ravenous.’

After a delicious meal of rabbit stew, haricots and mashed turnips, Genevieve recounted anecdotes from her opera days. We were still chuckling over one when Bram suddenly stood. ‘Right. Drink up, ladies. It’s time to go.’

I waved a careless hand. ‘Sit down, Bram, relax. It’s Sunday.’

‘I’ve a surprise for you both at the theatre.’

‘The Lyceum?’ I asked, bewildered. ‘But you’ve just come from there.’

‘What surprise?’ asked Genevieve.

‘Let me just say,’ began Bram mysteriously, ‘that your curiosity regarding what I’ve been doing these last weeks is about to be sated.’ He pulled out my chair and helped me rise. ‘I’ve something special to show you.’

Ignoring all questions and protests, Bram hustled us into our coats and hats and hailed a hansom.

Once we were on our way, I twisted to face him. ‘What’s this about, Bram? Why all the secrecy?’ I wondered briefly if perhaps he was writing again, choosing to keep the manuscript at the Lyceum. Only, that didn’t make sense.

‘Yes, Bram,’ said Genevieve cautiously. ‘What’s so special you can’t simply tell us?’

In the close confines of the cab, he regarded us with sparkling eyes, like a young lad about to embark on a grand adventure. ‘Patience, ladies. All will soon be revealed.’

Upon arrival, Bram led us backstage, then along a twisty and rather dusty passageway. We passed the gilded thrones used in *Hamlet*, the bust of a Roman emperor, one side of his head missing, and an arrangement of very dead flowers. We mounted flights of narrow, creaking stairs festooned with cobwebs, inhaling the overpowering odour of rodents. It was like entering a haunted house from one of the marvellous tales of Edgar Allan Poe that Phil and I used to read. The only heart I could hear beating was my own. Above us, thick wooden beams groaned, unlit lamps were screwed into the walls. Thank goodness Bram had brought a light. There was the ghostly echo of the scene painters' voices below as they touched up some flats. Broken pieces of furniture were stacked untidily in dark corners. Swathes of rotting canvas were thrown over other large objects, and I could have sworn the material trembled as we passed, as if some malignant spirit lurked beneath.

I was hot, badly in need of a refreshment, and feeling quite light-headed. I hadn't walked so much in weeks, not with the sickness having me in its thrall until recently, and Mrs Daw and Matilda reminding me constantly that a woman in my condition should rest.

Finally Bram stopped outside a wooden door.

'I didn't know this was even here,' whispered Genevieve, her eyes large in the glow of Bram's lantern.

'Few do,' said Bram. 'Now, ladies, allow me to show you what's kept me occupied. Ta-da!' He threw open the door, and with a grand flourish, bade us enter, pushing ahead to light the gas lamps.

My first impression was of a gloomy, very long and narrow room. More like a hallway in shape and size. The walls were oak-panelled and dark, gleaming. In the centre was a large table that could sit over thirty people with ease. High-backed chairs surrounded it – some grand, others still in need of repair, most mismatched. There were pictures aplenty on the walls, portraits mainly, all in gilded frames. There was a lovely marble fireplace, and an ancient rug on the floor. The room smelled of nostalgia and old men.

Bram was leaning over the table looking from me to Genevieve, waiting for us to say something.

'Well?' he asked, holding out his arms like a proud father. 'What do you think?'

'What is this place?' I asked.

'This used to be the Beefsteak Room,' said Bram.

Genevieve glanced at me and we both shrugged.

'The *what*?' I asked.

'The Beefsteak Room,' Bram repeated and grinned. 'Decades ago, a club called the Sublime Society of Beefsteaks was created and gentlemen would meet in this very room to dine, partake of refreshments, smoke, sing and, over a piece of steak, solve the world's problems.'

'Or create them,' I muttered.

Bram continued. 'When I first discovered it, I dismissed it from my mind. It was run-down, ramshackle, and mainly used to store disused props.' He pulled out a seat, inviting me to sit. Genevieve began to wander around the room, studying the paintings. 'Before he left for his sailing trip with the baroness,' Bram explained, 'Henry expressed a desire to host dinners at the theatre instead of the clubs; to entertain key patrons, cultivate and support artistes as well. I remembered this room, what it once was, and knew it'd be the perfect spot to fulfil his wishes. For the last month or more, I've spent every spare minute making it ready. Now, it's fit for purpose. When he returns from abroad, Henry can reinstate the club.'

I regarded Bram steadily. '*This* is where you've been? What you've been doing?'

Bram beamed. 'I haven't done it single-handedly,' he said, indicating the chairs, the rug, the pictures. 'Some of the staff helped.'

'Of course,' I said faintly. I was both flabbergasted yet strangely resigned.

'My, you *have* been busy,' said Genevieve, placing a comforting hand on my shoulder, squeezing it. 'I do hope Henry appreciates your efforts. Tell me,' she added, when no-one spoke for a minute, 'isn't that the famous actor David Garrick over there?' She pointed to a rather forbidding picture on the wall opposite.

Bram nodded. 'He's Henry's inspiration. Now, it's the Chief's turn to do the same for others.' He jerked his chin towards the other artworks.

Facing me was a series of seven paintings. With a start, I saw they were all of Henry Irving. In one he was portrayed as King Lear, in another, Hamlet, then a character I didn't recognise – Mathias? I was surrounded by a gallery of Irvings.

Even when he wasn't here, he was *everywhere*, including in my husband's head and heart. Instead of taking advantage of Mr Irving's

absence to pursue his own work, join me on outings, or spend time at home, Bram had spent every spare minute creating this shrine to his master. He was awaiting my praise, my congratulations for a job well done. Oh, it was very kind, it was thoughtful, but it was also … My knees began to shake; my palms grew sweaty.

I tried to stand, but the arm of the chair was slippery in my grip. Everything around me began to grow dark.

'Are you quite well, Florence?' asked Genevieve, clutching my elbow to steady me.

'Florrie!' said Bram and flew to my side. 'Come, let's get you home. This has been too much. Matilda did warn me.'

I didn't object as they led me away. Nor did I protest when Bram didn't accompany us back to Southampton Street but bundled us into a carriage and remained at the theatre. I didn't ask why or how long he'd be. What was the point?

Sensing the dark turn my mood had taken, Genevieve sought my hand. 'Be grateful the room's finished before the babbie's born, Florence. Bram has no excuse not to be there when the time comes.'

He'll find one, I thought.

Or Henry will find one for him.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

London, 30 December 1879

Eyes wide with wonder, Bram beheld his newborn for the first time. With an exclamation of joy, he reached into the crib and carefully scooped his son into his arms. They made a splendid tableau: the besuited father and his swaddled boy. He'd entered the world just as a threatening storm unleashed its madness, my own wails mingling with those of the wind.

Next to Bram stood Dr Everett, who'd been recommended by George. On his other side was Matilda. George stood just behind Bram, patting his brother's shoulder. Emma was bustling around, bunching bloody cloths and towels. First making sure I was comfortable upright, pillows nicely plumped behind me, the nursemaid, Mrs Elizabeth Jarrald, took up position close to the babbie. The glow from the coal fire made everyone appear radiant. Fire smoke drifted lazily about, forming spectral shapes in shadowy corners, while outside, gusts rudely jolted the glass.

'What are you calling him?' asked Matilda, crooning softly.

Before I could answer, Bram did. 'His name is Irving. Irving Stoker.'

'What did you say?' I stared at him incredulously. Surely, I'd misheard.

'I said,' Bram repeated, a fatuous sort of expression on his face, though whether that was from holding the child or the drinks he'd consumed, it was hard to tell. By the time he'd lurched into my crowded bedroom, the doctor who'd been present at the birth close on his heels, the babbie was more than two hours old.

'His name is Irving Noel Thornley Stoker.'

There were nods, murmurs of approval. George grinned and slapped Bram on the back. Matilda cast a dubious look in my direction.

‘Pfft. I’m in no mood for your humour, Bram.’ I fell back on the pillows.

‘Humour?’ Bram rubbed his nose gently against the babbie’s, inhaling. I’d a vague memory I’d done the same when they first placed my son in my arms, inhaled the very essence of him. It was like nothing I’d ever smelled before. As if the perfume of heaven and the angels had been distilled. To think, after all the blood, the hours of building pain, the soupy fog of the laudanum, this perfect little sweet-smelling being had emerged.

‘I’d hardly make light of something as important as our son’s name, my dear,’ he chuckled.

A sweet-smelling angel called *Irving* …

‘He’ll not be called *Irving*.’ My voice was low, firm.

Emma paused in what she was doing. Elizabeth’s hands fluttered nervously. The doctor gave an embarrassed cough.

‘Too late to change it,’ said Bram, chuckling, as if *I* was making a joke. ‘It’s on the birth certificate. Filled it out when I arrived, according to the doctor’s instructions.’

Dr Everett said something unintelligible above the roaring in my ears. Bram had wanted me to use George as my physician. I told him it’s bad enough George lives with us and is privy to much of what is said and happens, be damned if I’d let him prod my body. Now I’d cause to regret my decision.

My fingers curled around the sheets. They’d been changed. The bloodied, sweat-soaked ones taken away, my body washed and scented. As scented as someone who’d just spent hours straining and pushing and expelling all kinds of fluids could be. God, I still leaked. I ran my fingers through my hair, which brushed and now dry, sat loosely about my shoulders, falling to my hips. I’d pulled off the cap I’d been wearing, loathing the way it clutched my scalp, the dampness at the edges.

‘I thought we were agreed upon names, Bram,’ I began, trying to keep my voice steady, aware of the audience. ‘If we had a boy, he was to be called *Noel* James Thornley – after my eldest brother and yours. Sorry, George.’

George shrugged good-naturedly.

Bram tittered, either ignoring or not hearing me. ‘Look at his hair. Matilda,’ he swung the child towards his sister. ‘It’s quite dark, isn’t it? Was

mine like that when I was born? I wonder if he'll have your eyes or mine, Florrie?'

'I think it better if he has his own,' I snapped.

Matilda began ushering George, Elizabeth and Emma out of the room, clucking like a hen. Dr Everett, who'd done very little except administer laudanum when I grew angry that Bram was ignoring the many messages sent to the theatre, and watched ('supervise', he said) Elizabeth help me deliver the child, took it as his cue to retreat to the drawing room for a celebratory drink. Bram was obviously keen to join him for more, as was George.

Bram wasn't going anywhere until we sorted out this naming business. One look at my face told him as much.

I waited until the bedroom door closed, and the chink of glasses, along with some low laughs, carried from the other room. I watched Bram swaying in front of the fire, nursing our newborn and tutting. How was it possible for a heart to swell with affection and yet constrict with rage and disappointment at the same time? I pressed my hand to my breast, willing my brain to focus.

'I don't want him called Irving, Bram.'

'Oh, but *I* do, Florence,' said Bram, smiling amiably. 'Think of everything Henry has done for us, for *me*. It's my way of honouring him. It's the least we can do.'

Everything *he'd* done for Bram? Why, the first thing he'd done upon returning from his boating holiday with the baroness was hire an accountant – an old, out-of-work actor named Charles Howson – insisting the man work with Bram. Bram, who'd done a meticulous job of not only managing the theatre while Henry sojourned, but reinstating the bloody Beefsteak Room, had been devastated. I'd been grateful to start with, thinking the extra person meant Bram would be freed from at least one duty. On the contrary, Mr Howson, who was supremely unqualified, created more work for Bram who had to train him and, when he proved unable to grasp what was required, check every entry he made in the ledgers and redo his calculations daily. When Bram tried to talk to Mr Irving about Mr Howson's ineptitude, instead of redeploying or even firing him, Mr Irving insisted Bram continue to supervise the man's efforts.

‘Charles needs the work, Bram. He can no longer tread the boards and being in the theatre makes him feel useful.’

I objected when Bram told me. ‘Mr Howson isn’t useful. *You* are. Tell him, Bram.’

Bram simply took on the extra workload.

And now, here he was, wanting to name our son after Mr Irving. Didn’t he understand, a man like that didn’t appreciate grand gestures. You may as well name a dog after him. Considering the fuss he made over his pups, he’d probably prefer it.

‘Oh, Bram … I think *you’ve* done more than enough. You don’t need to bestow his name on *our son*.’

‘Well, it’s done,’ said Bram. ‘Henry already knows.’

‘*What?*’

‘And he’s agreed to be *Irving’s* godfather.’

‘You asked him to be *godfather* as well?’ My voice was shrill. ‘Without consulting me?’

‘Calm yourself, Florence. Really. There’s no need to make a —’

‘Oh, Bram! How could you?’ I couldn’t deal with this now. I covered my face, blinking back tears. Warm fluid flowed between my legs. I imagined the blood, spreading, soaking into the fresh sheets. My life force, my protests, draining away. ‘Mr Irving didn’t even attend the christening of his own second son,’ I said, my words slightly muffled. ‘How can he be godfather to our boy?’ I raised my head.

Bram scoffed. ‘You know why he didn’t go – *his* Florence wouldn’t allow him. Anyway, this is different.’

Angry words crowded my throat, wrestling for release. On the one hand, I wanted desperately to make Bram understand how this was intolerable to me. Reason with him. Henry Irving already had a big enough stake in our family without my son bearing his name. God, could I bear to even say it? To call him *Irving*? To introduce him, knowing everyone would first see Henry Irving? The Chief, the guv’na, as the other actors and stagehands addressed him. Every time I called to my son, wrote about him in letters to my family, to Bram’s mammy, it would conjure him. How could I ever utter that name in love? To have it in my mouth, hear it upon the lips of others, in my house day after day after day, year after year … I shuddered.

Only, this wasn't Mr Irving's doing, was it? This was Bram's. Discounting what we'd discussed, he'd overridden what I thought was a mutual agreement. Then, he'd asked him to be godfather without talking to me first. The disrespect was breathtaking. I wasn't some weak-willed woman he could ride roughshod over. I was furious he couldn't see what was apparent to me, to Matilda, to Genevieve, even to Ellen Terry.

The last conversation I had with Ellen flew into my mind.

'I worry about Ma sometimes,' she'd said. Whereas most of the actresses called Bram 'uncle', an appellation to put me at ease so I knew their intentions towards him were avuncular, Ellen called him Ma. It came about when she saw how Bram signed letters with his qualification from Trinity, the MA. Not one to allow such a vanity, or to remind him of it, Ellen used the initials to bestow an altogether different meaning. It made me laugh the first time I heard her use it.

Arm in arm, Ellen and I had been strolling along the Embankment after church, my swollen stomach our vanguard. Bram was at the theatre, no doubt poring over the Lyceum's ledgers, correcting Mr Howson's mistakes. It was a beautiful, cold morning. There was not a breath of wind. Folk were promenading in their Sunday best. A flower seller was offering her wares in a lyrical voice. A young, grubby-faced lad was roasting chestnuts, the smell making my mouth water. Dogs gambolled. A cat basked atop the wall lining this part of the river, a slitted eye upon the frisky hounds. I was thinking how nice it was to be out of the house; how grateful I was to count Ellen among my friends. Ellen and the Gilberts, whom I'd invited over for luncheon.

'Worry about Bram? In what way?'

'How much time he spends at the theatre. With Henry.'

Ah. She wasn't the only one.

'It really should be Bram here beside you, Lemon, enjoying a Sunday saunter. Before you know it, there'll be three of you.' She drew me to the Embankment wall, and we paused to gaze out over the sluggish brown river. Four well-dressed lads were mucking about on a punt. Nearby, a larger ship was weighing anchor while around it bobbed smaller craft, most hauling nets.

'He would. If he had the time.'

Ellen turned to face me, squinting into the sun. ‘He doesn’t get much of that, does he? Time to himself. Time to be with you. And yet, you never complain.’

I guffawed. ‘Oh, yes I do. All the time. I’m quite the banshee.’

‘Thank God for that! I can’t tolerate a saint. Their halos always seem such an affectation, don’t you think?’

Christmas morning with Oscar flashed into my mind.

‘Seriously,’ said Ellen, continuing our amble, ‘perhaps I should have a word with Ma. He needs to stand firm, learn to say no to Henry’s endless demands.’

‘It won’t change anything,’ I said, shaking my head. ‘I’ve tried; been direct, argued, hinted, warned, practically begged. Rightly or wrongly, Bram is committed to Mr Irving, like they’re married. According to Matilda and George, he’s always been that way. Dedicated, a hard worker, loyal to a fault …’

Ellen scoffed. ‘To Henry. To the Lyceum. Even to me. But what about *you*? What about his baby?’ Her fingers lightly brushed the bulge my coat could not disguise.

I didn’t know what to say. Part of me was grateful someone else saw that Bram’s devotion only went one way, but also ashamed it meant they knew how little I figured in his world. ‘Bram thinks that in being loyal to Mr Irving, he *is* looking after me, providing for his family.’ I glanced down.

‘Providing,’ scoffed Ellen. ‘Like a shopkeeper or a farmer. Provisions are all well and good, but a wife, a mother, a child, needs more from their man.’

Amen.

‘Please, don’t say anything, Ellen. It wouldn’t be fair, not with you and Henry being together and —’ I paused.

‘I might love Henry, God help me,’ grinned Ellen, neatly side-stepping to avoid a child chasing a hoop. ‘But I’m not blind to his faults. I also know what a selfish bastard he is. He uses people. He’s using Bram.’

‘I know,’ I sighed. How many others could see what was going on? Or was it only the women who saw it? No. Gilbert did as well; he’d no time for Mr Irving. ‘Bram refuses to see it.’

‘Maybe we need to open his eyes.’

We continued in silence a while. ‘Sometimes,’ I started cautiously, ‘it feels as if Bram exists only to do Mr Irving’s bidding. And, much as I might want to blame him, Mr Irving can’t be held solely responsible. After all, Bram knows how I feel.’ I sighed. ‘Do you think I should be more direct with him? Tell him others share my view? Give him an ultimatum?’

‘Oh, God no,’ said Ellen, stopping in her tracks. ‘That’s the worst thing you can do. No, you must be much smarter than that, my dear.’ She patted my hand, turning it into a caress. ‘If this older – *ever-so-slightly* older —’ she chuckled, ‘lady might give you some advice? Use your womanly wiles. How do you think I manage Henry?’

I snorted. ‘I try not to think about it.’

Ellen bumped me with her shoulder. ‘Minx,’ she said. ‘I admit, he’s not always easy to love, but then, love should never be easy.’ She put her lips close to my ear. ‘I think you already know that.’

I took a deep breath. ‘Alright, what do *you* suggest, old woman?’ I looked at her askance.

‘This —’ said Ellen mischievously and, as we turned around to head back to Southampton Street, she outlined a plan.

At the time, I dismissed her advice as a last resort. It went against my nature. Anyway, I was preoccupied with what was happening to my body, the changes our household was about to undergo. I’d reached a point where I was able (almost) to cease thinking about how much Henry Irving controlled my husband and thus our life.

Tonight, I was cruelly reminded. It was because of Henry Irving and that stupid Beefsteak Room that Bram wasn’t here for the birth of his son but, like a latecomer to a show, arrived in time for curtain call. Now, he chose to bind himself, and his family, even closer to his employer by naming our son after him.

I glanced at the babbie and already his features took on a cast I’d grown to dislike. *Please, God*, I sent a silent prayer heavenward, *let me see my boy, not the name*. *Let me love him*.

Could I? Or had Henry Irving stolen that from me too – a mother’s love? No. I wouldn’t allow it. It took me a minute to realise Bram was speaking.

‘You should have seen him tonight, Florrie,’ said Bram, approaching the bed and sitting tentatively upon the mattress, adjusting the babbie into the

crook of his elbow. ‘All anyone can talk about is Henry’s Shylock. How they’ve never seen a Jew portrayed like that before. The Beefsteak Room was filled with praise.’ The wee mannie twisted slightly in his swaddling, his little eyelids fluttering, his rosebud mouth making gentle smacking noises. Bram didn’t notice, he was too busy extolling Mr Irving’s virtues.

‘To think, if Henry hadn’t gone away on holiday with the baroness,’ said Bram, ‘if he hadn’t met that Levantine Jew and rethought the whole concept of Shylock, none of this would have happened.’ He shook his head in bemusement. ‘I told him he needed to make a holiday a regular thing, not once every twenty-three years. You know what he said?’ Bram’s eyes were shining. ‘He said, next time, I must – *we* must – go with him.’

‘What? *Where?*’ I fisted the sheets.

‘On holidays.’

I’d sooner go to hell.

‘He has transformed Shylock from the hand-wringing usurer,’ continued Bram, lost in the throes of worship, ‘into an intellectual, a regal being who’s wronged. Audiences are loving this version. They’re calling it genius.’

I silently sighed as I gazed tiredly at Bram’s face. Already forgotten, his little boy lay asleep in his father’s arms. A will-o-the-wisp, trapped in a flesh cage.

Could Bram really be so unaware of what Henry Irving was doing? He’d turned my husband into a creature of the night, one who fell into bed as the sun rose, departing Southampton Street as it was setting, disappearing into the dim theatre, the world of eternal darkness. A world where all his creative energy was being siphoned away. Where any dreams Bram had were shelved in favour of Mr Irving’s.

The danger was, as Ellen had pointed out that day on the Embankment, the more I told Bram exactly how I felt about Mr Irving, the more Bram would simply batten down the hatches, defend the man; cleave to him in a way that would make it impossible for anything to come between them. She’d seen it happen before. If I wanted Bram to see Henry for what he really was, a selfish man who, if allowed, sucked the life and joy out of all those who came within his compass, all those who didn’t serve his purpose, then I needed to try a different tactic.

‘Instead of bemoaning Henry,’ said Ellen, ‘do the opposite. Heap praise upon him.’

‘I … I can’t do that.’

‘You damn well can,’ she said. ‘Even better, encourage Bram in his affections, his devotion and adoration, and most importantly, join in.’

I stared at her in horror.

‘What if,’ Ellen lowered her voice, ‘by doing that, instead of feeling like the third party in your marriage, Henry Irving became the extra?’ She shook my arm and laughed. ‘Come on, Lemon, I hear you want to try your hand at acting. Here’s your chance. Play the role of Henry’s admirer. What’s with that face? Remember, this is my lover we’re talking about. Trust me. It will be easy. Just base your performance on Ma’s. Remember, men and women are merely players …’

I thought back to when Bram and I saw *The Taming of the Shrew*, and I’d argued along similar lines, advocating that kindness and tolerance were the best way to persuade someone to change their behaviour. I wanted to eat my words. Then I recalled Bram’s analysis of the play: *It’s an interesting way to observe marriage … As if there’s an enemy to defeat*.

I flicked a glance in his direction. Dear Lord, he was still harping on about Shylock. This time, it was the costume – the dark brown robe and sash, the brocaded tunic. I waited until he drew breath and then touched his arm, stopping the flow of words. What if the goodwill approach worked? It was worth a shot, surely? Especially if it defeated my enemy …

‘I’m very happy for Mr Irving. For you too, Bram.’ He blinked in surprise. I contrived a smile. ‘Perhaps you’re right. Mr Irving does deserve our gratitude and, if you think we’re showing it by naming our son after him, well …’ The words were sour in my mouth. I leaned over, wincing as my hips and stomach throbbed, and stroked the babbie’s soft furry cheek. ‘Just wait until you meet your namesake, *Irving*,’ I said softly. I nestled as close to Bram as I could, resting my head against his shoulder. ‘You’re going to love the man just as much as your father does. As I do too.’ May God forgive me.

Bram beamed at the babbie, then at me.

I eased myself back down and shut my eyes. Ellen would be so proud.



PART THREE

1880 to 1881

In married life, three is company, two is none.

And so hour by hour we drifted apart.

Bram Stoker, *The Jewel of Seven Stars*

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

London, 14 February 1880

One hundred nights. That's how many evenings *The Merchant of Venice* had been performed thus far. Three hundred and fifty special programs, bound in white with gold lettering, were handed out to those invited to remain after the performance and celebrate the milestone.

Instead of using the Beefsteak Room (which was limited in size) for the festivities, the Lyceum stage was transformed into a majestic dining room. It became a glorious pavilion of snowy drapes and scarlet ribbons lit by two enormous chandeliers that glowed like twin moons above the tables. A beautifully drawn seating plan was pinned to a board and, as I was escorted to the stage by Gilbert (Bram was busy welcoming guests), I couldn't help but be awed, made giddy by the glamour, the glow of silverware, the glint from polished glasses atop pristine tablecloths. The heady perfume of the abundant flowers, their vibrant colours and shapes, added to the sense of being part of a wonderful fantasy where you could become anyone you wanted. As I took in the fashionably dressed women and exquisitely suited men chattering and laughing, the more important members of the cast among them, I felt a complete fraud. Who was I but the daughter of a soldier, mother to a scrap of a son? On the one hand, I wanted the vampire trap in the stage to open and swallow me; on the other, this is what I'd long dreamed of, what I'd hoped marriage would give me. I was going to relish being part of something momentous; drink, and demand my cup be refilled.

Gilbert patted my gloved hand, then indicated a distinguished looking gentleman who was watching us closely. 'I hope Bram always cedes this duty to me, Florence,' he said, 'and I continue to be able to escort you to every occasion, arousing the envy of artists, poets and royalty.' He nodded

towards the Prince of Wales, who had a famous French actress draped on his arm. ‘Just don’t tell Lucy I said that.’

I slapped his forearm playfully. ‘You, sir, are incorrigible.’

‘Yes,’ said Gilbert, twitching his moustache. ‘I am. And you love me for it. Fortunately, so does my wife.’

Lucy, sadly, was unwell, but insisted Gilbert accompany me. I was grateful. George Stoker was unable to attend, crying work. Though invited, Matilda declined.

‘Having seen Henry Irving as Shylock four times already, I don’t think I could bear to see him perform again,’ she said.

‘Oh, I’m not going to the play,’ I explained. ‘Just the party afterwards.’

‘My point exactly,’ said Matilda drolly.

To make up for abandoning me, Matilda helped me dress for the evening. A dab hand at styling hair, she first brushed mine until it gleamed and then, using a combination of bandoline, which, like starch on collars, fixed hair in place, and pins, created an elaborate updo with a braided bun at the nape of my neck. She then wove a marcasite necklace that had been a gift from Charlotte Stoker through my tresses. It was as though I wore a coronet. The dress itself had been quite expensive – I still hadn’t presented the bill to Bram. It was a beautiful violet and sky-blue shot silk overlaid with diaphanous fabric. When I moved, it gave the illusion of flowing water. The neck was scooped lower than I was accustomed to, but the seamstress assured me it was all the rage. When I mentioned the lack of modesty to Matilda, she scoffed.

‘If I had titties like yours, Florence, I’d display them at every opportunity.’

‘Matilda!’ I said, in faux shock.

‘Oh, don’t you Matilda me. You’ve a lovely figure. No-one would know you’d given birth less than two months ago.’

Standing in front of the mirror in my bedroom, I’d run my hands over the bodice and my stomach. It was nice to display a décolletage again, to feel more like my old self, especially after what childbirth had done to my body, how it had torn and ravaged my cunny. (Why, oh why, did no-one warn me about that?) Then, for a few short weeks, I’d been little more than a drinking vessel for baby Irving.

I still struggled with calling my son by that name. Every time I uttered it, another face replaced my babbie's sweet visage. I think that was partly to blame for my feelings of revulsion every time he latched onto my breasts. I could scarce stand the sucking. I couldn't overcome the idea that he was an incubus draining me, stealing my life force. I'd begged Bram for a wet-nurse, but George, supported by Elizabeth, informed me such a thing wasn't done anymore. It was important the mother feed the child. Well, they cannot say I didn't try. For weeks, I endured the pain of his rubbery gums gnawing at my tender nipples so fiercely they bled. Hard crevices opened, making the moment his lips latched on akin to someone driving needles in and out of my damaged flesh. Finally, in a puddle of tears and pain, I swore I wouldn't do it anymore. Elizabeth tried to persuade me to continue, Matilda too, but I refused. George was brought in to add his arguments.

When Bram found me one afternoon in January, sitting broken and hurting, a mess of snot and tears, while the others stood around admonishing me, the fractious babbie in my arms, he knelt by my side.

'What's this?' he asked, placing a finger under my chin, forcing me to look at him.

Between sniffles, I told him. Anytime George or Matilda tried to interrupt, he silenced them. When I'd finished, he took the babbie (the child was howling) and passed him to Elizabeth.

'My wife will no longer be feeding our son.' I stared at him in disbelief through swollen, watery eyes.

'But, sir, if the baby is to thrive —' began Elizabeth.

'You'll give him bread soaked in water,' said Bram, rising to his feet and pulling me upright at the same time. He put a protective arm around me. 'Or milk. It's what my mammy did and none of her children suffered.' He dared George to contradict him. George flung his hands in the air and stepped back.

'But, sir —'

'But nothing, Elizabeth,' snapped Bram. 'Take Irving and keep him in the nursery until such time as Mrs Stoker asks for him. Can't you see my wife needs rest? The poor thing is exhausted. Rest and peace. I'm sure Dr Stoker here would concur.'

George wisely remained mute. Without another word, Bram led me from the drawing room and into my bedroom.

Who was this solicitous, forceful man? Oh, I'd seen Bram assert himself before – usually with his underlings at the theatre – but never on my behalf. It was … marvellous. Was my new strategy finally paying off? I didn't know whether to laugh or cry harder.

He poured me a tumbler of spirit and insisted I drink. Then he helped me into bed, tucking the covers around me as if I was a child. I was overwhelmed by his solace. I lay back on the pillows, listening to the rain pattering against the windows, watching the curtains undulate with the draught. The room was dark except for the lambent glow of the lantern.

'I don't know if I can do this, Bram,' I whispered, reaching for the lapels of his jacket, pulling him towards me.

'You don't have to anymore,' he said, smoothing wisps of hair from my face.

'I don't mean breast-feeding.' I met his steady gaze. Bram looked handsome in his suit. A fine upstanding man. A gentleman. My husband. Why could I not find it in my heart to love him as he deserved? To love his son? Was it because I feared that if I did, it would be unrequited? *As it had been with Oscar*.

I couldn't bear the thought. To be *that* woman. Not again.

'I mean, be a mother.' My words were softer than a moth's kiss.

Bram chuckled gently. 'Of course you can, Florrie. It's woman's natural state.'

Tears began to well again and I shook my head. He didn't understand. No-one did.

'A child needs his mother,' he said firmly. 'Irving needs you.'

Irving? *Irving?* Henry's face appeared, the dark brows, the cold, black eyes. I released Bram. He sat up.

'Go to sleep, Florrie. Rest. You need it.' He bent over, pressed his lips to my forehead, then left the room.



From that day forward, Irving was handfed – sometimes cow's milk, other times, bread softened in broth and water. Desperate, I'd written to my mother for advice. She replied that her mother, my Granny-Moo, had sworn

by whisky – just a snifter. While it didn't work on the babbie, it did on me. I drank half a dozen snifters in one sitting and didn't hear him cry once.

To ease the ache in my unused paps, Elizabeth wrapped them in brown paper and vinegar. It smelled terrible and, after a few days when the compress was removed, my empty breasts were shrivelled and horribly flat. I couldn't stop bemoaning that my once pert bubbies with the rosebud nipples were now little more than something you'd toss on a griddle. But after a few days, with massages and washes, they resumed something close to their normal shape. Not as perky, maybe, but they'd suffice.

My figure may have returned, but the skin that had once been taut over a baby bulge remained a bit loose, and I still burned whenever I used the privy or washed myself. I took to ensuring I was always garbed before Bram – a nightgown, a shift, a petticoat. If he was uninterested in seeing me naked before, I didn't want him to see me now. Not that he would. Since I fell pregnant, Bram had made no attempt to have conjugal relations. We shared the drawing room, but our beds and bodies were our own.

While I was grateful for his lack of interest in sex (it was the last thing on my mind), a man had needs, and I began to wonder if Bram kept a mistress to ensure his were met. After all, women loved Bram and he in turn was very fond of them – look at Mrs Daw and Emma, Genevieve Ward, the other actresses at the Lyceum; their faces lit up when he was around, their eyes followed him everywhere and they looked for any excuse to engage him. Why, even Lucy Gilbert sang his praises. I supposed I should be jealous that he attracted such attention. I wasn't, but I was curious. When I mentioned it to Ellen one afternoon, phrasing it in a cavalier fashion as though the thought wasn't beginning to preoccupy me, she threw back her head and laughed.

'Why would Bram need a mistress when he's the envy of every man who meets you? Good God, Lemon! Don't be a doddypoll. Bram works too hard to keep anyone else, let alone a secret woman.' She shook her head in disbelief. 'How he even had time to make a child defeats me. Henry runs him ragged. When would he see a mistress?'

Nevertheless, I wondered. What did Bram do to satisfy his urges? Did he touch himself? (I blushed just thinking about it, at the same time recalling the way he would tug at himself, cure his lobcock, when we'd had relations.)

It was partly why, despite mounting bills from my endless shopping (as Matilda put it), I'd cast aside all concerns about the cost of the dress I'd had made for the celebration of *The Merchant of Venice*'s one hundredth show. This event was important to Bram and, as it was my first public appearance since the babbie's birth, it was important to me.

Gilbert and I waited our turn to check the seating plan and then joined the multitudes. I recognised the Dickens family, Charles's widow looking resplendent in a silver fur stole, her son and his wife less impressive. Gilbert's business partner, Arthur Sullivan, waved, as did Ellen, who was surrounded by admirers. She looked glorious in magenta.

I didn't see Henry Irving, who, like most of the men, was dressed in a black evening suit, until everyone had finally taken their seats. Seated next to Baroness Burdett-Coutts, who'd returned from Paris just to attend, Henry encircled himself with politicians, artists, playwrights and Bram's writer-friend, Hall Caine, who hailed from the Isle of Man but was now lodging with our neighbour, the charming but infirm artist Dante Gabriel Rossetti.

'There are so many famous people here,' I whispered to Gilbert, trying not to stare too hard.

'When everybody is somebody,' said Gilbert dismissively, 'nobody is anybody.'

'What does that make me?' I asked, mouth twitching.

Gilbert regarded me seriously. 'Somebody anybody would be proud to accompany.'

I laughed delightedly and kissed his bearded cheek.

I smiled greetings at those I recognised as waiters poured drinks, my ear tuned to the conversations around me. Bram had organised the Lyceum caterers to prepare a seven-course banquet. I'd virtually starved myself in preparation.

I was studying the gorgeously designed menus, done in a Japanese style, adorned with images of kingfishers, butterflies and emerald fronds, when I became aware that someone was watching me.

'Why, if it isn't the most beautiful mother in the world,' said an unctuous voice. The American artist James Whistler wrapped a sweaty palm over my bare shoulder.

I lifted his hand away. 'It's just as well your dear mother is no longer alive to hear you say that, Mr Whistler. Wasn't that the title you bestowed

upon her?'

Gilbert spluttered.

Mr Whistler waved a dismissive hand, as if I hadn't spoken. 'When are *you* going to sit for me?'

'So long as it's not on your lap, as you suggested last time we met, then, maybe one day …' I picked up my drink.

'I … err … Till then,' Mr Whistler stammered before pretending to acknowledge someone else and walking away.

'Marvellous artist,' I said casually to those listening. 'What a pity he can't paint himself in a better light.'

Gilbert guffawed. Two women opposite raised their drinks in my direction, bestowing broad smiles, the men nodding approvingly. The gentleman next to me twisted in his seat.

'I must know the name of the woman who finally put Whistler in his place,' he began.

'This is Mrs Bram Stoker,' said Gilbert proudly. 'Florence, allow me to introduce Arthur Balfour.'

Ah, the conservative politician. A man to be watched, according to George.

Suddenly, everyone around us wanted an introduction – not to Mr Balfour, but me, including a publisher, Edward Marston, who proved most gregarious. I was about to mention Bram's literary aspirations when Bram rose from his chair and, banging a knife on his glass, called for silence.

Before he could begin, there was a commotion at the back of the theatre. People swung around, some half-rising, craning their necks to see what the disturbance was.

It was a man in a dark, flowing cape, carrying a top hat. Whoever it was paused dramatically halfway down the central aisle, directly beneath the lights.

'Why, it's Oscar Wilde!' declared someone.

My heart flung itself against my ribs. Ice, then heat, filled my chest. It couldn't be, could it?

''Tis I, indeed,' Oscar declared, and made an elaborate bow. There were exclamations of delight, a smattering of applause. His brother, Willie, stood and hailed him in joy. Oscar sprang up the steps two at a time, clapping backs, shaking hands. When he saw me among the diners, his eyes

widened, then a slow smile crept across his face. He held my gaze. I forgot to breathe.

'I wasn't aware you and Wilde knew each other,' said Gilbert, looking from me to Oscar. It had been well over a year since I last saw Oscar, long before I'd married Bram, though I'd heard plenty about him. He looked splendid. Ridiculously handsome, with his deep-set eyes and wide, sensuous mouth. A mouth that had captured mine many times, including in my dreams …

'Know me?' said Oscar who, ignoring calls for him to join the table, came to my side. Around us, talk recommenced, Bram resuming his seat. 'As Adam did Eve, Gilbert.'

'Before the Fall, he means,' I added, trying unsuccessfully to swallow a grin. 'Oscar is merely trying to make mischief, turn me into the subject of tattle.'

'Not before time,' said Oscar, lifting my hand from where it trembled on the table and kissing my fingers one by one, his smouldering eyes never leaving my face.

I snatched my hand away, trying unsuccessfully to quash the feelings his lips, his touch, stimulated. People were looking and whispering. What if Bram saw? I took a breath and smiled pleasantly. 'Truth is, we were more akin to Petruchio and Katherina.'

Oscar laughed. 'Well, I always say, if a woman wants to hold a man, she merely has to appeal to what is worst in him.'

'Really? I would think the opposite is true,' I said lightly. 'She should appeal to a man's better nature – use her goodness to transform him.'

Oscar looked towards Bram, his smile disappearing. 'Men never *become* good – they merely become old.'

'They're not mutually exclusive, Oscar.' I strangled my napkin, wishing him gone. Wishing him never to leave.

He leaned closer, ensuring I alone would hear him above the rising din of voices. 'I'm sick of women who are good. Women who hate are much more interesting.' He waited until I met his eyes. 'Do you hate me, Florrie?' Before I could tell him I could never hate him, he straightened and gave a loud sigh. 'Much to my disappointment, I see married life, motherhood, suits you. You're more beautiful than ever.'

I ceased torturing the napkin; willed my heart to steady. I had to put a stop to this. ‘I live to disappoint.’

There were raised voices. Bram was trying to restore order after the chaos of Oscar’s late arrival.

Before he could summon a retort, Oscar was called to take a seat further down the table, next to his brother, Willie, near Bram and Mr Irving. With one last lingering look, a gentle salute and a kiss of his fingers, he left to take it. My eyes kept drifting in his direction.

‘He’s an acquired taste, that man,’ said Gilbert. ‘One I’ve yet to develop. It’s clear he holds you in … high esteem.’ Curiosity coated his words.

‘Not as high as he holds himself,’ I said. Our brief exchange had left me rattled. The visceral effect Oscar had on me was powerful. He always knew how to get under my skin, burrow into those parts I thought hidden, and had done so again, even now I was both married and a mother. And in public. I picked up my drink and took a generous gulp.

Fortunately, I was saved from any further discussion as a choir of young men, hidden by sheer curtains, led the guests in the national anthem. Grace was said and dinner served. Bowls of clear turtle soup were placed before us, followed by cold salmon the colour of flamingos, succulent lamb cutlets and mushrooms. There were platters of sweetbreads, stuffed larks, salad, ham, peas, aspic of prawns, cheese and Parmesan straws. Noises of delight greeted each dish; cutlery chimed, conversation hummed, and drinks flowed.

When the plates were being cleared, Bram rose once more.

‘Good evening, ladies and gentlemen,’ he began. ‘Welcome to this celebration of the one hundredth performance of *The Merchant of Venice*. The longest this play has ever run in its entire history. If only Shakespeare were here to commemorate such an accomplishment, an accomplishment only made possible by the one and only, the greatest and most remarkable thespian of the Victorian age —’

I shot a glance at William Terriss, one of the Lyceum’s other leading actors – younger than Mr Irving and far more handsome, as well as very talented. I wondered what he’d have to say about Bram’s description of the Chief.

Bram passed the duty of toasting Mr Irving to Lord Houghton. The noble waxed lyrical for some minutes, describing Mr Irving as the most extraordinary person who'd ever trod the earth, who'd done wonders for the dramatic arts and other pursuits, drawing laughter and cheers. He all but eulogised him, claiming how Mr Irving's rendition of Shylock rehabilitated a great villain.

Gilbert leaned over. 'Does he mean the usurer or Irving?'

I snorted.

There was great applause, then everyone was invited to stand and toast Mr Irving's health. Once we'd all resumed our seats, Bram then invited Mr Irving, who'd been lapping up the praise, to respond.

Mr Irving rose to thunderous claps, smiling and bowing, and with false modesty tried to quieten everyone.

When silence fell, he thanked Lord Houghton and, quoting from *Richard II*, began, '*I count myself in nothing else so happy / As in a soul remembering my good friends*.' His arm swept the room and there were more cheers.

Gilbert groaned. 'If this keeps on, we'll be here until Christmas.'

The speech went for over half an hour, encompassing Mr Irving's ambitions and his accomplishments. Not once did he mention Bram, his stage manager Harry, or even Ellen, who'd been a wonderful Portia to his Shylock. By then, even his most ardent devotees were growing restless. It was all I could do to uphold Ellen's advice and play the role of an admirer. I resisted the temptation to respond to Gilbert's occasional snide remarks and forced myself to listen. Mr Irving closed by giving everyone permission to smoke within the pavilion. As if on cue, waiters appeared with expensive cigars, distributing them to all the gentlemen and at least one lady.

Finally finished, Mr Irving stood while the diners stamped their feet, cheered and clapped. He pressed his hand to his heart, his smile wide. 'Please, you're all too kind.'

'What he really means is, *More, more*,' muttered Gilbert.

I gave a yelp of laughter, but fortunately, no-one heard.

Bram then invited anyone who would like to add their praise to Lord Houghton's to speak.

Much to my astonishment, and everyone else's, Oscar struggled to his feet.

‘As it happens,’ he began, ‘I’ve composed an ode just for the occasion.’

There was a smattering of applause, some groans too. There’d been enough speechifying for one night, surely. But this was Oscar. I couldn’t believe he’d lavish praise on someone like Mr Irving.

‘Hush, hush,’ said Mr Irving, banging his glass for quiet. ‘Let the man speak. I for one wish to hear this.’

There were cries of ‘Hear, hear’.

Aware he must deliver immediately or lose the moment, Oscar struck a pose and began to recite his work from memory.

‘*I marvel not Bassanio was so bold …*’

By the time he uttered the line, ‘*For in that gorgeous dress of beaten gold*,’ only the dimmest or drunkest of those present would not have understood that this ode wasn’t for Henry Irving, but for Ellen Terry. More specifically, Ellen as Portia.

I looked over at Ellen, who was transfixed by Oscar. Then I glanced at Mr Irving. Whenever I’ve read that someone had a face like a thundercloud, I oft wondered how they’d look. I didn’t need to anymore. Mr Irving’s face was all booming thunderclaps and jagged lightning. When he became aware others were looking in his direction, he smiled affectedly.

Bram was grinning, clearly enjoying Ellen being acclaimed. It was only when he looked at the Chief that his face fell.

‘*Portia! Take my heart: it is thy due*,’ continued Oscar, arms outstretched, facing Ellen. ‘*I think I will not quarrel with the Bond*.’

There was a beat when he finished, then, if not the rapturous applause that greeted Mr Irving, it was resounding nonetheless.

Using the cover of the clapping, I cried out, ‘A toast, a toast.’

Gilbert and Mr Marston joined me, calling out loudly enough to be heard. There was a scramble as everyone rose and raised their glasses towards Ellen, who blew kisses to Oscar, who returned them with a fervent grin.

‘To Ellen Terry’s Portia: all the world desires her,’ he cried.

Ellen clutched her hands to her breasts, her cheeks turning an enchanting pink. Mr Irving’s claps were slow and measured. His laugh was hollow, the eyes that rested on first Oscar then Ellen, empty. I shuddered to think what he might do – not to Oscar, but Ellen. They might be secret

lovers, but I'd no doubt he wouldn't hesitate to punish her for stealing his show. But, when they were such a theatrical team, I couldn't fathom how.

I managed to speak to Oscar once more before the night was over. I weaved my way through those remaining, trying not to cough as the fumes of over a hundred cigars choked the stage. I found him seated with Willie and Charles Millward, the composer, and a friend of Gilbert's.

'Your poem to Ellen,' I said, bending over so my words were for his ears only, 'was beautiful and more than deserved, even on a night intended to honour one man.'

Oscar gripped my wrist, forcing me to remain. 'A man who fails to appreciate what he has and how she illuminates him.' He looked pointedly towards Mr Irving, before his gaze slid to Bram.

I snatched my hand away and took a step back.

'Bram appreciates me.'

'As much as he does Mr Irving?'

I stared at Oscar in dismay. 'I'm his wife. Mr Irving is just his —'

'Master,' said Oscar.

'You make it sound like my husband is a slave. He's simply doing his job.'

'Is he? I find that the things one feels absolutely certain about are never true.'

'You're impossible,' I said.

'And you are adorable.' We locked eyes before I broke the moment and went and found Gilbert.

'Take me home, Gilbert. I find I'm suffocating from either the smoke of cigars or the panegyrics to Mr Irving.'

'Well, we can't have that.' He looped his arm through mine. 'Come, we'll find Bram and let him know we're departing.'

I glanced over my shoulder. Bram was standing with Mr Irving, who had his arm draped so far over my husband, it was almost as if he was about to strangle him.

Damn Oscar, I thought, all a-flurry as I hurried Gilbert from the auditorium, aware of Oscar's eyes upon me the entire time.



After two hundred and fifty performances of *Merchant*, the season finished, and we prepared to leave for our very first holiday to Southsea, near Portsmouth on the coast. The entire household was making the trip, including our maid, Emma, and the nursemaid, Elizabeth. Matilda and George would remain in London. The day before we left, just as I was supervising the last of the packing, I asked Bram what Mr Irving was planning to do now the season was finished.

'He's going on holidays.'

I was in my bedroom sorting out which hats to take. I needed a wide-brimmed one to protect me from all the sun I just knew was going to shine. 'Oh?' I asked, only halflistening. I didn't really care what he was doing, but this was all a part of my new strategy. 'And where does the guv'na go on holidays this year? Another cruise on the Mediterranean with the baroness?'

When Bram didn't immediately reply, I turned and looked at him. He'd not long returned from the theatre.

'He's holidaying in Southsea.'

Molten metal rushed through my body.

'That's rather a peculiar coincidence, isn't it?' I gave a brittle laugh. 'He's bound to run into us.'

'Run into us? Florrie,' said Bram, as if talking to a wayward child, 'I told you. Henry is holidaying *with* us.'

I slowly put down the hat I was considering. 'I think I'd remember if you'd told me that, Bram,' I said, proud my voice was steady. A high-pitched whine began in my ears.

'We're travelling there *with* Henry *and* Ellen – by train. She's accompanying him. It will be the four of us. With wee Irving and the maids, of course. Think of the fun we'll have.' Refusing to meet my steady gaze, he began to stride around the room, pausing by the window and pulling back the curtains. It was still light outside, with the lovely, bruised glow the late evening sky gets in summer. The percussive sound of horses was faint as was the strain of a violin. He let the curtain fall back and faced me. I hadn't moved.

'You're always saying we should spend more time with each other,' said Bram, throwing my words back at me. 'Now we will. That calls for a celebratory drink, don't you think?' He rubbed his hands together, as if he'd just made the most thrilling announcement, and left the room.

I stared after him in utter disbelief before falling onto the bed, my heart so heavy it held me there.

There was no escaping the man, was there?

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Southsea, 1880

I'd never heard so many Irish voices outside of Dublin as I did in Portsmouth and Southsea that summer. Employed to work at the royal dockyard and the railway station, the Irish were everywhere. They helped with our luggage and found us a conveyance to take us to our hotel. The concierge was from Belfast, the porters from Cobh, Dublin and Galway. It was a comfort to be surrounded by the singsong lilt of my homeland again.

The view from our room was panoramic, taking in the green of the common and the wide expanse of sand and water. We were a short walk from the entertainment and stalls on the Clarence Esplanade Pier. I began to imagine days of wandering the shore, eating ice-creams, watching the performers in town for the season and reading the books I'd squeezed into my bag.

While I'd worried about maintaining my pretence of being friendly towards Mr Irving on the trip south, especially in the close quarters of a railway carriage, it had been for naught. Between comforting young Irving, who was overtired and grizzling, and being grateful when Elizabeth and Emma took it in turns to carry him up and down the train, the rest of us sat in comfort and drank tea, ate the cake Mrs Daw had packed, and exchanged stories. When Mr Irving tried, he could be a pleasant companion. I wondered briefly what he thought of me. After all, I'd given him no cause to hold me in affection. We spoke of many things – William Terriss's new lady friend, an actress from Drury Lane; the Prince of Wales's current mistress; and Mr Disraeli's loss in the recent election. We were of a mind that being free of parliamentary duties meant he could at last finish the novel he'd started years ago.

‘Whether anyone will read it is, of course, another matter entirely,’ said Mr Irving.

‘It’s what preoccupies every author,’ said Bram, revealing himself. ‘Does the work merit readers?’ Despite being busy, he’d almost finished writing a collection of short stories for children, *Under the Sunset*, and would soon be seeking a publisher. With hopes it might be advantageous for Bram, I’d invited the publisher I met the night of the *Merchant of Venice* celebration months ago, Mr Marston, over for afternoon tea when we returned.

I reached across and gave his hand a reassuring squeeze. ‘Surely, publishers only accept work of quality, those that they believe have a readership.’

‘Ah,’ said Ellen, ‘I’m certain they give the famous special dispensation, assured the name will sell. Quality is not always a consideration.’

The days at Southsea became a blur of strolls along the seashore with Ellen, babbie Irving, Elizabeth and Emma, watching pantomimes and puppet shows at the pier, and lots of talking. When the weather was inclement, there were card games, chess and quiet reading. Tired from the eventful days, young Irving would be abed early and either Emma or Elizabeth would have the night to themselves. Our evenings were most often spent in the hotel restaurant, watching the mellow sunset and drinking wine and whisky. After dinner, the men puffed away on cigars or went for evening ambles along the foreshore, Bram content as a milk-addled cat. That left Ellen and me, blankets across our knees to keep the cold at bay, wine in hand, and the moonlit sea to gaze upon as we gossiped.

It wasn’t until the holiday was drawing to a close that the newfound accord between me and Henry (as he demanded I call him) ended abruptly.

For the last two days, we’d been confined indoors due to incessant rain. When the sun finally appeared, Bram and Henry decided to hire a boat. Naturally, we women weren’t invited as the men wanted to fish and declared feminine chatter would scare away any chance of a catch (I’d argue it was lack of skill and patience as opposed to women’s conversation). If Ellen and I weren’t enduring hours and hours of endless (and, frankly, quite smug and self-congratulatory) dialogues and evaluations between Bram and Henry of how well the Lyceum was doing, how fabulous their choice of productions, we were being forced to listen to them forecasting future ones, making plans to tour North America, and what a

wonderful actor Henry was. He didn't seem to notice or care that his leading lady was right there. Nor that much of what he took credit for was due to Bram. The vanity of the man was breathtaking and I was fast reaching the limits of my tolerance. I wasn't the only one glad to see the back of him and Bram for the morning.

Ellen and I, along with Elizabeth, Emma and the babbie, decided to take a picnic to the beach, having exhausted other pursuits. It was a lovely day – the calm after the storm of the night before, as one old sea salt noted. The sky was a glorious duck-egg blue, a few wispy clouds drifted, gulls squawked and floated in the thermals above. We found a secluded spot and laid out a thick blanket. We all wore wide-brimmed hats and removed our shoes so we might burrow our toes in the gritty sand. Babbie was thoroughly enjoying himself until he grasped a fistful and shoved it in his mouth. Oh, the cries! Emma and Elizabeth whisked him back to the hotel, leaving me and Ellen alone. Such bliss. Just us, some egg sandwiches, Victoria sponge and cordial, the sunshine, and a friendly hound that came over and lay beside us, sharing some crusts.

'Where do you think they're going?' asked Ellen, shading her eyes and looking across the bay.

The men's boat was heading west towards a large fort on the other side of the wide harbour. Henry was signalling dramatically to the boatman, urging him to continue rowing.

'Even off stage,' said Ellen, 'he can't help giving orders.'

'At least it's not to Bram.'

'Not today, at any rate.' Ellen flashed a smile. 'Did you know Henry doesn't direct productions? Not really. He pretty much leaves us actors to our own devices. He's much more interested in the staging of a show, the overall effect.'

'I always imagined him needing to be in complete control.'

'Oh, don't get me wrong, he is. He just manages from a distance.'

'Not everyone,' I said. 'Some he manages very closely.'

We sat quietly a while, watching as the boat drew closer to the forbidding-looking fort. People on the beach noticed it too, and were standing and pointing.

'It must be hard, though,' I continued, trying to ignore the small craft, the attention it was attracting. Why were people so interested? 'To both

oversee a play and star in it. Is Henry ever tempted to step back? Cede the starring role to another actor? Say, someone like William Terriss?'

Ellen guffawed. 'William? Never. Nor anyone else for that matter, even if it did ease his burden.' She sighed. 'The problem with Henry as an actor is that he doesn't allow anyone else to shine. He quite literally steals *all* the attention – not only by choosing plays in which he can take the lead, but by insisting the limelight remains on him, casting the rest of us into literal shade.'

It wasn't like Ellen to offer criticism of her lover, and I wisely remained silent.

'I've tried speaking to him about it – Bram too —'

An almighty boom rang out. The ground shook, knocking me and Ellen backwards. We both shrieked as a huge column of water erupted like a gigantic fountain right next to Bram and Henry's boat. It dropped with a roar, a liquid wall that momentarily obscured them.

'Bram!' I cried.

'Henry!' screamed Ellen.

We scrambled to our feet and ran to the water's edge. What on God's good earth had just happened? The boat was mercifully intact and the men, while drenched, sat clutching the sides of the wildly rocking vessel.

'Bram! Henry!' I yelled, waving my arms. Ellen jumped up and down, shouting, 'Are you alright?'

Either they were deaf from the explosion, or we were too far away to be heard. People joined us, muttering in confusion and fear, pointing and gesticulating. There was another boom, muffled, deep. A woman shrieked. Ellen fell against me, then more water shot into the air.

He rejected their bond. She chose a life beyond his pack.

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This was followed by yet another explosion and waterspout, and then another. Along the beach, there were cries of fright, as people staggered into each other and the ground quaked. Children were sobbing. A couple of dogs began barking and yowling.

Amidst it all, the small vessel pitched violently. More water spewed, suddenly, ferociously. It was like a battle. Each time a boom sounded, Ellen and I almost lost our footing. Dead fish began to float to the surface.

'There must be some kind of ordinance,' I shouted above the noise. 'In the bay.'

Ellen grabbed my arm. 'Dear Lord. They'll be blown to bits.'

The underwater detonations continued to ignite around the boat. Instead of heading to safety when they could, we watched in disbelief as Henry forced Bram to sit back down (he'd been trying to use the oars to head to shore), and casually reclined in the bow and lit a cigar, passing it to Bram. He then found another for himself. Seemingly unperturbed, the boatman gathered fish in a bucket, while Bram and Henry puffed away, bombs discharging around them.

A leathery local joined us just as another reverberation sounded.

'Fools,' he said in his gravelly voice, using the stem of his pipe to point at the boat. 'They've drifted into an underwater minefield,' he explained.

'What?' Ellen and I chorused.

'Aye, they've coasted into the area used by the navy over yon fort for training. Didn't they see the warning signs?' His pipe indicated some signage by the jetty. 'They'll be lucky to make it to shore in one piece.' He shook his head and wandered off.

Finally, the discharges ceased. The silence was deafening. Bit by bit, normal sounds resumed. The lazy murmuring of the waves, the sniffles of children, the chatter of those who'd gathered at the foreshore ambling back to their spots. The caw of gulls. Henry's voice carried across the now calm water. Following his instructions, the boatman picked up the oars and headed for land.

Ellen and I ran to meet the boat.

'That was a right craic,' chuckled Bram, leaping ashore then offering Henry his hand.

'I've never felt so alive,' exclaimed Henry, stepping onto the sand and stretching his arms above his head.

‘You pair of eejits,’ I bellowed as I reached them, my fear bursting forth. ‘What were you thinking? And don’t you look at me like that,’ I reprimanded the boatman, shaking my finger at him. ‘What were you doing taking them over there? They could have been killed.’

‘’Twas that gentleman insisted, ma’am.’ The boatman nodded towards Henry, who gave an amused shrug.

‘I wanted to see the fort. Didn’t know it would defend itself from curiosity quite so vehemently.’

‘Henry,’ cautioned Ellen. Her eyes flashed. ‘We thought you were going to —’ Tears began to well.

I was too angry to cry. ‘Surely, you knew about the minefield, Bram. You’ve been talking to all and sundry. Someone must have warned you. There are signs.’ I gestured towards them.

‘Oh, they did,’ admitted Henry. ‘There are. We just thought it worth the risk.’

Ellen gasped. I swung to Bram. ‘Worth risking your life? You have a son, Bram. A wife, too, yet you still went on this foolhardy boys’ adventure? Do you realise what might have happened?’

‘But it didn’t, Florrie,’ began Bram, holding out his arms. I slapped them away.

‘Don’t you Florrie me. I can’t believe that you only thought to satisfy your own selfish desires —’

‘Florence, Florrie,’ said Henry, using his Shylock voice, like treacle over pancakes. ‘Stop making such a fuss, dear. Leave Brammie alone. No harm has been done.’ He laughed and, before I could prevent it, looped his arm through mine. ‘Come, let’s go back to the hotel, and while Brammie and I change our clothes, how about I organise a whisky, or better still, a tisane for you. Calm those nerves. Funny, you never struck me as the hysterical kind.’ He patted my hand.

I was made to walk a few steps with him, Bram and Ellen following, before the fury spreading in my chest reached my head. I whipped my arm from his, any notion of being strategic forgotten.

I stood inches from him, our faces level. ‘How dare you,’ I began; my tone was steel. ‘You may have my husband at your beck and call, but you’ve no right to tell me what to do and how to think or feel.’ My words were a sword that I thrust again and again. ‘Nor do you have any right to

tell me how I may speak to my husband. That's my business, which makes it absolutely none of yours, sir. This is not the theatre. I'm not a character in your production that you can direct hither and thither and bend to your will. This is real life, Henry, mine and Bram's, and I won't allow you to treat it with your usual callous disregard.'

Henry's mouth dropped open. 'No-one has ever spoken to me like that before.'

'Then it's about time,' I snapped.

'Brammie,' said Henry. 'Are you going to allow your wife to speak to me like that?'

I spun towards my husband, folding my arms. 'Well, *Brammie*?' I dared him.

Ellen stifled a grin.

Bram shifted his gaze between me and Henry, guilt rearranging his features. He cleared his throat. 'Err … Florence doesn't need my permission to speak, Henry.'

I almost keeled over then and there. At once, the heat of my temper cooled. 'Well,' I said, brushing sand from my skirts so Bram and the others wouldn't clock my astonished expression, 'I've had my say and will not mention it again. Go change your clothes, Bram. The mines may not have killed you, but you'll catch a death in those sodden garments.' I deliberately ignored Henry. 'I'm going to check on the wee mannie. Like me and Ellen, he swallowed something most unpalatable. Coming, Ellen?'

With a last withering look in Henry's direction, I entwined my arm through hers and returned to the hotel.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

London, Autumn 1880

A few months after our sojourn in Southsea, Henry kept his word and cast me in Tennyson's play *The Cup*. As excited as I was at being part of Bram and Ellen's world, treading the boards, I also wondered if this was Henry's way of proving he could indeed direct me. Not that he did much of that, as Ellen said. He oversaw very few rehearsals, leaving much of it to Harry and even Bram. Henry liked to manage the big set pieces. I never saw him run lines with Ellen or practise his entrances and exits. He lurked around the theatre, watching, thinking, snapping his fingers for Bram to follow, barking orders, providing feedback on performances he viewed, Harry Loveday a shadow behind him.

I wasn't given a speaking part, so there was no risk of me stealing the limelight. Along with ninety-nine other young women, I was given the very minor role of a vestal virgin. It was impossible to distinguish one from another. No doubt, Henry's idea of humour.

When I read the play, I was underwhelmed. Not that anyone would dare say that to the poet laureate, Alfred, Lord Tennyson. It was an extravagant production, even by Henry's standards, with elaborate sets and a literal cast of hundreds.

'Henry takes realism too far,' commented Bram one evening after a long rehearsal. 'Why must there be real food, real flowers and even damn forests? The quantities of gold leaf, peacock feathers, ostrich feathers, genuine jewels, beggars belief. It's make-believe, for godsakes. And I'm the one who must find the money to pay for such things. Still,' he admitted, after a restorative dram of whisky, 'when everyone is distracted by the staging, they're not considering the rather woeful plot.'

Woeful plot or not, the elation of being part of the production, the numerous rehearsals, the costume fittings, applying make-up, having my hair brushed and braided by expert hands, escaping my everyday life for a few months, was something I'll hold onto for the rest of my days. I couldn't help but be grateful to Henry for that.

What I didn't expect when I was given a role, but enjoyed equally, was observing my husband at work.

At home, Bram was an altogether different prospect. It wasn't so much that he ceded control to me, though in many ways, apart from handling bills, he did. I was responsible for the day-to-day running of the house – with a great deal of help from Mrs Daw and Emma. Matilda had moved into her own accommodation after we returned from holidays, a small flat not too far away, so we still saw each other regularly. I don't know where I would have been without Elizabeth either – certainly not able to perform at the Lyceum. But seeing Bram execute his duties as acting manager, with forty-eight staff at his beck and call, as well as handling distinguished audiences every single night, made me see a different side of him – a more authoritative one. I liked it, or more accurately, I admired and respected this side of his nature.

When one of the lads in the orchestra left his violin case in the aisle, blocking it, Bram was on the warpath.

'Whose is this?' he called angrily, holding the offending item aloft. A young musician held up a trembling hand. 'Mine, Mr Stoker,' he squeaked. The orchestra ceased tuning their instruments, the conductor glaring at the shaking lad.

'The aisles must be clear at all times, do you understand?' said Bram. 'Even something as insignificant as this can cause injury.'

The lad nodded, his Adam's apple bobbing up and down. He went to climb out of the pit to retrieve it.

'Stay there, Joshua, isn't it? I'll bring it to you.' Bram strode down the aisle and passed it to the red-faced lad.

'How's your mammy, by the way?' he asked, his martial tone evaporating. 'Has she recovered from the ague she was suffering?'

'Y–yes, s–sir, thank you, sir,' stammered Joshua, taking his case and sitting down.

‘He can be a right bastard, Mr Stoker,’ whispered one of the vestal virgins, watching the incident unfold. ‘It’s that Irish temper. I wouldn’t want to be on the end of that.’

‘I can think of something I’d like to be on the end of,’ said another of the virgins, sidling up and winking. There were giggles. Among the extras, no-one knew I was married to Bram.

‘Say what you like,’ said another. ‘But he never forgets to ask after family, does he?’

There were nods and gentle murmurs. More than a few women’s eyes stayed on Bram. Now I could add these virgins to the ever-growing tally of women who loved him. Was I the only one inured to his charm?

I was there the day his Irish temper flared again. This time, it was with Jonathan Hurst who oversaw the box office.

‘Jonathan!’ Bram hollered from the middle of the auditorium, almost bringing the rehearsal to a standstill. He was doing a check on the seating plan for the premiere. In less than two weeks, the play would open.

Jonathan appeared at the back of the theatre, before he scurried down the aisle to where Bram stood, sheets of paper in his hand. The carpenters and upholsterers repairing some seating darted out of his way.

‘These seats belong to Lord Southby and his party,’ said Bram, his voice carrying. ‘Not as you’ve allocated here, the duke and his entourage.’

Jonathan stared at the page Bram showed him. ‘I … I thought a duke should be given precedence, sir.’

‘Not in my theatre,’ said Bram darkly. ‘Lord Southby is not only a loyal and frequent patron, he’s a Beefsteak Room regular. They always get preference, understand? Now,’ he continued in an ordinary tone, his anger forgotten, ‘here’s the names of those Henry wishes to be given complimentary tickets. See they’re sent an invitation.’ These were issued on specially printed cards, like a summons to a ball or royal event. Another Bram innovation.

‘Yes, sir.’

Was it only me who saw the flash of bitterness Jonathan levelled at Bram when his back was turned? He wasn’t the only one. Bram set high standards and expected others to follow them.

I marvelled at Bram’s vitality, knowing that once he finished here, he still had correspondence to deal with, plus all the social engagements Henry

organised. How he managed to spend any time at home or focus on his own writing was indeed a miracle.

Perhaps I *was* too hard on him. Perhaps *my* expectations were too high.

Yet, having seen my husband take command when Henry wasn't to be found, watching him in a subservient role the moment the man materialised became increasingly repugnant. He trailed after Henry; 'Yes, Chief', 'No, guv'na'. It pained me to see him reduced so.

It was only when he was in Henry's company that Bram became somehow diminished. He was like a puppy, tail wagging, slavishly devoted. My husband was quite the conundrum. At times, he was all manliness and leadership; at others, womanly and eager to be led. It was confusing and it troubled me in a way I couldn't articulate. I wondered how long Bram could tolerate such a situation.

I could scarcely stand it.



The opening night of *The Cup* is seared into my memory. Not so much for the excitement of being on stage before a full house, at one moment alive with noise and movement and the next, as the lights dimmed and the music commenced, falling silent – but because of Oscar.

Over the months, apart from occasionally hearing his name in relation to salons or as part of a Beefsteak dinner (to which I hadn't been invited), I'd managed to push him (mostly) to the back of my mind. Married life and motherhood didn't allow room for the perfidious ideas that used to crowd my head. Oscar began to fade into the background as a fond memory of what might have been but wasn't. Or so I told myself.

Until *The Cup*.

It was half an hour before curtain call. I was sitting in a corner of the large room given over to the extras for dressing and make-up, when I saw Ellen's maid, Judith, push her way through the crush. I was dwelling on what I'd be doing had I been at home and feeling more than a little grateful I was here, about to embark on an adventure instead of putting the babbie to bed or sitting by the fire reading. I wasn't aware Judith sought me until there was a light tap on my shoulder.

'Miss Terry is asking for ye, missus,' she whispered.

‘Ohhh! Who’s important then?’ drawled one of the virgins beside me. A ‘virgin’ who usually made her living in the music halls, and we all knew what that meant. If Mother or Father could see me now, they’d be mortified.

Grateful Judith hadn’t called me by my name, I swiftly followed her, wondering what was so important Ellen was asking for me this close to the curtain rising. Was something wrong? Had Henry changed his mind and decided I wasn’t good enough to make my debut?

‘Look what arrived for you,’ said Ellen, as I entered her dressing room. Filled with flowers and gifts from admirers, screens draped with sparkling, bold costumes, a heady, wild fragrance that was all Ellen’s, as well as dozens of pairs of shoes, hats, wigs, bright jewels, and the oily smell of make-up, her room was an Aladdin’s cave – a place where magic happened. A snowstorm of powder-dust enveloped me. As I reached her side, she thrust an arrangement of beautiful flowers into my hand. Judith shut the door and busied herself folding Ellen’s regular clothes.

Dressed as Queen Camma, Ellen was resplendent in a gown that wrapped around her fine figure. It appeared to have been woven from the wings of a dragonfly. Bands of gold circled the lower part of her arms, and a bejewelled cap sat atop her golden locks. I couldn’t speak; I was stunned by her regal beauty.

Ellen looked pointedly at the flowers, clearing her throat. ‘For you.’

‘Why, Ellen, that’s so very kind of —’

‘They’re not from me.’ Ellen caught my eye in the mirror. She jerked her chin towards an identical array on the table. ‘*They’re* mine. I’m not supposed to tell you who sent them, but I didn’t see the point of keeping it a secret. Here,’ she twisted around and passed me a note. It was addressed to her. ‘It explains everything.’

At once, my heart seized. I knew that handwriting – the ostentatious whorls, the elegant slope to the cursive. I sank into a nearby chair.

> I send you some flowers – two crowns. Will you accept one of them, whichever you think will suit you best. The other – don’t think me treacherous, Nellie – but the other please give to Florrie from yourself.

I glanced at Ellen.

‘Keep reading,’ she instructed, applying more powder to her face.

> I should like to think that she was wearing something of mine the first night she comes on the stage, that anything of mine should touch her. Of course if you think – but you won’t think she will suspect? How could she? She thinks I never loved her …

My face grew hot. I continued reading.

> … thinks I forget. My God, how could I!

Aware of Ellen’s eyes upon me, I kept my head lowered even as my cheeks flamed, and my disloyal heart somersaulted. Ellen knew all about Oscar. It was one of the many confidences we’d shared while away. Not that my past amours compared with hers. Why, Ellen had been married for the first time at sixteen, and had two illegitimate children to her artist lover, Edward Godwin, before she gained respectability for them and herself by marrying the actor Charles Wardell Kelly.

A bell sounded in the corridor. ‘Fifteen minutes!’ called Harry.

I had to move, resume my place with the other virgins.

I pushed my face into the flowers, shutting my eyes and inhaling their sweet fragrance and even sweeter memories. A part of me was so touched by Oscar’s gesture, but the other part of me wanted to slap his face with a glove, challenge him.

She thinks I never loved her …

What else was I supposed to think when he neglected me the way he did? First, he gifts jewellery, a painting, and makes a sketch of me. I shivered. I recalled how intimate that was, facing him in that small room, watching him watching me. The way his pencil flew over the page, his eyes following the flow of my hips, my waist, my breasts, lingering on my lips. It was as if with every stroke of his pen, he caressed me. The moving pencil aroused fire; caused my breath to quicken and my insides to melt. Jesus wept, if Oscar had sought to take me that day, I would have willingly lain with him. And yet, for all that happened between us, spoken and unspoken, public and private, he’d left me with the humiliating task of explaining his absence, his silence, his indifference. It wasn’t until Bram appeared that I

could hold my head up again, laugh at my negligent once-suitor. How dare Oscar try and second-guess me, tell Ellen, of all people, what I thought and felt. For all I knew, *he* forgot me and, as for loving me, I was not Madame Blavatsky, capable of reading minds or seeing the future.

Anyway, he'd had plenty of time to see me since – to talk to me.

He loved me. My heart tilted. *Once upon a time …*

I folded the paper, wishing my hands wouldn't tremble so. This was just typical of Oscar. Everything was a drama, including the stage debut of his former paramour.

'I hope you don't mind me letting you read that,' asked Ellen, facing me. 'I thought you should. Oscar had no right to put me in such a position, not that he'd see it that way,' she said tenderly.

I planted a kiss on her cheek and, plucking a flower from the crown, pinned it to the inside of my gown. 'I'm glad you let me. Mind you, I don't know what I'll tell Bram.'

'Will it bother him?' she asked. Her own husband chose to be wilfully ignorant about her relationship with Henry.

'Not terribly, I shouldn't think.' Not at all was more likely. He'd never shown any jealousy towards Oscar, or my past with him. As far as Bram was concerned, Oscar failed where he succeeded. Likewise all the other men who paid me outrageous compliments, whispered improper suggestions. I had the strong impression Bram enjoyed their attempts at seduction, knowing I was more than capable of repelling them. Their wasted interest in me reflected well upon him.

I placed the remainder of the floral crown carefully on the edge of Ellen's dresser. 'Are you going to wear yours?' I asked her, nodding towards it.

Ellen laughed. 'Not with this.' Her hands swept her gown. 'Lemon —' she began as I reached the door. 'Oscar and you … Do you …' She paused and pressed her fingers to her lips momentarily. 'I mean, do you love him … still? It's evident he has feelings for you.'

I glanced towards Judith, who tactfully began to hum. I approached Ellen and knelt by her side, looking at her reflection. 'Perhaps,' I said softly. 'Once. I thought I did. But then Bram came and now it's no longer … I mean … I can't …'

Ellen reached for my hand and squeezed it. ‘You don’t need to explain. Anyway,’ she said, releasing me and tucking a stray hair away, ‘you made the right choice, my dear. Trust me on that. Oscar …’ She pulled a face, half-grim, half-amused. ‘Well, let’s just say, he’s not really husband material.’

As I joined the other virgins, my inconstant mind wondered if I *had* made the right choice. Oscar might not be husband material, but was Bram?



It was late as the brougham drove away from the theatre, the streetlamps giving off a gentle glow, disguising the sullied snow banked up against houses and shops. The traffic was scant. Cab drivers had either retired for the night, or were gathered under a lantern, smoking and gossiping, their breath opaque ribbons dancing with tobacco fumes. A thinly dressed beggar shivered towards them, hands outstretched in supplication. It was the third poor creature I’d seen, the last with two emaciated children in tow. Bram tried to distract me from the sight of the wretches forced to wander on such a bitter night, drawing me close and whispering, reliving the night. It was warm beside him, and he smelled of cigars and the satisfaction of a job well done. I was still dizzy from the experience of being on stage. The heat of the lights, the press of bodies, the throbbing power of the music, the deep, resonant voices chanting lines I repeated in my mind. The hundreds of faces watching us in the weighty darkness, the excited whispers in the wings, the pushing, the peering, the running to make cues. Seeing first Henry, then Ellen and the other actors transform from the ordinary folk I knew into something imperial and otherworldly the moment they stepped onto the stage, had been remarkable. The deafening applause, the shouts of ‘Brava’ and ‘Bravo’ when first Ellen, then Henry, took their bows.

Bram was euphoric, recalling the comments we’d heard in the Beefsteak Room afterwards, the hearty congratulations given to both him and Henry, and to Ellen. I lost myself in his descriptions, adding the praise I’d heard. By the time we reached Southampton Street, we were both fizzing with excitement, joy bubbling within us.

Once home, we tried to be quiet but, in the manner of those who have drunk success, failed. We laughingly shushed each other, pointing down the corridor towards George’s room and up to the maids. I was about to enter

my bedroom when, much to my surprise, Bram grabbed hold of my wrist and pulled me towards his. It had been so long since he'd shown any interest in his husbandly duties, I initially wondered where he was taking me.

Ever since I'd been given a role in *The Cup*, our relationship had undergone an alteration. Instead of being an audience to Bram's life, I was beside him, and I relished that. So, it seemed, did he. We'd discussed rehearsals, the set, the music; projected spectators' reactions, admired Ellen's acting or that of other players; we became a team. Henry Irving's name ceased to grate, as he too was part of our mutual project.

A small fire burned in the hearth, making a shadow-world. Bram drew me to the bed and, as I stood in bewilderment, slowly unbuttoned my dress, helping me shiver out of it. With great patience, he unlaced my corset. Butterflies began to perform a ballet in my stomach; my mind was a battlefield of conflicting thoughts. Who was this man? When I went to remove my drawers, he stayed my hand.

'Leave them on,' he whispered hoarsely.

Relieved he didn't want me entirely naked, nervous he wanted me at all, I lay down and waited. Bram knelt beside me, on top of the blankets and, using his considerable strength, flipped me over onto my stomach. My face fell into his pillows. Before I could exclaim or reposition my legs, he pulled me up onto all fours, widened the opening in my drawers and entered me the way a dog does its bitch.

At first, I didn't understand what was happening and, when I did, he was already inside, thrusting quickly, harder than I ever remembered, one hand on my back, the other holding my hair, as if I was a horse he was riding.

There was the crude slap of his flesh against mine, his bollocks swinging to hit my arse. It was so carnal. My breasts jiggled and swayed. I lowered my head, screwed up my eyes, wishing I could reach down and pleasure myself, kindle some desire. I thought of Oscar's flowers, his words. *I loved her ...*

Then, Bram became still. With a great groan, he collapsed across my back, and I fell beneath him. I felt the hot rush of his seed, the shudders that ran through his body. When they ceased, he lifted himself slightly and withdrew, then rolled onto his side. His arm blended into mine. I could feel

a trail of stickiness across my thigh; the throbbing of my cunny; smell his hot manliness. Bands of frustration tightened my loins.

Boldly, I twisted towards him, reached for his hand, and drew it towards my aching centre. I parted my legs so there was no mistaking what I wanted. Before I could place his hand there, he snatched it away, and began to untangle my hair, which had come loose. Then, almost solicitously, as if I was an invalid, he covered me with the blankets.

He sighed and drew me into his arms. My head was against his chest. The coarse hairs tickled my cheek; his heart began to resume a steadier beat. With vacant eyes, I watched the Stygian silhouettes climb the walls and ceiling. What had just happened? It was so unexpected, so … What? Passionate? No, it wasn't that, though there was no question Bram had been filled with desire. But was it for me? Or was I simply the vessel he used to quench it? Why had Bram turned me over? Was it so he didn't have to see me? The few times Bram and I had relations, perfunctorily, as if we were strangers, I'd been on my back. Was this his preferred way? Or was it because I was now a mother, he couldn't bear to look at my body?

I searched for something to say, to break the silence between us. All my words had fled. In the space they left, sadness, and another emotion I didn't want to identify, crept.

Then, still holding me close, Bram murmured. 'You were wonderful on stage tonight. Magnificent.'

'How could you tell?' I whispered hoarsely. 'I looked and behaved just like ninety-nine others.' Should I tell him about Oscar's flowers?

No. I'd keep Oscar's gift to myself.

I loved her.

Bram didn't answer. He lay there, eyes closed, his breathing gradually deepening. After a while, I raised myself carefully on an elbow and studied him. Watery moonlight entered the room through the gap in the curtains. He looked so young in repose, all the cares of his daily life erased from his features. The lines were softened, his wide mouth immobile. Even the dark circles beneath his eyes faded into other planes and angles. The little pulse in his neck, just visible where his beard ended, fluttered. How vulnerable was a throat, I thought. Bram's was very white, completely unblemished. The steady beat, so revealing of one's heart. When it came to me, did Bram

have a steady heart? Damn the niggling doubts that ate at my peace. Only, they didn't arise from nowhere, did they?

Why could I not love him the way a wife should?

Why could I not love him as I had Oscar …?

Could I love another man? Should I? It wasn't vain to acknowledge there were men eager to bed me – James Whistler, William Terriss, John Millais, even Gilbert's friend, the up-and-coming politician Harry Cust. Then there was the Prince of Wales. Believing me to be a member of the chorus, he'd made his intentions apparent in the Beefsteak Room tonight. When Ellen told him I was Bram's wife, it only increased his ardour. I wondered what would happen if I showed interest in Oscar. What would he do?

I burned with shame for even thinking it. I was no Ellen, no Lillie Langtry. God knows, I could never break my vows. Was it so great a sin to *imagine* doing so?

I lowered myself back onto the pillow, trying to ignore the hunger between my legs, the stickiness. I should rise and return to my own room, sort my tempestuous thoughts, but I didn't want to disturb Bram.

After a long while, just when I thought I could make my escape and was beginning to slide out of the bed, Bram rolled towards me. His member pressed into my side, hard, primed. He sighed with such longing, it gave me pause.

'Oh, Henry,' he murmured.



Oh, Henry.

How those words haunted me; those, and the memory of his unyielding manhood, rigid against my thigh. Together, they plagued my every moment. I drifted about the house, simmering with confusion. I was plunged into a tossing ocean, and every day was a fight to keep my head above water. Unable to think of hosting an afternoon tea, I ceased to send out invitations. The thoughts I'd buried deep in my heart now bubbled to the surface. Was my marriage a sham?

Oh, Henry.

I began to look at my husband anew. Suddenly, his friendships with other men, with that poet he wrote long ardent letters to in America, with his friend Hall Caine (a foppish little man, I thought cruelly), became freighted with new meaning. I'd observe the way Bram would clap brawny tradesmen on the back, his palm lingering. How he'd bend towards the stagehands, smiling into their eyes. How he'd stand close to handsome William Terriss, whispering, before they'd burst into gales of laughter and clutch each other's forearms.

But William had a wife, didn't he? Henry and Ellen were lovers. Not that it always made a difference. I'd been wondering if Bram had a mistress, but what if he sought satisfaction somewhere else altogether? I'd heard stories about men who, to hide their real inclinations, married and had children. Was I a disguise Bram wore to hide his true nature?

I began to wonder where he went every night after the performance. Was it the Beefsteak Room as he said? Did Henry really keep him there entertaining sponsors and patrons until the sun rose? Or was Bram lurking in some seedy establishment that catered to certain tastes, a nearby molly house? What were the men up to when they retreated to Henry's apartment in Grafton Street?

Oh, Henry.

I wanted to say something, ask him, only I didn't know how. My entire life I'd spoken my mind, refused to be cowed … until now. This was different. What would I do if Bram told me something I didn't want to hear? Leave him and return to Ireland? God forbid, did I divorce him? Imagine what the family would say. What our friends, society, or those who made a game of such things would mutter. It was all well and good for Genevieve Ward – she was a countess, an applauded actress. Who was I? Who was Bram? We'd be utterly ruined. Not just me and Bram, but our son as well …

What if I was wrong? What if this was something my wretched imagination had conjured so *I* didn't have to be intimate with my husband anymore?

I was locked in a turmoil of self-doubt and unhappiness. How did other women deal with such things? Their worries about their husbands? Their marriages? Themselves? Who did they unburden themselves to? There was no-one I could confide in, not even Ellen. She loved Bram. I couldn't put it in a letter to Phil either. I just couldn't.

I was completely alone in this.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Cheyne Walk and Dublin, 1881

When the lease on Southampton Street was due to be renewed, Bram and I made the decision to rent a bigger house in Cheyne Walk, Chelsea. Situated halfway between Kensington Vestry Wharf and Draw Dock, the Cadogan steamboat ferry stopped virtually at the door, taking Bram – via London Bridge – to Waterloo. From there, it was a short walk to the Lyceum. It was a rather grand, if narrow, house of five stories, offset from the rest of the street. Across the road was the Embankment, a lovely place to promenade most afternoons with its granite retaining walls, row of young trees and splendid lampposts. The views from the front door and windows captured the river. When the tide was high, it was a delightful vista, even on drizzly days. Low tide exposed the pitted riverbed, attracted the curious mudlarks, and a terrible odour. Not that it bothered young Irving, who liked nothing better than to watch the water traffic or listen to the large cabs known as growlers rumbling along the macadam.

George contributed towards the lease monies, which was just as well, because it was considerably more expensive than our humble abode in Southampton Street. Thank goodness the move gave me plenty to do, decorating the rooms and purchasing new furniture to fill the extra space – anything so I wouldn't dwell on my growing doubts about my husband's inclinations and what they signified about him. About me.

As the weeks went by and Bram didn't seek my bed again, I began to feel relief that I was to be spared not only physical congress, but also a conversation I felt must happen but dreaded. Was I a coward? Dear Lord, yes. Was this the easier path? I'm not certain. But it was the path I chose. Contentment, with my marriage, with Bram, became a costume I donned daily, all while dousing spot fires of bitterness and doubts flaring in my

soul. I kept asking myself, if I'd known what my marriage to Bram would entail, what it would deny me, would I ever have agreed to wed him?

Even though my resolution to be nice to Henry was sorely tested at this time, I maintained it, all while praying fervently for strength. The strength to either bring matters to a head or endure.



Come mid-summer, I reached a decision. Whatever Bram was, whatever I was to him, I was still, in the eyes of God and man, his wife; I was Mrs Bram Stoker and that was beginning to mean something in our London circles. It was time for me to put aside my destructive thoughts and strike out on my own. To mark my new resolve, I began to plan my very first salon – Lady Jane style, as I'd once dreamed. After all, not only was our new house more suited to such an event, but I could count several London luminaries as friends and others as acquaintances. Matilda had brought a range of artists into my circle. These same people were connected, known and admired. I felt certain their presence in my home would, over time, bring others to my door as well.

Before I could begin any serious preparations, or think of putting together an invitation list, for which I would seek the advice of Ellen, the Gilberts and Lady Jane, I had to return to Dublin. Phillippa, my sworn-spinster sister, was getting married. The wee mannie and I, along with Elizabeth, left for Dublin just as Bram was preparing to accompany Henry and Ellen on a provincial tour. We parted with promises to write to each other, and Bram gave me gifts for his mammy, his sister Margaret and Thornley's wife, Emily.

My homecoming was greeted with great fanfare by my siblings, especially Phil. The moment Elizabeth and I walked through the door, Irving was whisked into Alice's arms and paraded about the house, while I was hurried into the drawing room to be reunited with Mother and Father. Captain Walton, who was a bit white around the muzzle now, didn't know who to follow, but decided that if Irving was going to be given some Victoria sponge, he was the better option. Catherine took Elizabeth upstairs to show her the room she'd share with Irving.

Alice had grown taller in the year or so since I was last there. Her lithe body now had curves, her eyes a knowing twinkle. Catherine had grown

into a lovely young lady and was, according to Phil, turning the heads of all the eligible and not-so-eligible men in the neighbourhood.

‘That Cormac O’Leary has been sniffing around her worse than Captain Walton does Mrs Browning’s bitch.’

Cormac O’Leary was a known rabble rouser who was against Home Rule. ‘You must be having conniptions, Father,’ I exclaimed.

‘He threatened him with a beating if he ever showed his face here again,’ said Mother, shaking her head.

Father chuckled, his bony shoulders jiggling. ‘Can still inspire terror in the lads,’ he said proudly.

‘If you keep doing that to anyone who shows interest in your daughters, we’ll never get rid of them!’ complained Mother.

Everyone laughed.

It was shocking how much my parents had aged since I last saw them. As if their years on this earth had suddenly caught up with them. I didn’t remember a time when the hairs circling Father’s pate weren’t grey, but since when had his back become so bent and the hand that gripped his walking stick so twisted? Mother’s hair had metamorphosed from rich auburn to mostly silver. Her voice had a tremor, and she kept clearing her throat. She relied on a pair of glasses and a magnifier to read the paper, and to examine me and Irving.

‘You’re looking thin, Florrie,’ she said, her eyes owl-like in the large lenses. ‘Don’t you think so, James? Is that Stoker husband of yours treating you well?’

How could I reveal my fears to my own mother? I was too ashamed, too afraid of what she’d say. My parents had never really forgiven Bram for throwing away his civil service job and linking our future to a theatre company. I hesitated just a second before answering. ‘Yes, Mother. Very well.’

Alice chose that moment to bring Irving back and I swooped upon them.

Mother harrumphed loudly, then held out her arms for Irving. ‘Come to Granny Moo!’ she clucked.

Maude was unable to leave her house because the babbie was due any day, so I would take Irving for a visit. Likewise, James and Billy were now living in the city and would come by to see me after work.

Phil's fiancé, the delightful John Knott, a wiry teacher with round spectacles and a soothing voice, joined us for dinner. Sat around our old dining room table that first evening, watching Alice, Catherine and Phil tease each other, bait Father, and plead with Mother about going to the theatre unaccompanied, made me realise how much I'd missed them. Missed the easy banter, knowing that even when you disagreed or argued, you were still loved. My eyes filled.

'Are you alright, Kitten?' whispered Phil.

I dashed away the tear running down my cheek. 'Don't be nice,' I hissed. 'I'll be quite undone. Quick. Call me names.'

It was something Phil and I did when we were on the brink of crying – demanded the other think of awful things to say.

'You're a proper dryshite,' she gibed. 'You're so ugly, even the tide wouldn't take you out. You're a right gombeen —'

'Enough, enough,' I began, smiling wanly.

'You can thank me later.' She put her hand over mine. 'We need to talk.'

'We do,' I said, and extracted my hand. It was the last thing I wanted.

I hadn't accounted for Phil's determination. After John had left, along with James and Billy, I pleaded weariness and, first making sure Irving was settled, retreated to my brothers' old room where I was sleeping. I changed and sat by the window, gazing upon Marino Park. The late evening sky was a glorious rainbow of violet, gold and rose. Couples enjoyed the balmy weather; men were out walking dogs, and two women pushed a stroller. The ducks that normally occupied the area near the rotunda were roosting by the pond. Above, a murmuration of starlings circled and glided, little blots of darkness against the paintbox sky. Lost in memories of meandering walks, picnics on the grass, and other times, my ribs grew tight, my throat too. Sweet Jesus. Was it just three years since I married and left Dublin? It felt a lifetime. I'd been another person.

The door opened, and in slipped Phil. My heart sank. I knew that look.

'Out with it,' she said.

She dragged over a stool and joined me by the window. 'There's no use denying it, Kitten. I can see you've something on your mind, something that makes you forlorn. No, it's worse than that. I sensed you were withholding in your letters. What is it?'

'Naught, Phil.' I flashed a tired grin. 'You're imagining it.'

‘Ha! You’ve always said I’ve no imagination. You can’t grant me one now just because you don’t want to divulge the source of your unhappiness.’

‘I’m not unhappy.’

‘Then why do you have a face like a slapped arse?’

I gave a bark of laughter. ‘Where did you learn that one?’

‘John’s mammy. Now, stop avoiding my question. Tell me, what’s Bram done?’

‘How do you know Bram’s done anything?’

‘I didn’t, but I do now.’ She waited, then reached over and took my hand in hers, stroking my fingers. Damn if my eyes didn’t well.

I released a long sigh. ‘You’re not going to give up, are you?’

‘Not when it’s you, Kitten, no.’

‘I don’t want to foist my problems on you. You’re about to get married, and John’s lovely.’

She scoffed and waved her hands. ‘More reason to tell me – I’m immune, inoculated by love.’ Her mirth died when she saw my expression. ‘Oh, Florrie, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to make a mockery of —’

‘No, no, it’s not that. You’re not. It’s just —’ Then, before I could change my mind, I told her – about how Bram behaved around Henry Irving, their strange, unbalanced relationship. How Bram idolised the man, failed to recognise his faults. How Henry was akin to a parasite, demanding all Bram’s time and attention, leaving nothing for me or Irving. ‘Worse,’ I added, ‘Bram appears to be willing to sacrifice everything for him. Apart from some children’s stories – many of which he’d written before we ever moved to London – his dreams of being a serious novelist appear to have been discarded. Everything he does now is to further Henry Irving’s ambitions …’

What I didn’t admit were my doubts about the nature of their relationship; how I feared it was more than hero-worship. How these doubts grew to encompass any man who came into Bram’s ken. Though Phil and I had read *The Symposium* together and resolved not to condemn those who loved their own sex, to understand them even, I told myself it wasn’t fair to divulge my concerns to her. Anyhow, I wasn’t entirely sure what I was dealing with. I might be mistaken …

When I finished, Phil was silent. Outside a cat wailed. From within the house, Captain Walton began to bark. There were footsteps, a shout, then the soft tinkle of the piano forte.

'Oh, Florrie,' said Phil. 'Are you sure —?'

'Please,' I said, holding up my palm. 'Don't say I'm mistaken, that it's just Bram being loyal and doing a wonderful job. I'm not and he is. This is more than that. I can't put my finger on it exactly … I just feel Bram is diminished by Henry when the opposite should be true.'

'I don't know what to say,' said Phil finally. 'I can't imagine this man you're describing as Bram Stoker.'

'That's the problem, Phil. It's only when Henry is around that his behaviour undergoes this alteration.'

'Does he know how unhappy Henry makes you?'

I scoffed. 'He must. I've said it often enough. But, in all fairness, it's not so much Henry who makes me unhappy, conceited and selfish as he is, it's that Bram is so deferential to him. Prioritises Henry's needs over his own, over his family's. What's even worse, I'm not the only one who notices.'

'Who else does?'

I looked at her miserably. 'Everyone.'

Phil chewed her lip a few times before seeking my hand and holding it tightly. 'I'm so sorry, Kitten. I don't know what to say, except that Bram's an eejit.'

If only that was all he was …

'You don't need to say anything.' I sighed and extracted my hand. 'It's helped just telling you.' I gave a dry laugh. 'Admittedly, it all sounds rather irrational. As if Henry's some succubus or monster, draining Bram.' I stood, stretched, then climbed onto the bed and patted the space beside me. 'Enough about me. I've come all this way for your nuptials. Let's talk about *you*.'

Still frowning, Phil joined me. The evening had grown cooler, so we lay under the blankets, heads close together like we used to. 'I'm going to ask you the question you once asked me,' I said.

'Oh?'

'Do you love him?'

'Who? Bram?' quipped Phil.

I snorted, as she knew I would. ‘You know jolly well who I mean. Well, do you love John?’

Phil cupped my cheek, a serious look on her face. ‘I do. But I think I need to ask you again, Florrie. Do you love Bram? It’s clear you care about him or this business with Mr Irving wouldn’t bother you so much.’

I stared at my sister and saw nothing but understanding in her sympathetic eyes.

‘I don’t know,’ I admitted. ‘Truth is, I think I’m afraid to.’

Phil pulled me into her arms and held me tightly as the tears I’d held at bay for so long were finally unleashed.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Cheyne Walk, 1881

The rain kindly held off long enough for my first salon to be a complete success. I'd spared no expense, deciding it would also be an opportunity to celebrate the publication of Bram's collection of children's stories, *Under the Sunset*. Meeting Mr Marston had paid dividends. Handsome ones. It was his company that published Bram's tales. I'd also invited all my friends and, following the suggestions of Gilbert, Lucy, Ellen and Lady Jane, a range of other people from London's artistic and political ranks.

Ellen, the Gilberts, George and Matilda were first to arrive, along with Bram's brother Richard, who was visiting from India and staying with his sister. He was followed by Lady Jane, Hall Caine and his housemate, the artist Frederick Sandys, and James Whistler (I couldn't not invite him; we were practically neighbours). The artist John Singer Sargent, a friend of Matilda's, came, as did the writer and illustrator George Du Maurier, who Gilbert had reluctantly introduced to me at the last Beefsteak dinner with the warning, 'Careful. He's a notorious womaniser, Florence.'

'A Lothario, is he? Then he needs to be wary of me,' I reassured Gilbert. 'I regularly slay them … with my tongue.'

Gilbert chuckled. 'The deadliest weapon known to man.'

'Only to those whom I wield it against.'

Regardless of Gilbert's caution, I was keen to converse with Mr Du Maurier as, having been born in Paris, he spoke fluent French and mine was becoming rusty. He'd asked to meet Sarah Bernhardt, the marvellous French actress I'd encountered last season and who was between tours. Escorting her was her lover, soon to be husband, Aristides Damala. Even the prime minister, William Gladstone, whom Bram had befriended before he was voted into office, came, accompanied by both his wife, Catherine,

and the notorious Sir Richard Burton who, learning about my salon, sent me a note, begging to be included. How could I refuse Sir Richard Burton? Others soon followed – the dashing William Terriss; a young Scottish writer, Arthur Doyle, who I'd bumped into on a walk with the Gilberts one day. There were also a couple of scientists from the Royal Society Lady Jane proposed, at least three journalists Ellen knew, and some philosopher acquaintances of Bram's.

The drawing room in Cheyne Walk was much larger than our previous one, but even so, it felt crowded. Striped wallpaper lined the walls above the oak wainscotting. Gold and cream chintz armchairs and a large chaise lounge were artfully arranged around a Moroccan rug. High-backed wooden seats from our dining room were placed in twos and threes by the large windows. A card table was erected near the fireplace and, sparing no expense, I'd even bought an elegant chess set and placed it on a mahogany table before our towering bookshelves. Hall Caine and Sir Richard were already in the thick of a game.

Cigar smoke swirled, mingling with the odours of perfume, the flower arrangements I'd purchased last-minute, leather, male pride and whisky. Conversation and laughter rose and fell. From my position near the window, I watched with no small degree of pleasure as my drawing room filled with people I admired, those I was yet to become familiar with, some I liked very much and, I admit, those I disliked, as well as some who simply tolerated each other's company. As they entered, I introduced my guests to each other, made sure they had drinks and encouraged them into pairs and small groups of like-minds. With a starched apron over her gown, Emma was ably assisted by two extra maids I'd hired just to serve Mrs Daw's scrumptious food. There were tiny watercress and egg sandwiches, jellied fish, devilled kidneys, miniature cakes, pastel-coloured meringues, as well as tea, coffee, wine and port.

Bram moved with ease through the room, chatting with Lady Jane about the worthiness or otherwise of a new newspaper, the *London Evening News*; congratulating Miss Bernhardt on her recent success in America and Paris. William Terriss was busy flirting with Ellen (a vision in lilac), telling her all about a visit he'd paid to the town of Godalming to see the electric lights.

'They say it won't be long before theatres are using it, too,' he said.

'Don't let Henry hear you say that,' said Ellen. 'If there's one thing Henry abhors above all else, it's change.'

Henry chose that moment to materialise. Eschewing his usual antisocial stance, he'd deigned to accept my invitation. I suppose I should have been flattered. He stood in the doorway, eyebrows bristling, gazing with marked hostility when no-one noticed him until Bram rushed to his side like a moth to a flame, saving me the trouble. Hall Caine, who'd lost his chess game to Sir Richard, fluttered over just as Gilbert, who'd been ready to suggest a rematch, headed in the opposite direction. He really couldn't abide Henry.

Lucy was trying to persuade me, Catherine Gladstone and Matilda to join a group of women who spent one day a week preparing packages for our soldiers in the Transvaal. We'd just agreed when Gilbert sidled over.

'I thought you'd better taste than to invite that ham,' said Gilbert, lifting his glass in Henry's direction.

'What's a party without a bit of melodrama?' I said.

'My mother would agree,' said a voice behind me. My spine tingled and my cheeks flooded with colour.

'Oscar,' I exclaimed, spinning around. I hadn't seen him come in.

Dressed in a royal blue jacket, a silk scarf tied about his neck, he held a glass in one hand and a flower in the other. He quickly handed the stem to me with an elaborate bow. It was a yellow chrysanthemum.

I stiffened. The bloom symbolised slighted love. As he greeted the Gilberts, Mrs Gladstone and Matilda, I swiftly recovered and placed the flower on a table. 'I didn't expect you.'

'I'd never be so boring as to be expected, Florrie.' He bent and kissed my cheek. 'I hope you don't mind me coming. Mammy said I'd be welcome.'

His mother chose that moment to limp across the room, using her cane to push people aside, her black mantilla towering over all of us – even her son.

'Of course you are,' I reassured him. 'Always.' As Lady Jane fussed over Oscar, I searched for Ellen. 'Look who's —'

Ellen gave a shriek and rushed to greet him, William Terriss on her heels. Bram detached himself from the group he was with and slapped Oscar on the back.

'Good to see you, Wilde. It's been a while. Heard you've been busy.'

'Not as busy as you,' said Oscar, gripping Bram's hand. 'Congratulations on the book.'

Bram brushed the compliment away, though I could tell he was pleased. ‘Just some children’s stories inspired by those Mammy and Nurse told me as a child. They’re quite gruesome, really.’

We all tittered, me nervously. They really were. Though I loved macabre stories as much as the next person, when Irving had nightmares from Bram’s tales of morbid hauntings and ferocious beasts, I was more than a little apprehensive.

‘So are most children,’ said Oscar and gulped his wine.

‘Who then grow into gruesome adults,’ I said, looking casually about the room.

Oscar followed my gaze. ‘None of us can stand others having the same faults as ourselves – not even you, Florrie.’

‘Why, Oscar, that presumes I have some.’

There was more laughter and a burst of excited chatter before Bram wandered away to greet new arrivals, including Oscar’s brother, Willie. After telling me how lovely I looked and what a splendid afternoon it was, William Terriss took Ellen aside. Gilbert’s business partner, Arthur Sullivan, drew Lucy, Gilbert and Mr Du Maurier into a deep conversation. I began to relax. Over by the fire, Bram was finding a seat for Lillie Langtry, who’d arrived unaccompanied, pleasing the men, especially Willie Wilde, George and Richard, no end.

‘By the way,’ I said, when it was just me and Oscar. ‘I’ve been wanting to thank you for the lovely flowers you sent on the opening night of *The Cup*. You shouldn’t have.’

Oscar smiled and my heart somersaulted. ‘No, I really should have. But you didn’t wear them.’

‘You saw me?’

‘I’ve always seen you, Florrie.’ He raised his glass in Bram’s direction. ‘Apart from having to endure old Henry, how are you and *Brammie*?’

My lips twitched. ‘You know Henry’s pet name.’

‘Shocking, isn’t it? Less like a Brammie, etcetera. Never mind, I’ve one for the master. Hen-peck, I call him, but don’t tell him.’

‘I think I might …’ I grinned.

Oscar’s hand clutched his chest. ‘Your teasing always undid me.’

‘Oscar. Don’t —’ I went to leave.

‘Wait. Florrie, please. Talk to me.’

I turned back.

‘I can hardly credit that the ingenue I knew in Dublin is responsible for this gathering —’ Oscar’s arm swept the room. Then he saw my face. ‘No, that’s not true. I knew you’d be remarkable. You always were.’

I gave a sad smile.

‘You have a lovely home,’ continued Oscar. ‘But, tell me, how’s married life? Is it everything you wished for?’

It was as if Oscar could see into my soul. There was nothing but sincerity in his eyes; sincerity and something else …

‘It’s … an experience,’ I said with forced levity. I owed Oscar no elucidation. I didn’t owe him anything.

‘Experience is the name we give to our mistakes.’ He tossed back his drink.

‘Then I will leave you to contemplate yours, Mr Experience.’ Before he could think of a clever retort, I joined Hall and Mr Rossetti, who were arguing with Mr Gladstone about the imprisonment of Charles Parnell in Ireland. I was about to engage with them when Mr Du Maurier descended and steered me towards the window, whispering urgently to me … in French.

Still flustered from Oscar, it took a moment to understand him. Once I did, I retreated a step.

‘*Mon Dieu*, Mr Du Maurier,’ I began firmly, speaking French as well. ‘This is neither the time nor place. As I said to you at the theatre last week, and the art exhibition the week before, though I’m flattered by your … proposition, I’m not interested. I’m perfectly happy with my husband.’

We both looked in Bram’s direction. He was deep in conversation with Henry. His eyes were shining, he was smiling broadly and nodding agreeably.

‘As happy as your husband is with Mr Irving?’

First Oscar, now Mr Du Maurier. What was I? A window everyone could see through? It was a full minute before I replied, my eyes narrowing as I beheld my husband and his chief. ‘That’s not happiness, Mr Du Maurier. That’s worship.’ The words escaped before I could prevent them. My hand flew to my mouth.

Mr Du Maurier chortled. ‘My, my, Mrs Stoker. You Irish don’t mince words, even in another language, do you?’

My throat burned, my face too. Of all the people to hear me speak so carelessly. A man who saved his often caustic observations about people for his satirical illustrations and scribblings.

I tried to mitigate the damage, laughing and placing my hand atop where his rested on the windowsill. ‘Who doesn’t worship Mr Irving? Bram is merely following the fashion.’

‘Really? Your husband doesn’t strike me as someone who cares for such tarradiddles,’ said Mr Du Maurier, returning to English.

‘Ah, wait till you get to know him.’ I went to move away, but not before he had the last word.

‘I’d rather get to *know* you, Mrs Stoker …’ I had no trouble understanding his French that time.

The afternoon passed in a whirl after that as I floated from one group to the next, trying not to think about Oscar, Mr Du Maurier, my unguarded words and the potential repercussions. Hall asked me to acquaint him with the journalist who wrote the articles about the outbreak of smallpox earlier in the year and the importance of vaccination. I obliged and left them to talk, having no inclination to discuss infection.

‘You’re a natural hostess, Florence,’ said Lady Jane when I joined her, kissing my cheek with her scarlet lips. ‘It’s not easy bringing such a disparate group together, but you’ve done a marvellous job.’

Her praise meant the world.

‘I was hoping there’d be more than verbal disagreements,’ said Willie, addled with spirit, pretending to box and almost falling over.

‘You’d still manage to be a punchline, dearest,’ said Oscar, holding his brother upright.

By the time the clock chimed seven, most of the guests had left, saying how much they’d enjoyed themselves.

‘It was all Florence’s doing,’ Bram told them proudly.

‘Well, Mrs Stoker, I hope you’ll host another soon,’ said Mr Gladstone, shaking Bram’s hand.

Much to my gratification, this sentiment was echoed by everyone.

Finally, only Oscar, Mr Sandys, Hall, Mr Singer Sargent, Mr Whistler, the Irish painter Walter Osborne (a friend of Matilda’s visiting from Brittany), Ellen and Mr Terriss remained.

We sat before the fire, the remnants of the afternoon mostly cleared away. There were just a few empty glasses, platters with some sandwiches and cakes, which I'd told Emma to leave. I'd briefly gone upstairs to say goodnight to Irving. When I returned, everyone was deep in discussion about portraits. Mr Whistler again insisting I allow him to paint mine.

'While it's very gratifying, Mr Whistler,' I said, pouring a fresh cup of tea, 'I oft think that portraits are little more than cruel reminders of who we once were.'

'What do you mean, Mrs Stoker?' asked young Mr Osborne, studying me with gentle eyes.

I eased myself back into a chair, trying to ignore my aching feet. 'The idea that my face might be captured on canvas for all eternity as it appears now, never to grow older or fade, makes me … uneasy. I don't want a reminder of what I'm destined to lose – or for others, over time, to compare and see what I've lost. It's like a punishment for simply living, for being fortunate enough to grow old.'

'Maybe it's just harder for women,' said Ellen. 'We're only celebrated while young.' She'd been painted many times and would lament how different she looked in real life to her portraits, how age had been cruel. (Which was ironic, because to me and her many admirers, she was still beautiful.)

'Don't you think it would be far more interesting if it was the portrait that was altered?' I asked.

'Do you mean artists should paint their subjects differently?' Bram frowned.

'No, not really,' I said.

'Oh, we should always imagine people differently,' said Oscar with a smile. 'Most are much nicer that way.' There were chuckles.

I waited until I'd everyone's attention again. 'Imagine if, in real life, the person painted continued to look just as they did when they sat for the artist, no matter how much time passes. What if instead it was the painting that aged and changed?'

There were exclamations of wonder.

'I like that,' said Oscar, leaning forward in excitement. 'The years no longer touch the person. They remain youthful and lovely regardless of advancing years or their dissipation.'

‘Exactly,’ I nodded, pleased Oscar grasped my meaning. ‘As if by magic, nothing corrupts the person, only the painting.’

There was silence, then some uncomfortable laughter.

‘That would be …’ began Ellen.

‘Demonic,’ said Bram, clearly beguiled by the notion.

‘It would, wouldn’t it?’ laughed Oscar. ‘And utterly marvellous.’

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

London, April 1882

It was spring, a time when flowers bloomed, sunshine occasionally won its eternal battle with the clouds, and the number of layers worn slowly decreased. I was tucked up in bed, enjoying a book I'd borrowed from the bookstall at the nearby train station – *The Italian* by Ann Radcliffe. Midnight had been and gone, and the sounds of civilisation had faded to a gentle rumble. Rain drummed its fingers against the window and the fire crackled and spat cheerily. I'd just reached the part where Vivaldi and his faithful servant, Paulo, were trapped in a dungeon, when I heard the front door latch. George had come home hours ago; Bram was early then.

When he knocked and entered the bedroom, one look at his face told me something was amiss. I closed my book and placed it atop the teetering pile on the side table.

'Hello, dear,' he said. 'I was hoping you were awake.' He dropped a light kiss on my forehead, gestured for me to shuffle over so he could sit on the bed, and released a long, heavy sigh. He glanced at at the book, reaching over to stroke the cover. 'The monk, Schedoni, is a masterpiece of villainy, don't you think?'

For a big man, Bram had lovely hands. Long tapered fingers. Unmarked white skin with a fine dusting of russet hair on the back. A writer's hands.

'Bram?' I said gently. 'What's wrong?'

He paused. 'It's Henry.'

'Oh?' What I wanted to say was, *What's ol' Hen-peck done now?*

Ever since Bram and Ellen advised Henry not to cast himself in the lead role in their latest major production, *Romeo and Juliet*, advice Henry ignored, he'd been in a dudgeon. How he ever thought a man of forty-two

could pass as a youth, no matter his talent, spoke volumes for his conceit; it was all I could do not to squirm watching him. Gilbert showed no such restraint and laughed openly at his performance and went out of his way to share the many caustic reviews and even a satirical *Punch* cartoon featuring him and Ellen. Despite all this, the Lyceum had managed to attract full houses for almost every show. Henry took out the scorn levelled at him on everyone.

'He's become quite the villain,' said Ellen wearily one afternoon when she came to Cheyne Walk. 'Prowling around the corridors like a caged beast, lurking backstage, front-of-stage, even pacing up and down the auditorium, barking at whoever he sees, judging everything Bram or anyone else does. How Ma puts up with him, I don't know.'

'I don't know how *you* put up with him,' I said. We'd long passed the point where I had to pretend with Ellen.

'Well, I don't at present, that's why I'm here,' she said, flopping into a chair and removing her gloves. 'Now, where's my drink?'

That had been back in February. Clearly, things hadn't improved.

Bram drew the heel of his hand across his brow. He took a deep breath. 'Without consulting me or Harry, Henry's hired three extra men —' He hesitated.

'Actors?'

Bram grimaced. 'No. They're … I don't know what you'd call them. Journalists, I suppose.'

'Journalists?' I sat up higher. 'Why would Henry hire journalists? He doesn't own a newspaper. What would he need *them* for?'

Bram's eyes grew dark with perplexity and, as I observed his knitted brow, the colour in his cheeks, the downturned mouth – hurt. It wasn't the first time Henry had caused Bram injury, and my instinct to rage against his employer fought with my wiser self.

In the past, without thinking, I'd level a criticism, foolishly believing that at last a wedge had been driven between the men. Only, just as Ellen had predicted, anything I said that cast aspersions on Mr Irving, even when totally justified or acknowledged by Bram himself, was defended.

No matter what Henry bloody Irving did, I'd end up the offender. Yet, Bram did occasionally share his distress at certain decisions Henry made. That had to mean something, didn't it?

Bram continued. ‘He’s employed an Irish fellow named Louis Fredrick Austin to act as his secretary. Then there’s Joseph Hatton, who’s to be his “official” historian, and a pretentious freelancer named Austin Brereton who’s been hired to oversee publicity.’

I blinked in surprise. ‘What can any of these men do that you don’t? I mean, you’re Henry’s secretary, you’re essentially his historian the way you keep records, and you handle publicity. Does it mean your hours will be reduced? That you’ll have time to pursue your own writing?’ For a fleeting moment, I dared hope. He hadn’t written another word since *Under the Sunset* was published.

He rubbed his beard. ‘When I asked, Henry claimed their employment won’t affect mine. I’ll still have the same duties.’

‘*What?* But … but that’s ridiculous. How? Please don’t tell me it will be like when he employed Charles Howson and mean even more work for you.’

Bram threw up his hands in a gesture of helplessness. ‘Who knows?’ He bent over and slipped off his boots.

‘What does Harry Loveday say about these new hires?’

Bram stared at his socked feet. ‘What Harry always says when Henry makes decisions – nothing – which is tantamount to agreeing.’

Bram loosened his cravat. He slid off his jacket and stood to hang it over the back of a chair. Then, he came around the other side of the bed, lowering himself and wriggling over until his head rested against my breasts and his arm was draped over my thighs. This was so unlike Bram, to seek physical comfort from me.

After my initial shock, I began to stroke the hair from his forehead. It was thick, slightly coarse with whatever he’d put in it to hold it in place. The lamplight made his fringe glint as if it was threaded with gold.

‘No matter how I broached my concerns,’ continued Bram, his voice deep, melodic, ‘Henry refused to offer a satisfactory explanation. Said his mind was made up, that he’ll enjoy the benefit of our combined wisdom.’

Resentment began to nibble at my resolve to remain mute.

‘Anyhow,’ sighed Bram. ‘It’s too late to do anything, the men have signed contracts.’

I halted my caresses. ‘Contracts I suppose Mr Irving had you draw up.’

Silence was my answer.

How dare Henry do this to Bram, deliberately undermine his position. First Mr Howson, now this. As for having Bram create the contracts, that was just Henry's sneaky way of reminding Bram who had the real power. Bram might be acting manager, but he was also Henry's factotum, hired to do his bidding, even if it meant employing others who would undermine him – worse, strip him of his dignity and authority.

Was this a further reaction to his Romeo being mocked? A way of reminding everyone that though he might not be young, he still pulled the strings at the theatre? Couldn't Henry see that Bram wasn't after power? He was no threat in that regard. Bram knew his place – much to my frustration. Everything he did, all the sacrifices he made, was so Henry could shine. Any ambition Bram possessed had been surrendered to Henry's cause.

What I feared the moment I read those early reviews of *Romeo and Juliet* had happened: Henry blamed Bram. I wondered briefly how he'd make Ellen suffer. Then again, the critics had damned her with faint praise as well. Maybe he saw them both as having been wronged – not by his vanity, but because Bram hadn't stopped him.

In many respects, this outcome was inevitable – a consequence of always kowtowing to Henry's every wish. The man didn't appreciate what Bram did, or give him any consideration when making decisions, even those that directly affected him. But, as Bram lay against me, and I continued to run my fingers through his hair, I couldn't say this – it would only cause him further distress. I could scarce remember the last time he turned to me for solace. In fact, I couldn't recall us ever sharing a moment like this. Intimate. *Emotionally* intimate. Perhaps I should be grateful to Henry for giving this to me.

Jesus wept. I didn't want to be grateful to that man for anything.

It took all my self-control not to lift Bram's head away, remove his arm so I might curl up and pull the covers over my head. I was sick and tired of how Henry managed to insert himself between me and my son or Bram and the child.

Only, this time, he may have blundered. No longer would it be just him and Bram (with yes-man Harry on the side), or the 'unholy triumvirate', as they were called. He'd have to balance five men's needs and efforts to please him, their failures too.

‘I think Henry will regret this decision,’ I began cautiously. ‘How can he not if he hires a bunch of third-rate parasites to help him? You’ve done the work of ten men for years without fault. All you need to do, my dear, is remain as steadfast as you always have. Don’t let these new hires get under your skin. Henry will soon see the error of his ways and, when he does, it’ll return to how it has always been.’

‘How’s that?’ asked Bram, twisting his head to look straight at me.

He looked so sad, so in need of reassurance, I provided it, even though the words were dust in my mouth.

‘You and Henry. Stoker and Irving. A duo like no other.’

‘We are, aren’t we?’ he said and smiled.

Later, long after Bram had returned to his own bedroom, I lay in the darkness, listening to the wash of waves on the banks of the river as a boat passed. I thought over what had just happened. Despite our marriage’s shortcomings, Bram trusted me. Maybe it was time I trusted him enough to ask the question burning in me. What I imagined could not be worse than the truth, could it?



A few nights later, after Bram returned from the theatre and had been in his bedroom awhile, I screwed my courage to the sticking place and tiptoed down the hallway, knocked on the bedroom door and poked my head around.

‘Florrie!’ exclaimed Bram. ‘Is everything alright?’ He was in his shirt and trousers, sitting on the edge of his bed.

The glass in the window shook as a late-night cab rattled past.

I shut the door and leaned against it. ‘I … I’ve something I need to ask, Bram. Something I’ve been meaning to ask for months now, and —’ I paused, nervous fingers plucking at the lace of my nightgown. ‘I want you to tell me the truth.’

I waited until his eyes met mine and moved closer. ‘Why do you never seek to be … intimate with me anymore? Not since the opening night of *The Cup*.’

Oh, Henry.

I hated that my voice shook. ‘Is something wrong with me … do I fail to … please you? Or is something, someone …?’ I couldn’t finish.

Bram gave an almost inaudible groan and stared at the ceiling before returning his gaze to me. ‘Oh, Florrie.’ His lips began to tremble, and great tears welled. ‘I … I knew that one day you might ask this … Dreaded the moment you would …’ He released a drawn-out sigh. He looked at me with such trepidation. ‘There’s nothing wrong with you.’ He gave a dry, bitter laugh. ‘You’re beautiful. The most beautiful woman I know. A woman any man would be proud to call wife … but …’

Silence stretched, expanding to fill the distance between us.

‘But?’ The word was both hard and soft, a whisper with sharp edges.

Bram went to stand, then changed his mind. ‘What if I can’t tell you the truth because … because I don’t know what that is?’ He lowered his head into his hands, his fingers ploughing his hair.

I waited. And waited. ‘I don’t understand. You’ll have to explain to me.’ More silence.

Finally, with another low groan, Bram raised his head. His eyes were grey orbs of sorrow. ‘I’ll try …’ His mouth moved, but no sound came. He swallowed, looked at me, then away, preferring the pockets of darkness behind me. ‘When I met you, I thought I could be a regular husband. Be like other men. Turns out, I was wrong. I cannot …’ He dropped his chin. ‘There’s something in me, Florrie …’ He struck his chest, forcefully. ‘Something I cannot help, nor … control.’ To my horror, he began to weep; deep, shuddering sobs that he swallowed as soon as they arose. I took another step towards him, then stopped. He needed to finish. I needed him to finish.

‘I’m sorry,’ he cried. ‘The thought I might lose you … to consider what my life would be without you by my side, is unbearable. I know there are men who desire you, who seek to possess you, pleasure you – how could I not? Yet, even knowing I’ve such eager competition, the choices available to you …’ He bit his lip so hard, the skin broke. Blood bloomed, a single ruby drop trembling in the candlelight. ‘I cannot be the man you want. The husband you deserve; not in the manner expected. I don’t …’ He shook his head, the droplet ruptured, blood dotted his mouth. ‘It’s not you, Florrie. By God. It’s … it’s me.’ He thumped his chest repeatedly. ‘It’s all me. *Me*.’

His face blurred as my eyes filled. The lamp by his bed became a small sun, glowing brightly, throwing his shadow onto the wall behind him, distorted, monstrous. Could he hear my heart? It was like the drums the queen's guards beat when she rode through the city.

'Florrie,' he whispered. He licked his lips, smeared the blood. There were tears in my name. Mine were poised to fall.

'Is there …' I began with a quaver, then cleared my throat. 'Is there someone else?'

He waited until my gaze found his again. 'You're the only woman I have ever and will ever love.'

I hesitated. Was that an answer? 'Are you telling me you prefer … men, that —'

'Please!' He held up his palm as if to prevent the rest of my question reaching him. 'Enough. Leave it, Florrie.' His eyes became red-rimmed coalholes, dark and impregnable. 'I beg of you. Leave it.'

Days passed, centuries. I grew old, died, was reborn. I was an iceberg, a desert. A raging river, a stagnant pool. My worst fears were confirmed; my doubts assuaged (oh, God). My stomach lurched and bile rose in my throat. Part of me wanted to leave the room, the house, the city, and never turn back. Another part, when I regarded him – cowed, broken, trusting me, terrified I'd abandon him – could not revile him.

A memory arrived unbidden. Me and Phil, lying in bed, discussing Plato's *Symposium*, embracing Aristophanes' explanation for all kinds of love; that sometimes one cannot control to whom they give their heart. Oh, how liberal we thought ourselves, how non-judgemental. Love is love, God is love, we thought innocently; naively. But it's one thing to profess such a beneficent attitude towards a stranger, to congratulate yourself for your tolerance, quite another when the man you're married to all but admits you do not make him whole. That other desires take precedence.

Sweet Jesus. If what Bram had all but confessed was ever discovered, we'd all be condemned to social purgatory: me, Irving, Bram. He would be branded a criminal, outcast from society. I would be a laughing-stock, a pariah. We would be utterly ruined.

Yet I could not abhor him. I'd asked the question and, as hard as it was, he gave me an answer. Incomplete in some respects, raising many more

questions in its wake, but an answer nonetheless. Gaps could be filled in later, over time.

I inhaled and ever so slowly released a tear-filled breath. ‘I see.’

‘Do you?’ His voice was deep. Manly. ‘I’m not sure you do.’

I both did and didn’t. Before, I lived in ignorance; from here on in, through sheer force of will, I would live in awareness, but also blind, deaf and mute.

Nevertheless, as I stood before my husband, more spirit than woman, denied and affirmed, relief coursed through me. Relief that it wasn’t me who repelled him; it wasn’t something I had or hadn’t done. It was some other inclination – or lack of inclination – that drove him.

If my tortured thoughts over the last months and years had taught me anything, it was that with this knowledge, I could do something.

‘Does anyone else know?’ I asked.

‘That I’m … an unnatural man? There are those who might wonder,’ he admitted. ‘But I’ve not given anyone cause to be assured one way or another.’

I drew closer. ‘You’ll not embarrass me or yourself, will you, Bram? Shame our name, sully our standing?’

‘I’ll never do anything to shame either of us, or Irving.’

For a moment, I wasn’t sure whether he meant our son or his Chief.

‘Never,’ I repeated. It was a vow.

He raised mournful eyes to mine. ‘And what of you, Florrie? Would you take your pick of those who wish to bed you, knowing what you do now? Knowing that the man you call your husband failed in his duties?’

‘Failed in only one respect, Bram.’

He made a mocking sound. ‘Only one?’ I didn’t reply. ‘You could renounce our marriage. Seek divorce. I would understand …’

I stepped closer, and as the space between us contracted, he held out his arms. I hesitated, then entered them and knelt.

Encircled in his warm embrace, I nestled my head under his chin, surreptitiously wiping the tears from my cheeks. His lips rested against my hair. We were an inverse Pietà, a father and daughter. There was nothing sensual in our hold, yet I’d never felt closer to my husband than this moment.

‘I won’t abandon our marriage, Bram. I promise. Or you. You are my husband. I’m your wife. Mrs Bram Stoker.’

He gave a quiet sob and held me tighter. The night cocooned us in its silence. ‘I don’t think you’re shocked – are you?’ he asked eventually. He’d ceased to cry, to tremble.

I didn’t answer immediately. I wasn’t shocked. Did that make *me* unnatural? Maybe.

‘No,’ I admitted finally. And more forcefully, ‘No.’

I was more surprised that Bram disclosed what he had. Sex didn’t interest him, at least not in the usual ways. I’d no desire to have relations with him again – I hadn’t since the night he’d uttered Henry’s name. But nor would I desire any other man. Not anymore. Did that make us well suited?

I decided in that moment, it had to.

We had a child; no-one could cast aspersions upon Bram. We’d both fulfilled our obligations to the institution of marriage and society’s unspoken laws. There would be no scurrilous gossip to taint his reputation, nor mine. As God was my witness, I would make certain of that. I swore then and there to do whatever was in my power to protect Bram and, in doing so, protect us all.

If we were not lovers in the traditional sense of husband and wife, we could at least be friends.

The closest kind. The kind who, I thought as I soundlessly wept for what I’d never know, shared the darkest of secrets.



PART FOUR

1881 to 1887

Horrible imaginings

I am beginning to feel this nocturnal existence tell on me. It is destroying my nerve. I start at my own shadow, and am full of all sorts of horrible imaginings. God knows that there is ground for my terrible fear in this cursed place!

Bram Stoker, *Dracula*

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

London, 14 September 1882

I remember the day so very clearly: it was a Thursday, the sun was striving to shine and there was a mellow breeze. I was contemplating whether to take a stroll when Bram burst into the house, shouting. It was a commanding echo that pierced the walls. ‘George! George,’ he boomed.

There was pounding on the stairs. I leapt up from where I was sitting in the drawing room, and wrenched the door open.

Bram had just reached the landing. He was barefoot, dripping wet, his jacket and shoes were missing. Draped over his shoulder was an unconscious man.

‘Bram!’ My stomach clenched. ‘What’s happened? Where’s the rest of your clothes? Your shoes? Who is *that*?’ Questions tumbled out of me.

‘Never mind that now. This man needs a doctor.’ Bram stormed into the dining room, crashing into the sideboard. ‘George!’ he shouted again.

He swept aside the place-settings on the table in the centre of the room with one arm, uncaring that candlesticks, a vase of flowers, plates and cutlery toppled on the rug, or that a porcelain figurine struck the wooden floor, shattering on impact. The water from the vase soaked into the rug leaving a dark stain. The flower stems snapped, an arrangement of broken necks. I helped as Bram carefully laid the unconscious man atop the table, bunching one end of the tablecloth so it became a makeshift pillow.

‘For godsakes. Where’s George?’ he barked, wiping his arm across his forehead, his face devoid of colour, panting. He started to rearrange the man’s limbs.

Before I could fetch him, George charged into the room. He took one look at the strange scene, then started firing questions.

‘What happened?’

‘I hauled him out of the river,’ explained Bram. ‘He jumped in, trying to drown himself, I fear.’

‘How long was he in the water?’ George began pulling the man’s coat from his chest, ripping open his shirt. He searched for a pulse.

‘Maybe ten minutes,’ answered Bram as George’s hands moved with surety over the man’s body, prodding, poking, lifting an eyelid, an arm, banding a wrist, pressing an ear to his chest. ‘But he was under most of the time. Kept fighting me off.’

‘How long has he been unconscious?’

Bram glanced at the clock. ‘Since we reached the pier. About twenty minutes or so.’

‘Did you expel water from his lungs?’

‘I did. A gentleman on the ferry did, too. And again, at the pier. Without much success.’

George leaned over the man, grabbing his whiskered face in one hand, twisting it side to side, frowning. ‘Do you know who he is?’

‘Never seen him before,’ said Bram.

George stared at the stranger, then appeared to reach a decision. Much to my amazement, he pinched the man’s nose and, first taking a deep breath, opened the lips and began blowing in his mouth.

I’d never seen such a thing. It was shocking yet remarkable. As if George was kissing him. Only, he wasn’t. He was a pair of bellows, filling the man with air.

Bram remained beside his brother, checking the man’s chest as George blew and blew. After a minute, he picked up the man’s hand, which had detritus from the river stuck to the palm, like hair, and cradled it in his own. Such tenderness, such compassion. The man was old, his suit drenched and covered with grime from the Thames. His shoes were scuffed, his bald pate covered with moles and liver spots, his beard bedraggled. He wore a ring on one finger. He also had the letter ‘D’ branded into the left side of his chest. A deserter, then. His eyes were partly open, suffused with a terrible red, as if filled with blood.

Stunned by what I was witnessing, it was a moment before I became aware we were no longer alone. Emma and Mrs Daw, drawn by the commotion, had entered, followed by two peelers.

Emma squealed in fright when she saw the man on the table, and George administering his very intimate therapy. She clutched Mrs Daw. They both stood behind me, wide-eyed, peering past my shoulders, whispering and clicking their tongues.

'Sergeant Anthony Roberts, ma'am,' said a tall fellow with long sideburns and a thick East End accent. He removed his helmet. 'This is Constable John Jenkins. Forgive the intrusion. We followed your husband from the river. I take it you're Mrs Stoker?'

'I am.'

The sergeant squeezed in beside me, and we continued to watch George while Bram counted. 'He's a hero, your husband. Not many would do what he did.' The policeman passed me a bundle of clothes. It was Bram's hat, coat, jacket and vest. Poorly folded, they were mostly dry. I clutched the clothes to my breast. Bram was soaking wet, his shirt clinging to his body. The outline of his undershirt was visible, the defining lines of his chest. His nipples were dark and hard against the fabric. His chest hair looked like coils of wire.

'Dived right into the river, he did,' added the constable, handing me Bram's shoes, then sidling in next to his colleague. 'Saved that man's life.' Emma and Mrs Daw made noises of appreciation.

'He did?' I regarded Bram with a mixture of admiration and astonishment, then passed his clothes to Emma and the shoes to Mrs Daw.

'Never seen the like,' said Sergeant Roberts. 'We were waiting on the Embankment for the ferry to dock, when we saw that cove there jump right off the passing steamboat into the water. Climbed over the rails before anyone could've stopped him. Thought he was done for. Your man, well, he tried to hoist him out of the water as the ferry went by, but the cove fought him off.'

Constable Jenkins shook his head in disbelief. 'Your husband stripped off them clothes and shoes —' he nodded towards the items, 'and without a thought for his safety, dived right into the blood — 'scuse me, ma'am – dived right into the river and swam after him. Caught him, then towed him to shore. That takes some strength, that does.'

'Should have heard the cheers and the like,' continued the sergeant. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Emma and Mrs Daw gazing at Bram adoringly. Mrs Daw was wiping tears away.

‘Mind you,’ he added. ‘We thought the old geeza done for until your husband said he wasn’t and he was taking him to a doctor.’

‘His brother.’ I gestured to George, needing to say something, do something. I was thrown off guard – not by Bram’s heroism, that didn’t surprise me at all – but by the risk he took. All for a stranger.

I was willing the old man to breathe, for George’s efforts to be rewarded. As we watched, men I’d never seen before entered the room. Some stood back, others, with a boldness that stunned me, walked right up to the table. A few began asking questions, notepads and pens in hand.

The press.

I didn’t know whether to laugh or cry at the absurdity of the situation. My house, my beautiful home, filled with outsiders who, without a by-your-leave, burst in – the half-drowned, the curious, the awe-struck, the gossip-mongers.

I approached the newcomers, speaking to the oldest of them, a bespectacled man in a long coat and a worn waistcoat too small for him. ‘Who admitted you?’

‘Door was open, ma’am,’ he answered, without looking up from the page he was jotting on.

‘Can you tell me whose house this is, ma’am?’ asked another, tapping my arm to get my attention.

‘Who’s the gent over there in the wet shirt?’ demanded a corpulent, untidy fellow.

I didn’t answer. Bram ignored them all.

‘Emma,’ I said firmly. ‘Pass me the master’s clothes. Thank you. Now, would you be so kind as to escort *all* these gentlemen from the house and make sure no-one else comes in. Perhaps you’d be so good as to help her, Mrs Daw? You too, Constable Jenkins?’

‘Right away, ma’am,’ said Mrs Daw. Before he could protest, she took one journalist by the elbow, the bespectacled one by his, and with the peelers’ assistance, steered them out. Emma took up the rear, flapping her apron when they tried to object.

One moment George was puffing, the peelers (who’d come back in) were whispering and writing in their notebooks, Bram was counting, in the next, George stopped. He stood straight, looked at each of us in turn, and shook his head sorrowfully.

Mrs Daw and Emma gasped. The policemen slid their helmets off again.

Voices from outside competed with the screech of carriage wheels, the whistles and shouts of vendors, the barking of dogs. The clock on the mantelpiece marked time.

I'd never seen someone die, though I'd attended plenty of funerals. It was disconcerting to think that the man who'd been struggling for life one moment had expired not simply in my house, but right before my eyes. Almost immediately, his pallor changed, a yellowish-grey suffused his face. Colour fled his lips, which opened revealing long grey teeth.

What had driven the poor man to such despair? What restless darkness lurked within him? Did snaggle-toothed demons gnaw at his peace, convincing him to take his own life? Or was it an accident? What if he blamed Bram for not acting sooner and sought vengeance from beyond the grave?

I shuddered, suddenly cold, and wondered if his spirit was even now rising from his body to its eternal resting place. Or would it linger here, in my home? Would he go to hell? Or would Bram's intervention allow him to enter heaven? *Please, God*, I silently prayed. *Don't let his spirit remain here*.

First closing the dead man's eyes, George found a napkin on the sideboard and wiped his own hands, his mouth. He found another, and gently draped it over the dead man's face. 'There's no more can be done. I for one need a drink.'

Without waiting to see how anyone else felt, he went to the drawing room. We all followed – the policemen, too. We stood dazed in the light-filled room. George poured whiskies, the peelers taking theirs gratefully.

There was an odd formality, a stiffness to this gathering as if no-one, not even the policemen, knew quite how to act. All I could think about was the corpse across the hall. Again, George came to the rescue, arranging for Mrs Daw to pay an errand boy to fetch the coroner. Only then could the body be taken away.

'How long will that take?' I asked.

'Could be a few hours, ma'am,' said Sergeant Roberts, looking at his empty glass ruefully.

A few hours!

'Still, we mustn't forget the hero of the moment.'

It was as if a spell was broken. The policemen put down their glasses and with a fervour that seemed incongruous, considering what we'd just witnessed, slapped Bram on the back. They both shook his hand, then, trying to appear official, drew out their notebooks again, asking him to tell them in his own words what happened. George added his comments and questions; his praise, too. I sank into a chair, twisting my glass around.

Good God. A man had just died. In my house. On my dining table. Why were they asking Bram to retell what happened so many times? Why were they congratulating him? Were you still a hero when the man you tried to rescue died? This was a tragedy, surely. Why couldn't they leave us alone? Take the man away?

Bram stood near the window as he spoke, casting occasional glances at the street where a crowd had assembled. He didn't seem shaken or upset. On the contrary, he was enjoying the attention. He wasn't even bothered by his wet clothes. The room, despite the fire, was very chilly. The faint odour of effluent lingered; Bram needed to change. And what about George, who'd pressed his lips to a dead man's? Was the deserter still alive when George started his ministrations? If so, why hadn't he survived? What had he done that God hadn't intervened and saved his life? Given him another chance?

I glanced at Bram. To these men, he was the picture of heroic masculinity as he recounted events. He was already weaving his actions into a wondrous narrative of mettle and misfortune. May the Lord forgive me, but I'd never been more grateful for his storytelling talents.

I couldn't shake the image of the dead man: his discoloured skin, a devil-sent shade, his blood-red eyes and long grey teeth. He was more like a character from one of the supernatural tales I so loved than a flesh-and-blood person.

Tremors began to overtake me as my thoughts became brambles, so I rose and crossed to the other window, hoping the outside world would distract me from what had happened. A sea of hats greeted me. A few umbrellas opened as rain began to fall, the sunshine of earlier having been swallowed by heavy clouds. I was about to turn away, when something caught my eye. Not far from where the gaggle stood, was what had once been a cap. Crushed beneath horses' hooves, it was now an odd shape. I watched as it went under the heels of yet more men running towards our front door, its shape no longer recognisable; like the dead man I imagined it

once belonged to, its purpose had been taken from it. The rain grew heavier, beating against the flattened object until, finally, it stuck to the wheel of a cab and was taken away.

I spun around to find two more journalists had managed to worm their way back into the house. Pointedly ignoring me and a flustered Mrs Daw, who gave a helpless shrug from the doorway, they stood either side of Bram, demanding a recounting.

The men's voices washed over me. Already I knew my sleep would be filled with impressions of scarlet eyes, hairy palms and long teeth, with images of the man who fate and God had brought into our home to draw his final breath.



Over the next few days, the papers were filled with Bram's exploits. The press even went to the Lyceum to interview him, which might have been alright had they not also sought a quote about the valorous Bram Stoker from Henry Irving.

Just as Henry's ego was beginning to recover from the *Romeo and Juliet* fiasco, my husband dared to steal the attention. When an article about Bram's courage appeared in *The Penny Illustrated Press*, not only was the entire incident beautifully sketched, and Bram praised handsomely, an accompanying illustration depicted Henry greeting a dripping wet Bram holding a soaking hat and jacket. 'Bravo, Stoker!' he was saying. 'We pretend to be heroes on stage, but you really *are* one!'

Ellen revealed to me that Henry had said no such thing. When he saw the press outside his dressing room and understood they weren't there for him, he sent them away with a flea in their ear. When he finally learned what Bram had done, he took him to task.

'You should have let the foolish old man die.'

'He needed help,' Bram protested.

'*I* need your help,' said Henry. 'Lest you forget, I'm the one who pays you.'

Uncowed by Henry's admonishment, Bram cut out and kept every single report on the incident, every illustration, cartoon or piece of copy. If I found one he'd overlooked, I saved it. He added these to the box in which he stored such keepsakes. He was so taken by these stories that hailed him

as a rugged hero and the kind of victorious athlete he'd been in his youth, he completely missed that while they praised him, the more recent reports in the gossip columns also poked fun at his excessive loyalty to Henry. Which meant they also lampooned his master. Bram may have failed to see it, but I did and so did Henry.

When Bram was awarded a bronze medal from the Humane Society for his bravery, I held a salon to mark the occasion. Bram soaked up the notice. Henry was conspicuous by his absence, an oversight Bram excused.

'He's exhausted,' Bram said, when asked where Henry was. 'He had another engagement,' he told Gilbert. 'He's readying himself for a trip to Paris,' he told George Du Maurier.

Gilbert and Lucy looked at each knowingly; Hall Caine shook his head in disappointment. Du Maurier just laughed and cocked a cynical brow in my direction. Matilda, William Gladstone, Lady Jane and even Oscar scoffed. Ellen sighed. And on it went.

This readiness to forgive Henry's pettiness did Bram no favours. While people recognised his devotion, there was a fine line between that and exploitation.

Or weakness.

That others might see beneath Bram's manly exterior to the needy person beneath nibbled at my composure. Thus far, if they did, no-one passed comment.

As if aware that the praise of others might tempt Bram to test his autonomy, Henry played his cards well, announcing to all and sundry that in the coming year the Lyceum, along with the players, scenery, costumes and even the limelight men, would tour America.

And who was to take responsibility for this enormous feat? Why, none other than Bram Stoker.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

London, October 1882

September slid into October, and the flurry of publicity over Bram's rescue came to a swift conclusion when the hero of the hour went north for a few weeks to manage the ridiculous 'Farewell to England' tour Henry had insisted the Lyceum company undertake before they headed to America. Bram and I had hardly seen each other, what with Henry and the theatre dominating Bram's every waking hour, and me visiting the Gilberts, attending plays, art exhibitions and lectures at the Royal Institution. I still held my salons every other Sunday, minus Bram and the Lyceum luminaries, but I was all too aware that opportunities to keep company with my husband, or for Irving to enjoy his father, were slipping away. Soon, Bram would be on the other side of the world for six months. We may not have shared conjugal relations, but it was important we consolidate what we had, otherwise I feared we'd drift apart, perhaps irrevocably.

When Bram came home in mid-October, I decided to discuss the possibility of snatching a few days away together, just the three of us – in Dublin, Paris, anywhere we could be together as a family.

Bram and I were in the drawing room. The moonlight pierced the gap in the curtains, spotlighting my writing desk and the book I was reading, *Around the World in Eighty Days*. If Bram could travel, so could I, albeit in my imagination. The coals gave off a lovely molten glow. I was tired and longed for bed, but ever since the man died in our house, I'd been disturbed by strange dreams that left me hollow-eyed and jumping at shadows.

They always began the same way: I was sitting at our dining table, entertaining friends. The table was beautifully set with fine bone china and silverware. Candles burned on the mantelpiece and sideboard. The fire wasn't lit, and the room was very cold and filled with shadows. Bram

wasn't always present, and I couldn't recognise my guests. Sometimes, they were vague outlines; at others, they were dark and lumpen, their faces obscured. It didn't seem to bother me, not at first; nor the fact that everything happened in silence. In the centre of the table was an enormous cloche. At some point, the cloche was lifted. Beneath it lay the drowned man. I tried to cry out, to stand, to flee, but I was unable to move. Bands of fear twined themselves around my rib cage, tightening like a cruel corset. My guests began to dissolve into thick grey smoke that rose as the man slowly sat up and faced me, staring with those blood-red eyes. I tried to express how sorry I was that he had died; how I wished more could have been done. That it wasn't Bram's or George's fault. But my tongue became a great weight, muting me. Then his mouth opened in a rictus, exposing long grey teeth as he reached for me with impossibly attenuated fingers, his palms draped in weed or hair, I couldn't tell which, before he lunged for my throat and I woke, bathed in sweat.

In other dreams, he'd simply follow me through the house, emerging from behind doors, anywhere the light didn't reach. I would try to ignore him, but the tension in my chest, my goose flesh and shallow breathing meant my body wouldn't let me. I soundlessly cursed him, pleaded with him to leave me be. But he didn't, and slowly my fear transformed into vexation. Why was he tormenting me? His death was not my doing.

It had been so long since I'd slept through the night, the lack of sleep was making me irritable. At least, that's what I told myself. I hadn't divulged to Bram what was plaguing me. He thought I was out of sorts because he was leaving. There was truth in that, too. A part of me *was* angry with him – angry that he'd brought the man into our home, angry that I was obliged to keep his secret, even though I knew I'd little choice. In my head, the two merged, one becoming a symbol of the other. Secrets damaged everything, caused relationships to decay, love to die. I'd no choice but to keep Bram's confidence because it was also mine. And now I had to hold it tight while dealing with my unwelcome nightly visitor. Aye, rightly or not, I was angry with my husband.

Bram was settled into his chair, whisky in hand and waiting for me to speak of my day. There was the hoot of an owl, the hollow clop of horses' hooves. It was very late, past two in the morning.

'So,' I began, after Bram finished telling me how difficult it was proving to pack the required scenery for America, 'I've been thinking …'

‘You’re always thinking, Florrie,’ he interrupted. I wasn’t sure if it was a criticism or a compliment.

‘We should snatch a few days away before you go. You, me, Nounou Yvette and Irving.’ Mademoiselle Yvette was a very sensible Frenchwoman I’d hired to replace the marvellous Elizabeth, who’d been forced to return to her family in York when her mother fell ill.

Bram shook his head. ‘That’s impossible, Florrie. Henry needs me.’

I stared at him incredulously. Honestly. This was getting ridiculous. I counted to three before I spoke, determined to keep calm. ‘You’ve just spent the last few weeks by Henry’s side. You’re about to go away with him to the other side of the world for half a year. Has it ever crossed your mind, Bram, that maybe I need you? That your son might? Or is Henry the only person you ever think about?’

Bram released a weary sigh. ‘Of course I think about you and Irving. Words like that don’t become you, Florence.’

‘Oh, so what words would you like me to use, Bram? Please, do tell.’ So much for remaining calm. ‘Or would you rather I say nothing at all? Stop thinking and, while we’re about it, talking too?’

‘Now you’re being ridiculous.’

My laugh was a sharp trill. ‘First, I’m unbecoming and now ridiculous. How many other insults will you level to subdue me?’ I leaned towards him. ‘I’ll not be quiet on this matter. In case you’ve forgotten, Henry hired extra staff who can meet his needs. It would do him good not to be so reliant on you. And, frankly, Bram, as I’ve said many a time in the past, it would do you good, too.’

Bram finished his whisky and stood. ‘I’m tired. It’s been a long day, and I’ve a very busy one tomorrow. The last thing I need is to come home and be harangued by my wife. I’m going to bed.’

A red curtain fell across my vision. I felt cold and heavy, like a great iceberg anchored to the ocean floor.

‘Sometimes,’ I said bitterly, as he reached the door, ‘I think you’d be more troubled if Henry died than me or your own son.’

Bram paused and slowly turned around. His eyes were filled with angry sparks. ‘I can always have another son,’ he spat. ‘What I cannot have is another Henry Irving.’

‘*What* did you say?’

‘You heard.’

My heart pounded; I began to shake, my chest constricted. Did other wives ever feel as I did in that moment towards their husbands?

Sheer hatred.

There, I said it. I wanted God or some other force to smite him, turn him into a pillar of ash. If a sword had been in reach, I swear I would have run him through.

Instead, I steadily rose, replaced my glass on the sideboard and pushed past him to wrench open the door. I paused at the threshold. ‘It’s a blessing I’m not accompanying you to America.’

There’d been a moment when he was upset about Henry’s decision to exclude spouses and children, especially as Henry’s dogs Charlie and Fussie were travelling with them, but as usual, he hadn’t contested it.

‘After all,’ I said, softly, dangerously, ‘you can scarce manage one wife. How could you possibly cope with two?’

I didn’t wait to hear his answer and slammed the door in his stunned face.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Dublin, 1883 to 1884

Bram and I parted on very strained terms. His terrible words echoed long after I waved goodbye as he boarded the steamship *City of Rome* with only six hundred tons of sets and costumes for company. Henry had sailed a week earlier, on 11 October, taking the luxurious *SS Britannica* along with Ellen, the dogs, and the rest of the players.

I can always have another son. What I cannot have is another Henry Irving.

A Henry Irving who thought nothing of making Bram follow him rather than travel beside him.

Irving and I spent Christmas with my family in Dublin and remained with them for the duration of Bram's absence. Naturally, every visitor who came to Marino Court was curious about why Bram wasn't with me. I was forever fielding questions about where he was and what he was doing. As the weeks passed and more letters arrived, I was able to tell them, 'He's in Philadelphia this week', or 'Detroit this month', as the company travelled north, west, east, then back to New York where they started. There, Bram met President Chester Arthur (and even went on to dine at the White House when the company arrived in Washington). He also met the writer Mark Twain, whose real name was Samuel Clemens, and arranged to see his beloved Walt Whitman, the poet whose work caused such controversy.

Reviews of Lyceum performances reached Irish shores and were shared over breakfast or in the evenings. While Henry was praised for his Mathias in *The Bells*, the critics didn't appreciate his Charles I, one writing it was a 'charity to cut off his head'. I imagined Gilbert chuckling over that. I know I did.

Ellen wrote, informing me that for all Henry captivated audiences and the people he wined and dined, it was Bram making the greatest impression.

> Henry might be charming the bald eagle, but without Ma, we'd all miss our entrances and exits – and not just on stage. He's obsessive about sticking to schedule, ensuring we all run on time – Henry, William, Harry, the trains, even the hounds, Charlie and Fussie. We'd be lost without him. Henry especially. The people here recognise that and love him. How are you faring without him, Lemon?

I wasn't lost, but as the weeks went past, the ice-cold anger and despair I felt at Bram's brutal words began to melt. There was no point letting it become a canker that ate my soul. Harsh words were oft exchanged between spouses in heated moments; it was how one chose to deal with them that mattered. I didn't think I could ever forget what he said, but I was able to lock it alongside the other secret, in an imaginary box, and bury it deep within me.

But not deep enough, it seemed. Aware something was amiss, Phil cornered me one day.

'You're too pale.' She studied me as I unsuccessfully tried to darn one of Irving's socks. 'Worse, you've forgotten how to laugh. Come on, 'fess up. You're miserable again. Mother's noticed too.'

'Miserable? *Moi?*' I looked up from my terrible stitching. I gave her the brightest smile I could conjure. 'What reason would I have for misery?'

'I can think of one – a burly one who happens to be in America. Oh, give me that sock. I can't bear watching you ruin it.' She snatched it off me and began to unpick my work. When I didn't speak, she looked up. '*Well?*'

'Well … alright. I admit it.' I sighed. She waited for me to continue. 'I'm coming to the realisation that while Bram and I share a name, a son, a house – and that only now and then – we've very separate lives.'

'Then you're like most married couples,' said Phil. 'Mother and Father barely saw each other for years – only long enough to make another child.'

I gnawed my lip. 'That's different.'

'How?'

‘Father was an army officer; he was away in another country, in the Crimea and Borneo. He was serving queen and country. My husband serves but one man, in London, the provinces, and in America. Wherever he’s ordered to go.’ I sighed again. ‘I don’t know, Phil. I thought marriage would be … different. That as husband and wife, no matter our … divergences, we’d build a life *together*. As it is, I don’t feel a part of Bram’s life at all.’ Bram’s face as he confessed to being ‘an unnatural man’ threatened to appear.

‘Maybe, but —’ said Phil, biting the thread, ‘who says you must be a part of his? If he’s not willing to include you, why can’t you just live your own life? Sounds to me you practically do anyway. You’ve your own friends, family here, Irving, you’ve those wonderful salons you write about in your letters – why, even folk here are talking about them, about you. You go on outings, do volunteer work. You have me,’ she smiled. ‘What more do you want?’ She passed me the mended sock. Her needlework was exquisite. ‘The way I see it, you have it the wrong way around. It’s Bram who needs you. Imagine what sort of life he’d have if you weren’t in it? If you didn’t ensure he mixed with more than theatre types? The kind of man he’d be?’

I shot her a look. There was nothing disingenuous in her question.

Unaware of my discomfort, she continued. ‘I mean, isn’t there something you can do for Bram that Henry Irving can’t? Apart from the obvious.’ Phil chuckled and reached for my fingers. ‘Don’t pull that face. There must be something. You just need to work out what that is.’

I considered Phil’s words long after I should have been asleep. Perhaps there was something I could do. After all, I’d brought Bram and Mr Marston together, and look what resulted … There was no doubt Bram met many interesting and worthwhile people through the Lyceum but, apart from our closest friends, they only saw him in that context: as Henry’s man. What if I invited more of them to our home? Bram would be seen in his own environment, out from under Henry’s shadow. He’d be viewed differently, I felt certain. Possibly even taken seriously as a man of many talents, in a way he wasn’t while only associated with the theatre.

The idea excited me. Who knew what could happen?



The rain was unrelenting over Christmas and into January, keeping us indoors. Nounou Yvette, Alice and Catherine played parlour games and cards with Irving. I read countless books, many aloud to Mother, who would sit in her favourite chair, her impossibly thick-lensed glasses atop her nose, and knit. Mary Shelley, the Brontes and Austen (much to Father's disgust – he'd leave the room as he had no time for female writers) were quickly devoured. I revisited Dickens and even the works of Bram's old employer, Sheridan Le Fanu, including the vampiric tale, *Carmilla*. When the weather permitted, I'd venture out – sometimes with Irving, always with one of my sisters. I visited Bram's oldest brother, Thornley (his mother and sisters were living on the continent), bringing a lovely fan and a silk scarf for his wife, Emily. She'd been very unwell. When I asked after her, Thornley all but broke down.

'I don't know what to do, Florrie. She's taken to eating insects in the belief they'll prolong her life.'

'Oh, Thornley,' I said, imagining the lovely Emily stuffing flies, beetles and wasps into her cupid-bow mouth. I repressed a shudder. 'I'm so sorry.'

Thornley nodded miserably. 'Here I am, a man of medicine, and the best I can do for my wife is lock her in the east wing of this huge house for her own protection.' He gazed about despondently, not seeing the overloaded wooden bookcases, the flocked wallpaper or crystal chandeliers. 'I've hired two nurses to attend her.'

I couldn't stop thinking about Emily, or Thornley. Problems like that put my own in perspective. I wasn't going mad, despite the way I sometimes felt, the conclusions I worried others might leap to if I admitted what was disturbing me. I *was* in control. I wrote and told Bram, encouraging him to contact his brother. I prayed for Thornley, Emily too.

As winter ended and spring shyly reared its gentle head, I was more than ready to return to London. Dublin was no longer my home. I'd forever be fond of it, but I'd outgrown it.

I reached London on a cold, mist-riddled morning in late March, and aired the rooms at Cheyne Walk, removed the dust-covers from the furniture, and set about hiring new staff. We'd been forced to let Mrs Daw and Emma go as we couldn't afford to pay them while Bram was away and I'd no need of them in Ireland. The place was strangely quiet without them; almost unwelcoming. Thank goodness for Nounou Yvette and the distraction of Irving, who soon filled the house with noise and laughter.

Once they understood I was back, my friends called – Gilbert, Lucy, Genevieve and Matilda – and invitations and outings resumed. I began to plan my next salon.

I hadn't forgotten Phil's words either.

Isn't there something you can do for Bram that Henry Irving can't?

Bram would be back in a matter of days, which begged the question: I might have been ready for London, to live *my* life, and to broaden our circle of friends and acquaintances.

But – was I ready for Bram?

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

St Leonard's Terrace, 1884

I don't know when the rumours about Oscar first reached me. Maybe they were whispered long ago, back in Dublin, drifting about like a spring breeze, too gentle to be heeded. Maybe I heard them at one of the Beefsteak dinners, swirling among the tobacco smoke and whisky fumes, evanescent and impossible to catch. But when they became more than the background drone of busy bees buzzing first here, alighting there, transforming into dangerous words that found willing ears, they could no longer be ignored.

However, on my return from Dublin, I was initially too preoccupied with domestic matters to hear them. Whether it was the glow of homecoming or the success of the North American tour, when I suggested we move house again, Bram readily agreed.

We shifted into Number 17 St Leonard's Terrace at the end of spring. A four-storey place near Albert Bridge and thus a ferry terminal, it wasn't too far from our old house. Grander than Cheyne Walk, it overlooked a lovely park and had a setback, which meant cabs and broughams could deliver us to the front door without my skirts or shoes getting wet.

'It was time for a change,' I said in answer to Ellen's question, pouring tea and passing her a cup. She was my first visitor.

While I'd been very happy in Cheyne Walk to start with, so much had happened there, and returning after an almost six-month absence had made the unpleasant memories starker. It didn't help that my first night back my nightmares returned. The drowned man rose from the grave to torment me once again.

'Well, it's lovely here,' said Ellen, flopping onto the sofa. 'I like the wallpaper you've hung. Is it William Morris?'

‘It is,’ I said, admiring it all over again.

‘Must have cost a pretty penny.’

‘Bram isn’t happy about the expense, even if we did manage to save a considerable sum while he was away. Though that’s all gone now, what with the move, and having to hire new staff.’ I’d employed Mrs Mary Dunhunter to cook, Maria Mitchell as our maid, and a young woman named Louisa Maiden as our char.

‘Don’t forget your fancy French nanny,’ said Ellen, blowing on her tea. ‘What is it about that accent that makes everything sound so exotic? I swear, whenever a Frenchman speaks to me, my knees turn to jelly. I should say French person, because it happened with your Yvette as well.’ Ellen gave a wicked grin. ‘And I could scarce believe it when I heard Irving chattering away in perfect *Français*.’

‘He calls me *La mère*, and Bram, *Le père*. Bram doesn’t know what to make of it,’ I said quickly, relieved to be changing the subject. Ellen had struck a nerve. Money had become a real concern. Bram’s wage had to cover all our expenses now as George no longer shared with us. After a short romance, he’d wed a very nice woman, Agnes McGillicuddy. For the first time since arriving in London, it was just us under the roof. But I couldn’t manage a house this size without help. Bram conceded that at least.

‘I’ll find the money,’ he said.

The extra work he did as a slate of new productions were scheduled – *Twelfth Night* was the next – never meant extra wages. Bram worked just as hard for the same salary. Because of the success of the first American tour, a second one was already being planned and would include Canada.

‘Are you going to the next Beefsteak dinner?’ asked Ellen. Before I could answer, Maria appeared with a tray containing some lovely little sandwiches and delicate cream cakes. Mrs Daw had been an excellent cook, but Mrs Dunhunter was superb. Her creations were hard to resist.

‘I am,’ I said. ‘Bram tells me there’ll be some new faces – the writer Henry James and that explorer chap, what’s his name?’

‘Henry Morton Stanley.’

What neither of us mentioned was that it had been some time since Oscar had been invited to a Beefsteak dinner.

‘That’s him,’ I said. ‘Oh, and George Meredith. I also heard an up-and-coming publisher, William Heinemann, has been invited. I’m very keen to

meet him.'

'You're collecting for your next salon, aren't you?'

I laughed. 'Like a philatelist.' I swiftly explained to Ellen my scheme to try and help Bram. 'I won't rush it. These things take time. Also, I don't want Bram to know what I'm up to. There's nothing worse than setting expectations that may later be dashed. But, if you can think of anyone who might … encourage his writing, be useful in that regard …?'

'I'll let you know. Anyway, it will be nice to expand our circle.'

'It will,' I smiled. 'If there's one thing Lady Jane taught me, it's to introduce fresh faces as often as you can. Keeps it interesting.'

'I hope I'm interesting enough!' protested Ellen, playfully pouting.

'Oh, you're much better than that, Ellen. You're fascinating.'



Meanwhile the rumours about Oscar continued to grow. People were saying that he had a predilection for men. Young men. The younger the better. One of his university cohort claimed to know this for a fact. Because of the vicious tattle, his poetry and other works began to be read with altered eyes. Those who once praised them now described them as 'offensive filth'.

She signed the divorce papers. Now he wants to talk.

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Oscar returned to London after months away, first, in America where he'd been doing a speaking tour and making a name for himself, then in Paris recuperating. His reception wasn't always positive in America and the reviews of his addresses were quite mixed. Bram said it was because he was Irish.

'He doesn't sound Irish,' I said. Oscar had worked hard to elide all traces of his background. 'You do, and the Americans loved you.'

‘I don’t pretend to be what I’m not,’ said Bram, without a hint of irony. I almost choked on my tea. ‘They respect that.’

Lampooned or praised, Oscar didn’t care. He always said the only thing worse than being talked about, was not being talked about.

But this was different. Different and perilous. Like Bram, Oscar had always maintained close friendships with other men. When I heard muttering that Oscar had been indiscreet with a young man from Oxford, I fell into despair. I cast my mind back to that Easter when Oscar hadn’t come home to Dublin, bedazzled by his ‘new friend’. What if he had returned? Come and swept me off my feet? Oscar, who, it was swiftly becoming apparent, preferred the company of men in a manner that didn’t bear thinking about. Though I did think about it. Obsessively. I suspect Bram did too.

When Oscar started openly boasting that in America he’d kissed Walt Whitman, the poet Bram worshipped and others regarded as a corrupting influence, I kept my ears and eyes open whenever I encountered him. I found myself studying Bram as well. Nothing I saw alarmed me greatly, he was being discreet as he promised, but neither did it reassure me entirely. After all, I knew better than most that marriage didn’t mean much when it came to love or conjugal relations.

Did *all* men prefer the fellowship of their own sex? Were women merely tolerated as painful necessities? Were we simply there to reproduce, to provide the son men desperately desired? I oft wondered why no-one pointed out that if women only produced male offspring, then humankind would rapidly cease to exist. Mostly, regardless of how kind or tolerant the man, we were treated, as Mary Wollstonecraft argued, akin to decorative objects, toys kept in pretty boxes to be taken out and played with when it suited the owner. We were also like Henry Irving’s limelight, used to shine a spotlight on the man.

Though I begrudged being thought of as a plaything, or a bright light, being admired and living in a fine box wasn’t so objectionable. But, if that was the case, why did I often feel so … hollow? My worth was based on my appearance, something *I’d* no say in; it was a (happy) accident of birth. A woman’s value was also largely dependent on whom she married, on the appraisal of men. A valuation that, unlike a painting or piece of jewellery, declined with age. It was most vexing.

Then, unexpected news flew about town. Oscar Wilde was getting married.

Bram told me one night after a Beefsteak dinner. Laid low with an awful cold, I'd stayed home in bed.

'Oscar? Oscar Wilde?' I said, hauling myself off the pillow to blow my nose and level watery eyes at Bram. 'Who? Who's he marrying?'

Oscar. My Oscar was getting married.

A shaft of jealousy lanced my chest, a scalding heat followed by a frost so deep and hard, I feared I'd begin to crack if I moved. Bram perched on the bedcovers.

'Constance Lloyd. You remember her.' He took my limp hand in his. 'We've met her on several occasions – at Du Maurier's, the gallery opening. She was at Lady Jane's last salon. Dresses very simply. You said she was stylish.'

'Did I?' I said faintly.

'She's the daughter of that Queen's Counsel.'

I tried desperately to recall her. Then I remembered. Introduced as a long-time writer friend of his, Oscar had hovered over her solicitously. I thought her very pretty with lovely big eyes and a slender, almost boyish figure. Warm, friendly, she was also Irish and the same age as me.

She'd grasped my hands tightly and drawn me close.

'Oscar has told me so much about you. I hope we'll be great friends.'

I managed a smile and some form of agreement, but not before I'd shot Oscar an accusatory look. He may have told her about me, but I knew nothing of her.

'Are you feeling any better, Florrie?' asked Bram. 'You really are very pallid. How about I mix a toddy? Mammy always swore by them.' Before I could object, Bram leapt up, making a drink and recounting the night's performance. I barely listened. My head was filled with images of Constance and Oscar. A persistent voice, high-pitched, like the steam from a kettle, whined, *Why did he never ask for your hand? What does Constance have that you lack? What changed?*

Was it because Oscar was genuinely in love? Was it a matter of social status? Or was Constance his disguise, a costume he donned to move about safely in the world? Were both the important men in my life, the one who courted me and the one who married me, more attracted to their own sex?

It was too much to consider.

Arm in arm with Bram, on 29 May 1884 I attended the wedding of Oscar and Constance at St James's Church in Paddington. I could scarce take my eyes off them as they exchanged vows. Oscar bestowed a lasting kiss on her lovely mouth, and then with shining eyes led her back down the aisle. I worked hard not to imagine myself in her place.

With the rumours circulating, did I even want to be? I'd my own complex relationship to protect.

There was no doubt, Oscar and Bram liked men, and a great deal more than made me comfortable, but it was evident that they enjoyed the companionship of women as well.

Lucky for them both, Constance and I provided the cover society demanded.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

London, 1886

The one complaint Bram allowed about Henry was that he was going to bankrupt the Lyceum. Nineteen months after Oscar wed Constance, a production of *Faust* was mounted, and almost did. A full-size organ was built into the stage and a peal of bells worth four hundred pounds was specially cast. Over two hundred and fifty extras were hired to play demons, goblins and warlocks. As if that wasn't enough, Henry insisted that swords using the new-fangled invention, electricity, be made so that when fights took place, sparks would fly. There were tinsel storms, floating mists, and a ladder of angels. Extra trapdoors were built into the stage and ropes and pulleys constructed, allowing cast members to ascend and descend from the heavens. There were apparitions, fires and so much more. It was beyond spectacular, and the audiences adored it – and Henry, for what he gave them.

Despite a weak script, the run of *Faust* was already long, and the demands extensive. As the season continued, Bram begged me to bring Irving to see the show. Knowing it was a most unsuitable play for a young child (Irving was only six), I persuaded myself it could be no worse for him than listening to his father's terrifying tales. It would have been churlish to refuse after moaning about how Bram never saw his son.

I spied Bram the moment we entered the stage door, a still presence amidst the whirl and noise. Irving was thrilled to be back at the theatre again and, I confess, so was I. After being part of the chorus in *The Cup*, I'd never performed again. The desire had been smothered. If I'd been offered another role, I would have declined. Still, there was something charmed about the place; how from all the backstage chaos, clutter and clatter, the colour, haze of tobacco, sounds of instruments tuning, voices warming up,

panicked squeals, running feet, shouted orders, the moment the lights dimmed, and the orchestra started, all fell into place. The audience were transported.

'*Maman*,' said Irving, clutching my hand nervously as we navigated the corridor, passing imps, goblins and assorted horned creatures chatting and rehearsing lines, his little eyes wide. '*Pourquoi y a-t-il des monstres partout*?'

Bram glanced back. He didn't approve of Irving speaking French in his presence.

'English, please, Irving,' I reminded him.

Irving gave a weary sigh. 'Why are there monsters everywhere?'

'Oh, darling,' I said, swooping on him, forcing Bram to stop. I knelt so Irving could see my face. I pushed his hair back from his forehead, pressing the little worried furrow between his soft brows. 'Remember I told you the theatre was pretend? These aren't really monsters, they're just people, like you and me, only they're wearing costumes and face paint, doing make-believe, like you and Nounou Yvette do sometimes.'

A particularly gruesome troll chose that moment to squeeze past. Irving squealed in fright and buried his head in my shoulder. 'Perhaps this wasn't such a good idea,' I said to Bram over Irving's head. 'I'll take him home.'

Bram scowled, then his face lit up and he snapped his fingers. 'I've a better idea. I know exactly how to fix this. Irving,' he said, prying him from me. 'Come with me, laddie. I've someone I want you to meet.'

I stood, looking at Bram quizzically.

'Leave him with me, Florrie.' He placed a reassuring hand on my arm. 'Why don't you visit Ellen? She'd love to see you.'

Poor Ellen. She'd had a terrible time recently, losing three important men in her life in quick succession, including her husband, Charles Wardell Kelly. She'd been understandably downcast.

'I'll bring Irving back once I've eased his fears.' Before I could ask how Bram intended to do that, he lifted Irving into his arms and disappeared around the corner.

'Lemon!' exclaimed Ellen as Judith opened the door. 'Come in, come in. This is a lovely surprise.' She enfolded me in a warm hug. My face was momentarily pressed into her shoulder, and I inhaled musk, jasmine and the slight mustiness of her heavily brocaded costume.

‘Sit, sit,’ she insisted as she resumed her seat. Judith quickly brought over a chair, and I sat at an angle watching Ellen as she put the finishing touches to her make-up. ‘Dear God,’ she exclaimed, flapping her arms. ‘These bloody sleeves are a nuisance.’ Long and widely flared at the ends, the extra material dragged over the top of the dresser, knocking over bottles and causing her brushes to clank to the floor. I picked them up.

Ellen chuckled. ‘You’re too well dressed to be stooping for those.’

‘I don’t mind,’ I said, and passed the errant objects to Judith, who replaced them out of reach and then began to pin back Ellen’s sleeves. Like the rest of the gown, they were heavily embossed and beaded. A jewelled sash angled across her torso, while a beautifully decorated cap adorned her head, her golden hair framing her face sweetly.

‘You make a lovely Margaret,’ I said, smiling at her reflection. The desolation in her eyes only enhanced the character.

‘A Leadenhall butcher would look lovely next to Henry’s Mephistopheles. That make-up is hideous,’ she shuddered then looked about. ‘I thought you were bringing Irving?’ She dusted a brush across her cheek.

‘I did. The poor mite was frightened by all the actors in costume, so Bram’s allaying his fears.’

‘You *were* worried this wasn’t an appropriate play for him.’

‘Still am. But Bram gets to spend so little time with him. If worse comes to worst, and what Bram’s intending doesn’t work, can I bring Irving here until the play’s over?’

‘Of course,’ said Ellen, reaching for my hand and giving it a loving press.

While she lined her eyes with kohl, I asked her how she was feeling.

She lowered the brush from her eyes. ‘Relieved I can escape here each night.’ She gave a tremulous smile. ‘It’s easier to deal with this tragedy rather than my own.’

‘I’m so sorry, Ellen.’ I went to touch her, reassure her, but hesitated.

‘Let’s not talk about it,’ she said. ‘Instead, have I told you about Mr Tonkins? No? Well, he comes to see the play every week and insists on coming backstage to check on my welfare. He believes Henry really is the devil and my soul is in mortal danger.’

‘I’m sure it is,’ I said, grinning. ‘Not only from Henry …’

‘Lemon!’ began Ellen, faking outrage, when a piercing scream rang out.

‘Irving!’ I was out the door in a flash, Ellen behind me.

The actors parted for us like the Red Sea for Moses. The scream turned into wails, leading me straight to Henry Irving’s dressing room.

I burst through the door to find Henry, costumed as Mephistopheles, replete with horns and ruby and black make-up, looking utterly terrifying, looming over my son, who sat with his little face buried in his hands, facing the mirror. Bram was shaking him by the shoulder, clearly cross.

Both men started guiltily when I bowled in.

‘Irving!’ I raced to his side. ‘What is it, *mon coeur*?’ I rubbed his back; he heaved with silent sobs.

Henry made a scoffing noise. ‘He’s overreacted, that’s all. Tell her, Brammie.’ He stood and leaned back with his bottom pressed against the dresser, arms folded.

‘Bram?’ I looked to my husband. Irving was frozen in fear. I was unable to coax him to lower his hands and turn around so I might comfort him.

‘I don’t know what’s got into him,’ began Bram, looking from me to Ellen then Henry. ‘All Henry did was put a little paint on him to prove that anyone can become a monster.’

‘I don’t want to be a monster!’ Irving howled into his palms.

I made a noise of dismay.

‘And you’re not, sweetpea,’ said Ellen soothingly, ruffling his hair. ‘The make-up is only so you look like one.’ She glared at Henry, then Bram. ‘What were you thinking?’

Irving’s cries began to ease.

Dismissing Ellen with a flap of his hand, Henry bent over until his face was level with my son’s. ‘That’s right, boyo, there’s nothing to be afraid of. Why don’t you show your mother? Show her what I did.’

Ever so slowly, as Ellen and I made noises of encouragement, Irving lowered his hands and stared in the mirror. Beside him was Henry. I studied the two faces, side by side, one large, one small, one aged, one youthful, the crow-coloured brows, the hollowed cheeks, eyes reflecting the gaslight so they appeared to have twin flames in their heads. Not only was my son named after Henry, in that moment he resembled him as well.

‘Dear God,’ I whispered. ‘A diabolical double.’

Irving's eyes, already crudely emphasised with black rings, grew larger by the second, his lips began to quiver and his body to shake. He let out another piercing shriek, and shoved Henry away. '*Enlève-le! Enlève-le!*' He began rubbing his face, smearing the make-up.

'*Merde!*' Henry, startled, fell on his arse and scuttled away.

Irving began to rake his cheeks, his nails renting the delicate flesh. Blood and tears mingled with the thick paint. He was sobbing, terrified, confused. I grabbed his hands and turned him around so he could no longer see himself. Ellen stood between Irving and Henry.

'Dearling, Irving, listen.' I kept my voice calm, soft. '*Tu vas bien*. You're alright.' He was panting heavily; snot collected between his nose and upper lip. Ellen handed me a towel and I knelt and wiped his face, wincing as the scratches reopened and bled afresh.

'I want to go home,' he cried, tears trailing down his damaged face.

'Hush, hush,' I whispered, brushing them aside, pulling him into my arms. 'If that's what you wish, we'll go.' I looked pointedly at Bram, who had helped Henry to his feet. 'Bram?' I waited for him to offer comfort to his distressed son, to do *something*.

Henry's eyes narrowed as he observed us. 'You need to take that boy in hand, Brammie. Teach him to behave.'

'Behave?' I stood and lifted Irving into my arms. 'What? Like any young Christian lad would when made to look like Satan? To having the devil himself transform him?'

Henry began to laugh. It was cold, brittle, like breaking glass. '*Moi*, the devil?' He gestured towards me. 'And there's your problem, Brammie. The poor boy can't tell the difference between reality and fantasy. I wonder who's to blame for that?' With one last accusing look in my direction, he swept from the room. Moments later, Harry's voice rang out.

'Five minutes until curtain! Show's about to start.'

As far as I was concerned, the show was over.



I put Irving to bed, leaving him in the care of the new nanny, Mrs Cassan Simpson, Nounou Yvette having returned to France a month earlier. I retired to my own, my mind filled with noxious thoughts about Henry and devils

before I found myself dwelling on Oscar again. Yesterday, I'd learned that his son, Cyril, was ill. He was a sickly baby and a source of concern for him and Constance, who was very pregnant with their second child. It was the reason Oscar had absented himself from his usual social circles, including my last few salons, though Bram said he'd been seen about town. I confess, I'd missed his presence. I prayed for him, his son and Constance, before finally drifting off …

Something woke me from yet another feverish dream. I found Bram at his desk, writing. The sun hadn't risen but from the bugling of a distant cock, and the mauve and sapphire sky, dawn was approaching.

'How long have you been home?' I asked sleepily. I hadn't heard him come in.

He waved towards a chair, inviting me to sit. 'A couple of hours.'

'You haven't been to bed.'

Bram shook his head, even though it wasn't a question. A half-drunk bottle of whisky and a glass sat at his elbow.

I waited for him to inquire after Irving. He continued to write. I cleared my throat. 'Shouldn't we discuss what happened with Irving? With Henry?'

The pen stilled. 'I'm not sure what's left to say about it, Florrie. The boy had a fright, that's all.'

'He did. *Henry* frightened him. I can't believe you allowed him to do that to our son.'

'Do what? Put a bit of greasepaint on him?' Bram scoffed. 'Henry was right; the boy overreacted.'

'*Overreacted?* He was terrified, Bram.'

Exasperated, Bram put the pen down. 'Did Irving have trouble settling when he got home?'

'No —'

'Has he had nightmares?'

I pursed my lips. It was on the tip of my tongue to tell him of my own.

'Then, Florrie, there's nothing to talk about, is there? Please, don't make more of this than it is. Irving is a sensitive lad, some might say oversensitive.'

'Really? Who?'

Bram didn't bite. 'Let it go. If you do, the boy will. Henry will as well.'

'Henry? Don't tell me he was upset.'

‘Of course he was. Despite what you think, he’s not a complete monster. He was distressed by Irving’s reaction. Being a consummate professional, he didn’t let it affect his performance.’

‘Well, thank the good Lord for *that*.’

He returned to his work. I waited a full minute, then without another word, went back to bed.

Surely, if anyone was responsible for Irving’s flight of fancy, it was a father who’d raised him on a diet of ghost stories and tales of creatures roused from nightmares to pluck children from their beds and punish them. Not that I was innocent of that particular sin, I supposed, having told Irving many tales of restless spirits and invisible beasts myself. As far as our son was concerned, Henry was one of those storybook ghouls come to life – and had turned him into one as well.

How could Bram be so … cavalier? An image of his pen moving across the page filled my mind. Maybe he was right, and Irving was simply a sensitive lad who just needed to learn the difference between make-believe and reality. Visions of my own spectral visitor loomed. Perhaps I needed to learn that lesson too.

Before I finally drifted off to sleep, I prayed that what happened to our son tonight wouldn’t harm him in any long-lasting way. I also prayed it wouldn’t somehow crawl its way into Bram’s fiction to live forever.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Victoria Station, London, 1887

Caught in the frenzy of planning the 1887 tour of America (the Lyceum's third), Bram determined that this time, I'd join him. I refused. I'd no desire to go; no urge to risk the storm-tossed violence of the Atlantic, no matter how safe Bram said it was. This didn't stop him, or Ellen – shamelessly co-opted as his ally – pestering me endlessly.

Frustrated by their determination to make me change my mind, I decided to leave London for a while and go to Paris. My absence would allow Bram to dedicate every waking moment to his preparations while reinforcing I was serious about not wanting to accompany him. It was one thing to take a short trip on a steamship to France, quite another to sail to America.

Not intending to take the boy, when Bram generously upped my allowance so I could buy some new dresses (for when I came on the tour, he said – *ha!*), in a moment of weakness I relented, taking Mrs Simpson as well as Irving.

We were pushed and jostled on the platform as we farewelled Bram at the train station. Between ensuring our baggage was loaded, Bram incessantly checked his pocket watch. He had to make it back to the Lyceum before Henry noticed him gone.

I was thinking about ways to entertain Irving and Mrs Simpson on the journey. At least the ferry to Dieppe was overnight and the boy would sleep. We'd have a few hours to pass in Newhaven before we'd be able to board. A growing township with a wide, unpaved High Street and some shops, Newhaven had undergone a few changes since my first trip to Paris years earlier. The course of the river had been altered, creating a deeper, safer harbour, sands had been dredged and bridges upgraded. There was always a

veritable fleet of ships and barges in port, which of course meant sailors, some from far away. I hoped seeing the assortment of ships, the variety of cargo being loaded and unloaded, hearing all the different accents, would be enough to keep Irving amused.

'I must be off,' said Bram, kissing my cheek and shaking hands with his son. 'Think about America again, Florrie, for my sake?' he asked wistfully.

'You're not waiting until we depart?'

'Can't,' he said. 'Henry.' With a final wave, he disappeared into the furls of steam, bonnets and top hats.

The porter strode past, warning us departure was imminent and ordering us to board. Towards the front of the train, another uniformed figure rose above the swarm of people. He blew a sharp whistle and pandemonium erupted. There were tearful farewells, shouts, a baby began to cry. Somewhere, a dog started to bark, a frenzied barking that transformed into a full-blooded howl.

I swear, it sent shivers through me. A great feeling of foreboding smothered everything, as if this was to be the last time I'd ever stand here on the platform, searching for my husband who was lost to me. The sensation sucked the air out of my lungs, my vision briefly dimmed. I wanted to cry, to howl like the dog.

'We have to board, *Maman*,' said Irving, tugging at my skirts. I looked at the strange boy with the slight French accent. I forgot where I was. Who I was. Who *he* was.

Irving frowned, his expression altering from annoyance to concern. I forced a smile. 'We do indeed, dearling,' I said, tugging the fair locks that hung beneath his cap. 'Let Mrs Simpson go first.' I took his hand to prevent him climbing the metal stairs before her.

Mrs Simpson neatly alighted, then turned to help Irving, who leapt into our compartment, racing past her to fling himself on the seat. I pulled myself onto the topmost stair and took a final, lingering look before shutting the door. The grey and white steam swirled. Shadowy figures moved within it and, for just a second, I thought I could see Bram's broad shoulders, that hurried gait. He'd waited after all. My spirit lifted, my hand too.

It wasn't him.

My heart stopped. I stumbled and would have fallen had I not swiftly grabbed the railing by the door.

‘What is it, *Maman*?’ asked Irving, sliding along the seat and poking his head out the window.

His voice came from a distance. Through the plumes that enveloped the platform, the squeeze of people, animals, luggage and railway personnel harrying folk to either board or step away from the carriages, a drab, lanky figure emerged and stood motionless amidst the maelstrom. I forgot to breathe. His eyes were the same fierce red I remembered, dangerous jewels in a pale face, boring into mine. He raised his cap, exposing the spotted dome of his head.

‘Can you see him?’ I asked hoarsely, a hand at my throat.

‘Who?’ Irving looked up and down the platform.

‘Him …’ I pointed a shaking finger.

‘*Maman*.’ Irving pulled at my sleeve, his brow creased, fear in his eyes, darker than his father’s, than mine. ‘Who do you mean?’ Irving’s fingers curled around my wrist.

‘No-one. It’s alright. I’m alright.’ I patted his hand and gave him a half-smile. ‘I just thought I saw …’

‘*Père*?’ supplied Irving when I didn’t immediately answer.

I directed my gaze back to where the man had stood. He was gone.

‘Yes. Father.’

Hot then cold sluiced through my body as I allowed Irving to pull me inside while Mrs Simpson wrestled the door. I went through the motions of making sure Irving was seated comfortably beside me, facing the direction of travel, that the windows were closed. Mrs Simpson sat opposite. At Irving’s request, and with my consent, Mrs Simpson delved inside the basket of food we’d brought. I declined the offered cake. I’d no appetite. Unable to resist the urge to look out the window again, I scanned those remaining on the platform.

Thus far, the spectre had been a flicker in the corner of my eye, the prickle on the back of my neck, a certain feeling I was being watched. He invaded my sleep, occupied shadows. But this was the first time, outside of dreams and illusions, of sensations, that he’d made such a bold appearance; that he’d appeared in daylight. Why? I’d thought moving house, leaving the place where he had met his demise, would free me of his presence.

One of the stories from his childhood that Bram was fond of telling was about the Doom that would appear when someone was about to die. Bram would narrow his eyes, hunch his shoulders and in a voice deep and yet sibilant, tell of how it took on the shape of a human or an animal and would haunt the footsteps of the fated, whisper in their ears, torment them to madness by reminding them of their mortality. Is that what this spectre represented? Was he somehow the harbinger of my death? If so, why had I not met it yet? Or was it imminent?

I shuddered.

'Would you like a blanket, Mrs Stoker?' asked Mrs Simpson. 'You're milk-pale and oh, my, you're shivering.'

I took the blanket she held out; what could I say? *Forgive me, Mrs Simpson, but this ghastly apparition has been haunting me for a few years in my nightmares, and he just manifested on the platform*. I'd be thought hysteric. Was I? How could something I conjured from a tragedy, then terrible imaginings, combined with fears about my life unravelling, have such a visceral effect upon me? Further fed by all the supernatural tales Bram told and the plays I saw.

I recalled what Henry had said about Irving. How he'd blamed me for the child's reaction. What if he was right? I forced myself not to look at my son lest I see proof of my culpability.

I needed to tell Bram about the spectre. If anyone could understand the power of imagination, the awful demons the mind could summon, it was him. In the wake of the make-up episode, Bram had written a shocking, evil story, 'The Dualitists', about a pair of child-killers, inspired by my description of Irving and Henry as a diabolical double. Bram had approached Mr Courtier-Dutton, another recent addition to my salons, who published a magazine for theatre-lovers called *The Stage*. When Mr Courtier-Dutton learned the story was inspired backstage at the Lyceum, he'd bought it immediately. I'd been appalled Bram could compose such a wicked tale – and by my part in its conception – but Bram explained it had taken hold of his mind and wouldn't let go. I consoled myself that at least he was being published again.

When the train began to lurch away, the wheels shrieking and grinding, the long, loud whistle announcing its departure, I rested the back of my head on the seat. Something moved in the corridor, and I sat bolt upright.

What if the drowned man hadn't remained on the platform, but had boarded the train? What if even now he was moving along the corridors, searching for me?

As Irving and Mrs Simpson chatted, she pointing out the various landmarks we passed, exciting him about the ship to Dieppe and then another train to Paris, I rose and, as calmly as I could, pulled down the blinds on the windows facing the corridor, darkening our compartment slightly. Their conversation washed over me, not in a soothing way, but like a tide fast coming in, leaving nowhere safe to climb.

When I sat back down, this time near the interior door so my son, his mouth half-full, could look out the window, I found myself unable to stop staring at him. He squealed at a herd of cows being driven down a road. Laughed at the ramblers awkwardly climbing over a stile. I noted the spark in his bright eyes, the sheer excitement the trip evoked. His joy, his anticipation, made me heartsick. All I could think was, if the devil-eyed man does come for me, what's to stop him taking my boy too?

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

SS Victoria, 13 April 1887

Unable to sleep, I crept out of the ship's cabin, leaving Irving and Mrs Simpson fast asleep in their bunks, and went up on deck. It was a cold, clear night, sometime past midnight. The channel was as calm as when we'd left Newhaven a few hours earlier. The moon carved a silvery passage across the onyx waters. The great funnel of the *Victoria* silently expelled its fumes into the cool night as the ship chugged along. I leaned against the rail and inhaled deeply. I was so tired, my overwrought mind refusing to settle. From the moment we'd left the train to when we boarded the steamship, I'd searched every face, every shadow, but seen no sign of my unwelcome … what did I call him? Lurker? Shadow? Nemesis? Haunting?

I was about to move when I glimpsed a figure in a dark robe. My ears roared. I spun around, ready to confront him, only to find a nun tottering over the deck.

'Good evening,' she said, approaching carefully.

'And to you, sister.' I tightened my shawl.

'Lovely night to be at sea, is it not?' she said tersely, gripping the railing hard and staring with wide, frightened eyes over the water.

'You've not sailed before?' I asked gently.

'Never. I don't like leaving land. God knows what can happen.'

'Does He?' I asked, finger pointing skywards.

She chuckled. 'If He *is* planning anything, I hope He tells me first.'

We shared a low laugh. The funny thing about travel was how it made the usual pleasantries more intimate, created a space in which you could tell perfect strangers things you'd never say normally.

'Doesn't help that I can't swim,' said the nun.

‘Me either.’ I waited until she met my eyes. ‘Here’s to staying afloat then.’

‘Amen to that,’ she sighed. We stood side by side in silence. ‘I saw you earlier,’ she said eventually, her eyes darting nervously towards where the gangplank had been drawn up, then at the lifeboats. They looked too small, too shallow to be capable of saving anything. ‘You’re travelling with a little boy and a woman.’

‘My son and his governess,’ I said. ‘I’m Mrs Florence Stoker, by the way. We’re on our way to Paris for a few days. You?’

‘Pleasure to meet you. Sister Euphemia. I’m en route to Normandy, to take up a teaching position at a convent.’ She plucked her lip a few times. ‘I fear my nerves are playing havoc with my sleep – and not only because of the new job.’

‘Ah,’ I said, pity for the poor woman making me want to soothe her, even though my own sleep was disturbed, and I was as scared of water as she evidently was. ‘I’ve travelled this route many times; you’ve no need to be afraid. I can’t recall an accident on the Dieppe line.’

‘Oh, but I do.’ Coming towards us from the main cabin was an elderly lady. Beautifully dressed in a long fawn coat, she had silver hair, a beaked nose and regal bearing. ‘’Twas twenty-two years ago,’ she continued, joining us. ‘A vessel by the name of the *Alexander Read* ran aground on a rock outside the harbour.’ She waved towards some point in the darkness.

‘It did?’ squeaked the nun.

‘You were on board?’ I asked in a sharp tone. I was annoyed this woman had all but undone my reassurances.

‘No, but I’m the captain’s cousin,’ said the woman, dismissing me with a glance. ‘The story is legend in our family.’ Without another word, she wandered away.

I wasted no more time outside after that but escorted Sister Euphemia back to her cabin and went to mine. I lay down beside Irving, careful not to disrupt his slumber, and after a while glided into a sleep populated by glowing red eyes, swirling dark robes and waves crashing against the sides of a sinking ship.



It was dark when I woke. For a moment I wondered what had disturbed me until I heard the gentle tap-tap of the steward knocking on doors, asking for tickets. I quickly rose, straightened my clothes and rummaged in my reticule. Just before the officer reached the door, I opened it and showed him ours. There was no point trying to sleep after that. It was a bitter morning. I decided to fetch a warmer jacket from our luggage and a fresh shirt for Irving before we reached port. He'd spilled some gravy on the one he'd been wearing. Our luggage was in the box room, decks below.

The ship's engines thrummed as I moved along the corridor, the vibrations making it seem like a living thing, and I an alien moving about its innards. There was no-one else around, though I could hear faint conversation, snores and wheezes through the doors I passed. The smell of fresh paint, seawater and mould mingled with the odours of humanity as I tried to stick to the centre of the narrow corridor, the dim lights making the interior gloomier than not.

I was halfway down the stairs when I saw a familiar shape pass at the very bottom.

I halted. 'Is that you, sister?' I tried to keep my voice low. I could hear no footsteps, no indication there was anyone there. My eyes slowly grew accustomed to the dimness. Standing at the bottom of the stairs, a figure waited.

It wasn't the sister.

A chalk white face with terrible burning eyes stared. The thin blue lips were open, as if about to speak. I could see long, glistening teeth.

'Leave me alone,' I began, feeling not fear, but an intense dark anger. How dare he follow me. I resumed my descent. 'What do you want? It's not my fault you died in —'

There was a violent *boom* and I was flung headfirst, striking the walls, the slick wooden steps, the floor. Small lights danced before my eyes; my head throbbed. A warm trickle ran down my forehead and into my eyes. I touched it. Blood.

A great shuddering began around me as I tried to sit up. There was the tinkle of breaking glass, a giant thud as something heavy struck the deck above. Rope, lanterns and other items attached to the walls shook loose and tumbled to the floor, some striking me. There was the sound of metal twisting, a colossal groan as if the ship itself was being tortured. Screams

and cries rent the air. Doors were flung open and people spilled out of the cabins, frantic, shouting, demanding to know what had happened. A baby bawled. I quickly pressed myself against the wall as people streamed past, trying to reach the staircase. My fingers were crushed, my skirt ripped as they trod on and around me. I began to lever myself to my feet. Then, the ship canted sharply.

There were more screams and people fell. Someone helped me remain upright. All I could think about was Irving. I joined the throng pushing and shoving to mount the stairs.

When I reached our cabin, the door was open and Mrs Simpson stood there, one arm around Irving who, though owl-eyed, was composed.

'Come,' I said, 'we must get outside.'

When we reached the deck, it was inclined so steeply it was impossible not to slide down its length towards the figurehead I could just distinguish through the darkness, smoke and haze. Above us, the great funnel coughed and spumed. The noise was astounding. Cries, shouts and orders flew, strangely flat as they were swallowed by the thick swirling fog, occasionally escaping to echo around us. It was hard to get a sense of direction. I kept a firm hold of Irving, Mrs Simpson too.

Unable to tell which way we should go, it wasn't until the nun joined us that we shuffled towards the davits where the lifeboats were kept. The lifeboats that only a matter of hours ago I'd thought inadequate to the task. There, male passengers were brutally shoving aside women and children to reach the boats first. I couldn't believe what I was seeing. The cowardice of these men, the selfishness as they ignored the captain's shouts, the crew's frenzied attempts to get the weak and vulnerable to safety. A child was cruelly thrust to the deck; a woman was grabbed and flung down. The craven men cut two of the ropes holding the boats aloft and, as the lifeboat landed in what were now churning seas, leapt overboard to save themselves.

I began to hurl abuse. I wasn't alone.

'May your bastard souls rot in hell!' screamed Sister Euphemia.

'Lily-livered curs!' cried someone else. 'Hope yer bollocks fall off.'

Above, men were climbing the rigging, dangling from the crosstrees, shouting like maniacs.

Somehow, Irving, Mrs Simpson, the sister and I ended up in one of the lifeboats, but not before one man tried to wrench Mrs Simpson away.

Without thinking, I turned and punched him fair in the face. He staggered back, blood sprayed across his cheek.

‘Oh thank you, Mrs Stoker, thank you,’ wept Mrs Simpson as she fell into the boat.

Overcrowded, filled with crying women and children, we clung to the sides as we were tossed in the frigid waves, able to see only a few feet in front. Sobs and shouts from the other boats and the sinking steamship were dulled by the opaque fog. When it occasionally parted, we saw, not too far away, the first lifeboat sinking, overfilled with clawing, struggling men. Gunshots rent the air as desperate fellows, not knowing how to signal their distress, fired meaninglessly into the ether. I wanted to throw myself over Irving lest a stray bullet catch him, but once in the lifeboat we’d been separated and ordered not to budge. He sat in the stern, jammed between two portly women.

Whether it was luck or fate, the crew on our lifeboat worked fast to pull us away from the vortex of the sinking ship. We were packed so tightly against each other, I couldn’t move. One of the seamen swore we weren’t far from Dieppe. Another mentioned Fécamp. We’d been rowing a short while when we saw a young girl clutching an oar. An old man clung precariously to a piece of flotsam nearby.

‘Look! Look!’ I cried as we were about to row right past them. ‘We must save them.’

There was some mumbling from the crew. ‘We can only take one,’ said the senior crew member, a man in his forties, with a dark beard and small bleak eyes.

I began to object.

‘Listen,’ said the sailor, his voice sharp, ‘if we take them both, we’ll sink for sure. Then we’ll all drown.’

The sailor looked at each of us in turn. I turned away. The young girl, weeping and whimpering, was pulled on board.

‘For the love of God, surely we can take one more soul,’ pleaded Sister Euphemia.

The lifeboat was foundering badly, taking on more water.

The crew members ignored her. Irving began to cry. Silently, with tears rolling down my cheeks, nursing my torn knuckles, I prayed for God’s

forgiveness as the old man's anguished cries followed us before they too ceased.

Time passed. No-one spoke.

Eventually, the fog began to thin, the moon was waning and dawn approached. The beam of a lighthouse spun across the waters. Under instruction from the senior crewman, we held up our sodden handkerchiefs, stark against the darkness as a signal, but they were not up to the task and slapped limply in the faint breeze. In the distance, I could just see the tops of white chalky cliffs, the twinkle of lights from tiny villages, safe and secure. I wished us there so badly, willed God to rescue us from the waves breaking over us, the biting cold, the rocking lifeboat, the wailing of the women, the sour smell of vomit, the uncertainty of it all.

God was listening. Seven hours after the *Victoria* sank, another steamship found us. They brought us on board and made straight for the port of Fécamp.

To be on land again, to know that Irving was safe, that I was too, and Mrs Simpson, was a miracle. Had God ignored or answered Sister Euphemia's prayers? I couldn't help but think of the figure I'd seen, the man I believed signalled my Doom. I'd held him responsible for this catastrophe, persuaded he was the harbinger of death. Only, I hadn't died, had I? On the contrary, being on the stairs instead of in the box room when the ship foundered saved my life.

When we reached the end of the pier, Sister Euphemia knelt upon the rocky shore, offering prayers to the Almighty. Others from the lifeboat joined her. I pulled Irving into my arms and gave my thanks as well. My dress was torn and trailing, my forehead cut, my knuckles grazed, my hair undone and clinging to my shoulders and waist.

That's where locals from the port authority and the biggest inn found us as they came with warm blankets, spirit and food. Many survivors refused to leave the shore, desperate to hear news of their relatives and companions. Names were exchanged. I remember a Miss Holt, who played a game with Irving to keep his mind off what had happened, a family called Jess, a Mrs Warlett. There were folk from Vienna, some from Constantinople. Four were the steamship's crew and it was due to them and their strength, their impossible decisions, I swear, that we survived.

Later, we learned that all but two of the men on the first lifeboat drowned. A young married couple were also lost to the waves, along with the captain's cousin who had spoken so grandly on the deck. Some children, caught in the forecabin as the ship sank, never made it out. My heart broke at that news. Altogether, of the one hundred or so souls who boarded, some twenty died, crew among them. There was great bravery that night and terrible, shameful cowardice.

I waited until Irving and Mrs Simpson were taken to the inn at Fécamp and tucked up before a fire, dozing, then sent a telegram telling Bram we'd survived. Reports of this disaster would travel faster than good news, and I just hoped that if information about the sinking of the *Victoria* reached Bram first, he wouldn't be in agonies of doubt for long.

The following day, my trunk was found. It was returned with the lock broken, half the linen stolen and everything of value gone, even the money I'd hidden in my corset. We made do with what we could, and the generosity of the locals and the other survivors would remain with me forever.

Over the next two days, loved ones arrived to retrieve those who'd survived. So did the authorities and the press, both wanting to interview those involved. Mrs Simpson's brother came to fetch her. With each passing hour, the number remaining at the port dwindled. We watched as they were taken away, thanking God, the ship's crew, the kindness of the people of Fécamp.

Still Bram didn't come.

I silently seethed at Henry, blaming him for refusing to release Bram from his duties. Added to this was fury that my husband, Irving's father, could be so callous, so indifferent to our ordeal. That yet again, he chose Henry. The hate I'd battled to overcome bubbled to the surface again. I could no longer live with it or the man who aroused it.

When I finally saw his tall figure disembarking from a steamship, I thought at first he too was an apparition. He drew closer and, upon spotting me, broke into a run. I flew down the street, uncaring of the stares and smiles, Irving behind me. Locals cried out in joy, '*Belle dame! Belle dame!*' All I could think of was Keats's poem, and thanked God I'd been shown mercy.

We stopped, feet apart, Bram and I, staring at each other, both panting. Irving, sensing something awry, halted behind me.

'Where have you been?' I demanded, shattered and fed up. My fury was a shield that forced him to drop his arms. 'I sent telegrams.'

'You did? They … they never reached me, Florrie,' said Bram, ashen, unkempt. 'Truly. I didn't know about the sinking. Nothing. Not until late last night. I came at once.' He took a step closer. He held out his arms again.

'I've been sending cables since we reached here.'

He shook his head. 'I never received them, Florrie.'

Disbelief set my features; anger coursed through my chest.

'I've barely been home these last nights.' Bram was all but pleading. 'The preparations, you unders—' The look on my face gave him pause. 'You sent the maids away. There was no-one home to receive the messages. No-one.' He gave a shuddering breath. 'The moment I heard, I came.'

I wanted to believe him, but it was second nature for Bram to put the theatre before his family, and too easy to believe he'd waited until it was convenient for Henry to come.

'You never received my telegrams?'

'I swear. But when I learned about the sinking, that it was your ship …' His eyes filled. 'I dropped everything and came. You have to believe me … Florrie, please.'

Still, I hesitated, even as a sob began to build. I wanted to believe him. Trust him, but …

With a groan, Bram pulled me into an embrace. Resistant at first, I soon relented, melting into his hold. Irving flung his arms around us both. All my pent-up anger, hurt and fear, my doubts, were unleashed as, together, we held each other and wept, oblivious to the gathered crowd.

As we walked back to the hotel, my tears started afresh. Whether Bram was telling the truth or not, we'd survived. Against terrible odds, we were alive. This was a second chance.

Later that night, as we lay on the hotel bed, Irving curled between us, it occurred to me that real second chances required change – of perspective, habit, anything. One thing I knew for certain about my husband was that he was not only unwilling to change, he was unable to.

It was up to me to give us, me and Bram, that second chance.

And so, against my better judgement, swallowing my terror of the ocean, I made the greatest reversal a woman could: I changed my mind.

I accompanied Bram on the Lyceum's six-month tour of America.



PART FIVE

1888 to 1900

None other should be master of me

I was conscious of a love growing into adoration, and also of abhorrence. This I know is a paradox, but I can make no other attempt to explain the feeling.

J Sheridan Le Fanu, *Carmilla*

CHAPTER THIRTY

Scotland, 1888

Bram suggested to Henry that over the summer break they go to Scotland and take in the blasted heaths, the ruined castles, and immerse themselves in Scottish history and mythology, all in the name of research for the Lyceum's forthcoming production of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. Ellen and I were to join them. I'd always loved the play, the otherworldly elements, Lady Macbeth, Hecate, the witches, prophecies and the bloody consequences of unchecked power. Here was an opportunity to see the landscape where it was set, and that appealed far more than crossing and recrossing the Atlantic with the entire Lyceum company which, as great an adventure as it was, I swore never to do again.

As I planned our Scottish trip, I decided Irving would return to his grandmother, aunts and uncles in Dublin. Deep down, I knew he'd be happier with his relatives, and at his cousins' school. Over in Ireland, he was the boy who lived in another country; he was exotic, with his quaint accent and ways, and therefore paid a great deal of attention. Far more than if he travelled with us, especially since Henry would be sure to monopolise Bram. I'd Ellen for company, and while Fussie would no doubt be by Henry's side, Irving needed other children. He needed to be part of a family in a way he simply wasn't as an only child in London.

When I told him, I half-expected, half-hoped, he'd object. He'd never been to Scotland and was, among many things, a curious boy. On reflection, it was when I said Henry would be there too that he accepted his lot with something akin to relief.

Then he said something unexpected.

'Mother,' he began, looking uncertain. 'Can I tell you a secret?'

We were sitting in the drawing room. Bram was at the theatre, Mrs Simpson was embroidering. Irving had been playing with a wooden train, driving it over a rug road and cushion mountains.

A strange coldness swept over me. ‘You can tell me anything, dearling.’ What secrets could an eight-year-old have?

Irving ceased to play and, casting a wary glance at Mrs Simpson, came and stood beside my chair. ‘I don’t like Mr Irving.’ He stared at me with troubled eyes. ‘Not one bit.’

‘Oh,’ I said, trying to keep my voice level. Mrs Simpson’s needle hovered mid-air.

‘I wish I wasn’t called after him. I wish I had another name.’

‘Do you now.’ I ushered Irving back towards his toys, kneeling on the floor beside him, watching as he pushed his train.

I’d been so careful to ensure I didn’t complain about Henry when Irving was in earshot. I also made a point of using endearments rather than my son’s christened name, one that had never been my choice and still, years later, jarred. But I never knew it bothered him quite so much as well. From the look on Mrs Simpson’s face, she wasn’t surprised.

‘What would you rather be called?’ I asked cautiously, tugging gently at an errant curl. I racked my brain for names. Some American ones came to mind. ‘Grover?’ Irving spluttered. ‘Talcott?’

‘They’re silly names.’ He chuckled.

I agreed. ‘Spot? Blacky? Rufus?’ I thought of the neighbours’ pets.

‘No!’ he laughed. Then became very serious. ‘I want to be called Noel.’

About to tickle him, I paused. He’d clearly given it some thought.

‘It’s my middle name,’ he said. ‘We could swap it to be my first. I could be called Noel instead of after *him*.’

I tilted his chin towards me. He really was an unassuming, placid child; clever too. He should be so easy to love. Everybody else did … Maybe if he wasn’t called Irving anymore …

‘Very well,’ I said, cupping his face in my palms. ‘I shall call you Noel. Mrs Simpson, too.’ She nodded agreeably. ‘And, once you’re in Ireland, Granny Moo, your aunts and uncles, and your teacher, will as well.’

Irving’s eyes, grey like his father’s, sparkled.

‘But,’ I cautioned, raising a finger, ‘for the time being, let’s keep this a secret between us. Mrs Simpson and I will call you Noel when we’re alone.

And, when you go to your new school in Oxford, I'll tell your father that from hereon in, Noel is to be your name. How does that sound?'

My son stared at me wide-eyed, then flung himself into my arms, pressing his little face against my cheek. 'Thank you, *Maman*,' he said, slipping back into the French his beloved Nounou Yvette had taught him.

I hugged him tightly, feelings of such warmth and pleasure making my breast swell. My heart felt lighter than it had in a long, long time. Mrs Simpson resumed her needlework, beaming.

If only it was so easy to rid ourselves of the other Irving.



Scotland. The beauty and fierceness of the countryside had me in its thrall. Ellen and I sat by the window of various train compartments (we changed trains often), and between reading excerpts from the Scottish play to each other, we gazed with wonder upon the craggy mountain tops, the heather-covered slopes, the endless stony hills, glimmering lochs, and the occasional castle or village.

We decided to stay in Edinburgh a few days. More a large town than a city, it nevertheless had a majesty about it, and not only because the royal family had a residence there. In one direction the cobbled main street led to the Palace of Holyroodhouse, in the other was Edinburgh Castle, protected by sheer cliffs on one side and a riddle of streets, fortifications and baileys on the other. From the castle, the views were splendid: tree-covered slopes to the south and west, and the vastness of the Firth of Forth to the north and east.

While Ellen and I wandered among the streets and snickets of the Old Town, and admired the elegant Georgian buildings of the New, Bram and Henry haunted less savoury areas, searching out authentic Scottish artefacts, sporrans, pipes, bonnets, plaids, horns, as well as many grisly tales, which they regaled us with over dinner.

I'd thought the Irish fond of their bloody stories of apparitions, hauntings, headless riders, selkies and banshees, but the Scots had just as many – some so blood-curdling, I'd lie awake long after we'd gone to bed, my heart thrumming in my ears. My dreams would be a melding of drowned, grey-skinned and red-eyed men, and women with long, seaweed-green hair, all seeking to pull me down to a watery grave. I continued to

start at shadows, peer into the endless mists and dim corners. I grew tired and fractious. I still hadn't found a way to confide in Bram about my spectral companion.

Throughout the journey, Henry urged Bram to make notes – about the colours, the smells, the sounds, the garb. It was only after we'd been travelling a few days and changed trains several times, that I noticed Bram had two notebooks. One, to scribe all that he and Henry observed; the other, he most often filled at night when we were quite alone.

When Henry couldn't see or obstruct him.



As our train headed north to Aberdeen, we passed through an area known as Port Errol, a delightful fishing village nestled within the rocky arms of a bay called Cruden. I gasped at its wild beauty and urged Bram to join me at the window.

'Look,' I said and pointed towards a picturesque castle atop a steep headland overlooking the churning North Sea. 'Is that not magnificent?' It reminded me of those you'd see in the Irish countryside, with long wide windows, turrets, towers, and sweeping stone staircases.

'I believe that's Slains Castle.' Bram stared at it for a long time, a muttering Henry quite forgotten.

Caves riddled the headland upon which the castle sat; deep openings that yawned into the bay. Enormous, strange-shaped rocks rose out of the crashing sea in an uneven row, an ugly mouth forming a barrier to anyone wishing to enter the harbour. Sprays of foam dashed against their serrated peaks. The whole place was so isolated, so windswept and resplendent.

'I'll return,' said Bram quietly, as mesmerised by its violent beauty as I was.

'We will,' I said, and squeezed his arm.

With one last contemplative look, and a smile for me, he swivelled back to Henry, pen poised and notebook open – but which one?



Henry was his usual demanding self the entire trip, dominating Bram, separating us whenever he could. However, the time away brought me even

closer to Ellen. She divulged I was her most cherished friend.

'In my experience, pretty women don't really have friends their own sex, do they, Lemon? You, however, are the exception.'

'Which do I lack then? Beauty or friends?'

Ellen guffawed. 'You have both in abundance, which is, I believe, a rarity.'

We were at our hotel in Inverness. It was almost midnight. The men were still downstairs in the bar, enjoying their cigars and Highland whisky. We'd retreated to the rooms we'd been allocated upstairs. They were conjoined, with a cosy communal parlour between, perfect for conversations and planning. We sat with half-drunk wines in our night attire. Though it was summer, it was chilly enough to warrant a fire. Outside, it was a clear night and the moon had risen, its argent beams spilling through the window and accenting the worn rug, nature's limelight. I was tempted to strike a pose in its glow. We could just hear the fretting ocean discussing the tides with the wharves, and the deep voices of sailors loitering outside. Several ships had come into port that day, one from Norway, others from England. A shanty from a nearby tavern blew on the wind, as did the sing-song banter of the drinkers, broken by the odd shout.

I was touched by Ellen's revelation. She was my closest friend as well. But I also counted Lucy Gilbert, Bram's sister Matilda, and George's wife, the irrepressible Agnes, as beloved friends. Genevieve Ward, too. I also had my sisters – especially Phil. I regarded Ellen fondly. Though she had three sisters, including a Florence, they weren't close. She looked lovely in the firelight, her cheeks rosy, her hair spun gold. The Scottish air agreed with her.

Ellen repeated her earlier words, interrupting my train of thought. 'Think about it, the more attractive a woman, the less likely she is to have friends.'

'What *does* she have?'

'Competition.'

I blinked. 'But … I would never consider you in such a manner; nor any other woman.'

Ellen burst out laughing. 'That's because, Florence Lemon, no-one can compete with you. You're always the most beautiful woman in the room. But, for the likes of me, who is considered comely, but works in a

profession where aspersions are cast as fast as a Scotsman's fishing line, I *only* have competition. The older I get, the harder it is to win.'

I raised a self-conscious hand to my face. I was thirty years of age. Old by some accounts. 'Well, I consider you my dearest friend, Ellen,' I said. 'I have for a long while.' I lifted my drink. Our glasses kissed.

'Did I mention I tried to talk to Henry about Lady Macbeth?'

'Oh?'

'He has very set ideas about how I should play her and … well, I don't agree. I thought being in Scotland was the perfect time to raise the matter.'

'And?'

She gave a harsh bark of laughter. 'To him, Lady Macbeth is merely *the wife*: a foil to her husband; an accessory. She exists to highlight the tragedy of her man, nothing else.'

The wife. How that rankled. 'But … that's not right. She's more than a prop. She's the heart of the tale.'

Ellen sighed. 'I should have known talking to him would be a waste of time. You see, for all his worldly ways, he lacks knowledge of womenfolk. If he can't understand women, how can I expect him to understand Lady Macbeth?'

I hadn't thought of Henry in those terms before. The man had been married, dealt with women every day in his profession, played countless roles opposite Ellen, and other actresses, and counted her his lover for years. He entertained many females in the Beefsteak Room, escorted them to functions. I'd not thought him ignorant about the fairer sex. Only, it was more than that, wasn't it?

Ellen was right. Henry didn't understand women because he didn't care a jot what we thought or felt. If he did, he wouldn't be so demanding of Bram, for a start. If he couldn't see how his actions made me feel, made my son feel, did that mean I should be more understanding about what he asked of my husband?

Hell no.

Ellen saw my expression and gave a defeated chuckle. 'He has, I think, never given the subject of women his consideration.'

Our eyes met and we began to laugh.

'I think the only subject Henry has ever considered seriously is —' I began.

‘Himself!’ we said in unison and laughed harder.

A draught blew down the chimney, sparks exploding like miniature fireworks.

‘The play is said to be cursed, you know —’ she said grimly.

I did.

‘And I’m worried it will curse Henry.’

I recalled the reception of his Romeo; the American reception of *Faust*. While I didn’t care about Henry, I did care about Ellen and Bram. If Henry failed, so did they.

‘I gather Henry didn’t listen to you?’

‘When does he listen to anyone?’ replied Ellen.

‘So, Burnham wood will remove to Dunsinane.’

‘Aye. Along with Henry, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing,’ said Ellen dolefully.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

London, 1888 to 1889

We arrived back from our Scottish research trip to a London in the grip of panic. Every newspaper carried the same story; from Charing Cross to Victoria Street Station, headlines were shouted to appalled and curious crowds.

Woman Brutally Murdered!

Blood and Horror!

Death Haunts the Streets!

According to the *Pall Mall Gazette*, which Bram purchased the moment we stepped off the train, the mutilated body of a prostitute, Mary Ann 'Polly' Nichols, was found in Whitechapel. Her throat had been so ferociously slashed, her spine was exposed.

I felt sick as Bram read the report aloud; sick and very frightened.

As soon as we got home, I read the article for myself.

The London newspapers were always filled with terrible stories of murder, yet there'd been nothing like this before. To think a man could enact such violence upon a woman; tear her apart with a knife like a butcher an animal carcass. Did he know her? Had he followed her? Had he been watching before he decided to pounce? Did *she* do something to make him behave so violently towards her? Or was it because of her profession she was killed?

I began to imagine the terror she must have felt when she saw the knife; understood what was intended. Her helplessness … and yet, she'd fought for her life. The poor, poor woman.

Mary Ann Nichols. Her name was on everyone's lips, known in death, though she'd been judged and disregarded in life.

She was still being judged.

Just over a week after Miss Nichols was murdered, the body of another woman, Annie Chapman, was found in the same parish, killed in a similar manner.

It was all anyone could talk about. As if speaking about the horrific details helped us to understand the crime. But there was no understanding it.

Bram ordered that no actress was to leave the theatre unaccompanied. After performances, Henry paid for cabs and broughams for those who lived further afield.

By early November, three other women were added to the tragic toll. I determined to remember their names: Elizabeth Stride, Catherine Eddowes and Mary Jane Kelly. Younger than the rest, Miss Kelly was described by the *Daily Telegraph* as having a 'fair complexion, with light hair, and possessing rather attractive features'. I thought of Ellen, and of the actresses who worked at the Lyceum, the Adelphi, and the many other theatres and music halls springing up around the city. Women who were often regarded as common streetwalkers and, once they left the stage door, were vulnerable and usually alone. For the first time, I thought kindly of Henry, his generosity in ensuring the safety of his actresses.

I thought, too, of my own safety. There wasn't a woman I knew who didn't.

What if this man, the one they first called 'Leather Apron' but now referred to as 'Jack the Ripper', as if he were an adventurous rogue rather than a cold-blooded murderer, tired of killing prostitutes and sought to find richer game over in the west?

In Chelsea.

I paused my salons; it was not the time for gatherings.

My spectral tormentor began to appear more frequently, disrupting not just my sleep, but my quietude. I started to leave the lamp on at night; darkness no longer offered succour for the weary but became a terrifying state where nightmares came to life. My mind filled with blood-soaked notions. Dear God. What if the phantom posed a greater danger to me than I believed? What if he wasn't a demonic imagining but flesh and blood? After all, he'd manifested at the train station, in the steamship, and since

then, had begun to infest my waking moments too. While he'd posed no real threat on those occasions, what if that changed?

What if *he* was the Ripper?

When I finally expressed my fears about the killer to Bram, he gathered me in his arms and held me tight.

'Do you think he'll be caught soon?' I asked, my cheek resting against his broad chest. The last time he embraced me like this was in France, after Noel and I survived the shipwreck. I could hear the steady beat of his heart, feel the comforting strength of his arms.

'With the whole constabulary searching for him,' he began, 'of course.' Bram didn't understand my qualms, which were echoed by Ellen and other women. How could any man? 'He must be.'

Newspapers were snatched up as fast as they were printed as each new edition carried more lurid stories, many with illustrations and graphic photographs. It became an itch I couldn't scratch. Connections were made to earlier deaths, to bodies that had been found in the river, in tenements, in the streets. Descriptions of the areas where the women were found abounded. I was appalled to read about the living conditions in the east of London. It was a different world.

Winter arrived with blasts of snow and bitter cold, yet still no-one was caught. Rumours circulated that the killer (or killers – some felt whoever it was must have accomplices) was either a butcher or a surgeon. Women were afraid to step out alone, or to be abroad when night fell, no matter where they lived. During the day, I paced the house, staring out every window and searching the faces of the figures who walked past. Bram insisted I ensure either George or Gilbert accompanied me on any outing. I lost sleep, started at the slightest noise. Exhausted, I tried to maintain an outward calm, a serenity I didn't feel, all while my imagination was like a wildfire, scorching rational thought. Noel would look at me peculiarly when I jumped if a visitor came to the door, or when floorboards creaked. Fear took up residence in my very bones.



When *Macbeth* finally opened on 29 December, there'd not been another murder for weeks. The make-believe of the theatre was such a welcome relief from all the horror-snatching headlines, even *Macbeth*, with its

bloody themes. I willingly agreed to attend opening night, and the Beefsteak Room supper afterwards.

The play was a resounding success with its magnificent backdrops and rich costumes (Ellen's alone had been stitched with beetle wings and gilded thread, and the crowns she and Henry wore were made of real gold). The number of people invited to celebrate afterwards meant the supper had to be moved to the stage again. There, beneath white canopies adorned with floral arrangements and sparkling candelabras and against backdrops featuring Scottish castles and blackened heaths, we dined. Bram had invited George and his wife Agnes. Tables were laid with sumptuous food, glasses brimmed with ruby wine, laughter and chatter filled the auditorium as Henry, Ellen and the entire cast were congratulated. I caught Bram's eye briefly as he stood to one side, watching everyone with a smile on his face.

As we found our seats, George whispered in my ear, 'I can't help but notice that no-one offers my brother commendations or thanks.'

'No,' I said, softly. 'As usual his contribution is overlooked.'

'And I note Henry does naught to alter that.'

Our eyes travelled to Henry, sitting like a contented cat lapping up the praise.

I asked Bram once, after *Faust* was first performed and everyone rushed to honour Henry, how *he* felt. He brushed it off. 'Proud,' was all he said. But now I'd seen firsthand how the Americans recognised the essential role he played in making the productions a success, all the stories about *him* in their press, was it easy for him to slip back into the shadows? Or did he wish just a smidgen of limelight would shine on him? I most certainly did.

I'd hugged and congratulated Ellen (who'd been completely magnificent, despite Henry's efforts to minimise her character's importance), made sure to tell Henry how fine he was, and greeted Oscar, who much to my delight was there that evening too, though his wife was not. I was seated between George and Hall Caine. Conversation and laughter flittered around us, and the backs of our chairs were regularly bumped as people pushed past, eager to reach Henry and Ellen.

I'd scarce seen Hall since our return from Scotland as he'd been preoccupied with an American doctor he'd befriended, a man Bram disparaged as a quack. I think Bram was hurt that Hall had all but disregarded him in favour of this new associate.

Hall and I caught up on our news, carefully skirting one subject until it inevitably arose – the Ripper murders.

'Where's your friend, the good doctor?' I asked, accepting a refilled glass of wine from a waiter. 'Francis, isn't it?'

'Dr Francis J Tumblety,' he said with strange emphasis, gulping his drink. He lowered his voice. 'You didn't hear? Bram didn't tell you?'

Another tidbit Bram had kept, protecting my sensibilities; perhaps my inner turmoil was more evident than I believed. 'Hear what?'

I could see Hall hesitating.

'Hall …' I said sternly. 'If you don't tell me, I'll ask Mr Gladstone.' The prime minister had just joined the table, amid much back-slapping and congratulations for Henry.

Hall sighed. 'Turns out, Bram was right about Francis.'

I raised my brows.

'The man *was* a mountebank. He was not only arrested on charges of gross indecency but —' Hall paused.

'*What?*' I urged.

Hall flashed a look around the room and then placed his lips near my ear. 'He was also suspected of the murders in Whitechapel.' He withdrew slightly, giving me a meaningful look, then threw back his wine.

A chill washed over me; a low keening filled my ears, growing in intensity. 'Your friend, *he* was Jack the Ripper?' My voice sounded strange, small. Dread engulfed my body, turning it to lead. I'd met this man, dined with him. He'd been to our house.

'I … I don't know.' Hall's cheeks flooded with colour. 'Before they could prove it one way or another, he fled the country.' He paused, then went on, 'Strange, don't you think, that the killings ceased after he left? But, if he is the Ripper, he's still at large. Only now he's haunting other shores.'

I swayed in my seat, tried to grasp hold of the edge of the table, but the cloth made it impossible. Good Lord. I shut my eyes briefly. Faces paraded in my mind's eye, like the kings before Macbeth: Henry as the Thane, his face streaked with a king's blood; Jack the Ripper, poised over the maimed bodies of those doomed women; Dr Tumblety, with his huge moustache and piercing eyes, loomed large, eyes which began to transform into glowing red coals …

I opened my own. There, in the gloom of the wings, lurked a familiar figure.

I raised a trembling finger. He smiled, lips pulling back to expose those long, gleaming teeth. Only now they were sharp and pointed, a row of miniature daggers. I gasped and his vermillion eyes fixed onto mine.

‘Florence. *Florence*.’ Hall’s voice came from far away.

‘Florrie, are you alright?’ It was George.

Everything around me went black, all except those fiery eyes, burrowing into my very soul …

‘Bram!’ someone cried.

The floor rushed towards me. There were screams, shouts, then I knew no more.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Whitby, 1890

When I received notice that Noel had been accepted as a private boarder in Oxford for the following school term, I marched into Bram's study and insisted that as soon as *Macbeth* finished its run, he take us on holiday for the summer. I let Bram pick our destination. My only request was that it be far away from London.

He chose the seaside town of Whitby.

Macbeth had played to standing room only for over six months. Whether it was the play's themes of ghosts, dire prophecies and witchcraft coming on top of the Whitechapel murders (as they'd come to be called), I'd been unsettled the entire season. My 'odd turn' (as Henry described it) on opening night was put down to a combination of these. The logical part of me knew the ghostly man wasn't real, that it was my overwrought mind playing tricks, while a tiny voice persistently said the opposite. I tried hard not to listen to it, but it wouldn't go away.

Enough procrastinating. It was a sign that the time had come to tell Bram about my 'fatal vision', as Macbeth called his apparitions. So, one night a few days before we left for Whitby, I told him how what had started as dreams of the deserter who died in our old house had slowly metamorphosed over the years into waking visions of the dead man, as if he were real and whole.

Afeared Bram would disbelieve, mock, or call me hysterical, I was relieved when he did none of these things. Instead, he took my hands and said, 'Describe him to me.'

We were in the drawing room. The curtains were shut; the only sounds were the clock, the haunting whistle of the wind racing down the chimney,

and my heart drumming in my ears. Lamplight flickered across Bram's face, plunging it half into shadow.

'The first time I saw him,' I began cautiously, looking around to ensure we were alone, 'he looked just as he did that day in the dining room.' I shut my eyes. 'The wet, crumpled suit, the terrible grey skin and blue lips, the long teeth.' I shuddered. 'And those red eyes …' I opened mine.

'George explained that was caused from haemorrhaging.'

'I know. But it was more than simply broken veins. It was as if they were alight with a devilish fire.'

Bram clicked his tongue. 'He sounds like Jack the Ripper or that fellow Spring-Heeled Jack …'

He was referring to the well-known legend of a tall, thin man able to leap impossible distances, who was possessed of metal fingers, wore a cloak and reputedly breathed fire. He'd attacked women in London decades ago, long before the Ripper. I shook my head. 'This … this is different, Bram.' I explained how I had seen him at the train station and aboard the steamship before it sank; and at the Lyceum when Hall told me about his friend Dr Tumblety. 'No-one else sees him. Only me, so I know he doesn't really exist, but …'

'It's understandable you'd be plagued by such a sight,' said Bram, his voice kindly. 'The trauma of witnessing someone die, and my predilection – and yours – for macabre tales would no doubt have a cumulative effect. And what with all and sundry recently gripped by the Ripper stories, and *Macbeth* on top of all that —'

'Yes, yes,' I said with no small degree of exasperation. 'I know they must all have had an influence, but I'm no hysteric, Bram. I'm not.'

'I know, Florrie.' He squeezed my hands. 'Please, go on.'

'The thing is, the last few times he's appeared …' I hesitated. 'He's looked … different.'

'Different how?'

Did I admit the man had taken on some of Henry Irving's characteristics? He'd become thinner, taller, possessed of hollow cheeks and slightly sunken eyes. His grin had the macabre shape of Mephistopheles. Sometimes, his hands and suit were stained with blood in the same way Macbeth's had been.

‘More … Satanic, more monstrous,’ I allowed. ‘His teeth are long, sharp, pointed even. And his hands …’ I gave an involuntary shiver. ‘The palms are coated with thick hair. Thick hair congealed with blood.’

We talked for longer, Bram plying me with questions. He was both sympathetic and curious. He didn’t pour scorn or tell me I was seeing things. He wanted details. Later, he escorted me to my bedroom and remained while I changed into my nightgown, and tucked me under the covers. Instead of holding me or comforting me with a gentle story, he said goodnight and retreated to his study.

The dark hours passed. The house creaked and groaned. Wind fought the windows. An owl hooted, followed by the squeak of bats. Though my eyes were shut, I felt the apparition’s presence.

I’d foolishly hoped that telling Bram would banish it forever. It didn’t, but neither did it make things worse. In fact, over the following weeks, I gradually ceased to fear the apparition quite so much. I began to rebuke him for startling me and to greet him when he did appear. He didn’t return my salutations or acknowledge my reprimands, he was simply there, a benign if unusual observer of my life. I didn’t like it, but understood that if I couldn’t banish him, then uneasy acceptance was the next best thing.



Whitby wouldn’t have been my first choice of holiday destination. A wild, remote place in the north, Bram had discovered it on one of the Lyceum’s provincial tours. Divided by the River Esk, the township was built below and along a clifftop on one side of the river and crawled up the slope of another on the opposite bank. It was renowned mainly for being the port where Captain James Cook left for the Pacific.

We travelled up by train from Kings Cross in late July and stayed at Number 6 Royal Crescent, a hotel squatting high upon the western cliff. We had a perfectly lovely suite and from just about every room there were sweeping views of the blue-grey ocean and Whitby Sands. Despite my fear of the sea, I rather enjoyed being able to gaze upon this ever-changing vista. There was also much to do in Whitby, and I swiftly fell for its charms.

We’d been here a week already and were staying for three. It was proving to be a lovely antidote to the panic and fear caused by the Ripper and my own disquieting visitations.

While we spent every evening as a family, the days were mine to fill, which included entertaining Noel. His father had taken him swimming in nearby Robin Hood Bay the day after we arrived. Knowing Noel couldn't swim, he'd nevertheless left him to flounder. Naturally, Noel panicked. I was furious when I found out. In the face of my anger and Noel's distress, Bram simply shrugged.

'He was never in any real danger. Anyway, how else is he to learn?'

Each morning, Bram took long walks along the cliffs, climbing the many steps to visit St Mary's Church on the eastern side of the river, and tromping about the vast grounds of the magnificent Whitby Abbey. Often, when I rose, he'd already gone. Today, he'd been abroad bright and early, but returned for breakfast.

'Good book, laddie?' asked Bram, reaching over to ruffle Noel's hair. Midway through munching his toast, Noel nodded, gave a half-smile, then returned to Jules Verne's *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*. He'd barely had his nose out of it.

A maid scurried over and, moving aside Bram's ever-present notebook, poured tea, then waited to take his order.

We spent a few minutes exchanging pleasantries about the weather and plans for the day. I watched Bram concentrating on slicing bacon, stabbing pieces of egg, but noted that while he ate, his mind was most definitely elsewhere.

Finally, he said, 'I've an idea, Florrie. For another book.'

'Another one!' I was surprised – and pleased. 'But you've not finished the one you started after meeting that American publisher, have you?'

After years of tinkering with his dream of becoming a writer, and encouraged by a publisher who'd recently entered our social circles, Mr John Harper, Bram had begun work on a novel set in western Ireland. And now one more was waiting in the wings. This is what I wanted him to be doing. Something for himself. Writing. Creating.

'*The Snake's Pass* is all but complete,' said Bram, fork aloft. 'And yes, another idea has taken root. You can't help it when the muse sings, Florrie. Actually, I thought up the concept a while ago, during our stay in Cruden Bay, but I wasn't sure what to do with it … until now.' He rested the fork on his plate, then placed his hand atop mine on the table. 'And I've partly you to thank.'

‘Me?’ I blinked in astonishment. ‘How?’ The last time I inspired my husband – after Henry had terrified Noel during the run of *Faust* – he’d produced the godawful ‘The Dualitists’.

‘Well?’ I prompted as he fell silent and gazed out the window. ‘Don’t leave me in suspense.’

‘Indulge me, dear, while I provide some context.’ Pretending a reluctance he clearly didn’t feel, he gave a mischievous grin and opened his well-thumbed notebook, flicking past pages of scrawled code to reveal what looked like a timetable and some rough drawings of a ship. ‘Look at this.’ He pushed the notebook towards me. ‘I was talking to some fishermen yesterday.’ Bram was always conversing with the locals. ‘Their dialect is fascinating, quite difficult to tune your ear to, but once you do, it’s an embarrassment of riches.’ He chuckled. ‘Anyhow, I’d not long come from the lighthouse —’ he gestured towards the east pier, ‘when I met a coastguard who told me about a ship that had run aground after a particularly rough storm some years back.’ He jabbed his finger on the page. ‘The *Dmitry*.’

His sketch was excellent. ‘Russian?’

Bram nodded. ‘A brigantine out of the port of Narva.’ He turned and framed the window with his hands. ‘Imagine this, Florrie. The heaving seas, rain lashing the cliffs, the howling wind – and in the midst, a tossing ship in grave danger. Apparently, the townsfolk lined the cliffs to watch, fully expecting it to break up before it crossed the bar.’

My heart began to beat strangely. Sweat dotted my upper lip, trickled between my breasts. Noel looked up from his book, his face ashen, his chin quivering.

Bram seemed unaware of the effect his words were having on us. Had he so swiftly forgotten what we’d endured on the *Victoria*? ‘Miraculously,’ continued Bram, oblivious, ‘it managed to sail into calmer waters where it ran aground, over there, near Tate Hill Pier.’ He pointed. ‘It was completely embedded in the sand. Spectators broke out into huge cheers, uncaring of the rain or wind, for not one life was lost.’

I’d been holding my breath and released it slowly.

‘Between that tale, those of the fishermen I met mending their nets, the wretched bats escaping the church tower each evening, screeching and wheeling about the sky —’

‘I don’t like bats,’ said Noel.

I gave his back a comforting rub as Bram continued, ‘The magnificent sunsets, the grey mists over the brooling sea, the cemetery with its ancient tombstones and vista of The Scar, never mind the marvellous abbey ruins – well, it was enough to send my mind spinning.’ He paused to drink his tea. ‘That, and the … um … man we’ve discussed. Your … er … *man*, Florrie; the one you told me about. Your excellent description became lodged in my mind. I made notes.’ He tapped his journal.

I withdrew my hand from beneath Bram’s. I should have known my dark phantasm would become creative fodder for my husband. I tried not to feel exploited, but to see it as a positive step. Perhaps once my apparition was on the page, he would disappear from my life once and for all.

Unaware of my thoughts, Bram glanced at Noel, then leaned over excitedly. ‘Then, yesterday, I found this book in the library.’ He drew it out of his satchel and placed it on the table.

I picked it up. *An Account of the Principalities of Wallachia and Moldavia* by William Wilkinson.

‘The library here has some fascinating tomes, but it was this one, Florrie, *this* one,’ he struck the cover with his knuckles, ‘that clarified all the ideas whirling in my brain.’

‘Oh?’

‘It’s about the Carpathians, to be exact.’ He took it from me and began to leaf through the pages. ‘It says here —’ he gave a dramatic pause, finger against a line on the page, ‘that “dracula” in the Wallachian language means “devil”.’

A shadow passed over me. Noel reached for my hand, clutching it tightly.

‘*Dracula*,’ enunciated Bram. ‘What a magnificent word. It conjures so much just in the saying, don’t you think? *Drak-u-lah*.’ He lowered his voice, waggled his brows. ‘Wallachians bestowed it as a surname upon any person who rendered himself conspicuous by courage, cruel actions or cunning. It’s a name to be given to a hero. Or a villain …’ He snapped the book shut. I smelled dust and myth; death and blood-soaked tales. Bram sat back and looked at me triumphantly.

‘Irving,’ I said, having not yet told Bram about the name change, something that would need to happen soon, before he went to Oxford. I

released his hand and stroked his cheek. ‘Why don’t you take your book to our room and read a while? Later, if you like, we’ll walk up to the abbey.’

‘Can I count the stairs?’

‘The stairs, the cows in the fields, the birds in the sky, whatever you wish.’

‘I’d like to see the circus.’

We’d learned yesterday there was a circus in town.

‘We’ll see,’ was the extent of my commitment.

Noel sighed and with a kiss on my cheek, tucked his book under his arm and left the breakfast room.

‘Dracula,’ I said finally, as Bram finished his meal with gusto.

‘It’s evocative, isn’t it?’ he said between mouthfuls. ‘What with your vision of the dead man who manifests in shadows and fogs, in the corner of rooms, his blood-red eyes and sharp teeth, flocculent palms, I have my villain. I’m thinking of writing about a psychical research agent who investigates those who refuse to die, who taunt the living. The undead. Someone or some*thing* called Dracula will feature, of course.’

‘The undead?’ I swallowed. My hand trembled as I reached for the teapot. I suppose that was what the drowned man was – to me, at least. Undead.

‘I rather fancy calling this agent Singleton. Dr Singleton, you know, to represent someone of single purpose. He’ll have white hair and a beard, like Walt Whitman, only more adventurous. Ever since I met that fellow who came to your first salon, the explorer, Burton, I’ve wanted to include men like him as characters in a book. Bold, daring, enterprising. Intelligent. Fighting evil. A story of this nature is perfect.’

‘*Undead*,’ I repeated. Again, an image of the spectral man rose before me. ‘Like a ghost that manifests in daylight to unsettle anyone who sees it?’

‘Oh no,’ said Bram with an odd smile, looking straight through me. ‘Something much, much worse.’



Our time in Whitby passed quickly. Noel and I attended dances, concerts and even a marvellous performance of *The Marriage of Figaro*. In our final week, I met the novelist Violet Hunt. Noel and I had been taking tea at the

spa in town. Miss Hunt was seated at an adjoining table and asked us to join her and her mother, Margaret Raine Hunt, who had her own claim to fame for translating *Grimms' Fairy Tales* from German into English (Noel's grandmothers had read these to him over the years). When she learned I was married to the acting manager of the Lyceum and a published author, Miss Hunt wasted no time inviting us to her parents' place nearby for a soiree. One of the guests at Broad Ings Farm happened to be George Du Maurier.

I'm not sure what came over Bram as we whiled away the afternoon eating cakes, drinking tea, playing games and exchanging stories. Perhaps it was an attempt to upstage Mr Du Maurier, who was in fine fettle, or to prove himself worthy among Violet's well-known acquaintances (including Ford Madox Ford and the writer Herbert Wells), but before too long, Bram began to regale those present with tales from the Lyceum I'd never heard before, arousing much laughter.

Later, while some of the guests played tennis, I took Noel into the gardens to see the huge aviary. Part of it was enclosed to protect the birds from the weather. Noel wandered around the cage, pressing his face against the glass, agog at the colour and noise. That was where Mr Du Maurier found me.

'Even their brilliant plumage pales beside you.' He swept a bow.

'Really, Mr Du Maurier?' I laughed. 'That's the best you can do? Comparing me to parrots?'

He chuckled. 'Oh no, I can do much better.' He stood so close, our shoulders touched. 'If only you'd give me a chance.'

'Mr Du Maurier …' I flashed a look at Noel, then out of the corner of my eye, I spied Bram heading towards us across the lawn.

Mr Du Maurier saw him too. 'Forgive me, Mrs Stoker, but it's so easy to forget what stimulating company your husband can be, he's so often lost in Mr Irving's shadow.'

I released a tired sigh. 'He casts a long one. We'd come here to escape.' I didn't admit that not a day went by when I half-expected Henry to show up at our lodgings.

'Well, I for one am glad you did. It's always a pleasure to spend time with you, Mrs Stoker.'

I looked askance at Mr Du Maurier, but there was nothing but sincerity in his eyes. I responded accordingly. ‘Thank you. I wish —’ Bram had reached Noel, who was around the other side of the aviary, pointing at a macaw. Bram knelt beside him, indicating another rather large bird with a magnificent emerald and sapphire crest.

‘What do you wish?’ asked Mr Du Maurier softly.

‘I wish we didn’t have to return to London.’ There was such an expression of horror on Mr Du Maurier’s face, I burst out laughing. Bram looked up and smiled uncertainly in our direction.

‘You don’t mean that, surely?’ Mr Du Maurier asked incredulously.

‘No,’ I admitted, still laughing. ‘Not really. But —’ I lowered my voice. ‘It’s nice to be away from the Lyceum.’

‘From Henry Irving, you mean.’

I wisely remained silent.

Mr Du Maurier nudged me. ‘Do you remember you once said to me that your husband worshipped the man?’

‘Did I?’ I gave a cavalier laugh. Oh, I remembered. I also recalled how disloyal I’d felt saying such a thing. But Du Maurier never used my rash words against me or Bram. ‘Now, I’m inclined to think Henry’s mesmerised my husband, the power he has over him.’

‘*Mesmerised?*’ said Mr Du Maurier. ‘Now that’s a novel thought.’

‘One I pray you keep to yourself.’

‘Imagine hypnotising someone,’ he said, ignoring my request. ‘What you could compel them to do …’ He brushed his fingers across my back.

‘George …’ I said in a warning voice, stepping away.

‘Well, your charms have always mesmerised me …’ He lifted my hand to his lips. I could feel the heat of his mouth through my gloves. ‘One word from you, Florence, that’s all it would take …’ I snatched my hand away.

With a dirty laugh, he walked around the aviary and joined Bram, slapping him on the back as if he hadn’t just propositioned his wife. Again.

‘What do you know about mesmerism, Stoker?’ he asked loudly, winking in my direction.

Rogue, I thought, watching as he and Bram wandered back to the others, Noel scampering ahead. For all Du Maurier’s persistence and rakish appeal, I wasn’t tempted.

First ensuring my gloves were in place, I slowly followed.

When we left the Hunts hours later, it was with promises to meet again soon. Violet attended a regular salon near her usual home in Kensington and promised to add our names to South Lodge's invitation list.

At last, I thought, as we travelled home days later, our time at Whitby over, I've made a friend who has nothing to do with the theatre, Henry, the Lyceum, or Bram's interests.

Violet was mine.

Maybe George Du Maurier was, too, I thought, recalling what he'd said, how he said it. The way he'd kissed my hand. Would my irresponsible words about Bram and Henry come back to haunt me?

A few days after we returned to Chelsea, my question was answered. Bram, Noel and I featured in a cartoon Mr Du Maurier had drawn for *Punch* magazine. We were portrayed sitting in Violet's garden. Bram had a tennis racquet at his feet, while I appeared to be staring at my gloves. Noel stood behind my chair in his broad-brimmed hat and breeches. But it was the caption beneath this family idyll that gave me pause.

It read: *Mamma to Noel, who is inclined to be talkative, 'Hush, Noel! Haven't I told you often that little boys should be* Seen *and not* Heard*?' Noel: 'Yes, Mamma! But you don't look at me!'*

Was this Mr Du Maurier's revenge for my rejection? Or was it proof my impulsive confidences were safe with him?

When Bram saw it, he laughed.

'How can you chuckle when Du Maurier is portraying me as an indifferent mother?' I huffed.

'Is he? Not only did he get Irving's name wrong —'

I winced.

'But he's suggesting our boy is a needy child.'

'Needy? Hardly.' I took a deep breath. It was now or never. 'Bram, there's something I've been meaning to tell you.'

'Oh.'

'Du Maurier didn't get our son's name wrong …'

As predicted, the argument over the name change was bitter and long. But in the end, Bram had no choice but to accept that the boy he'd named after his idol had a mind of his own.

I wish I could say the same for his father.



When I casually mentioned the cartoon to Ellen and Lucy next time I saw them, they were enthusiastic. ‘It shows you’re rising in society, my dear,’ said Lucy. ‘You’ve appeared in these pages before, but Mr Du Maurier only lampoons those he admires, and it’s more than evident he admires you.’

‘Before you know it, he’ll write you into one of his stories,’ said Ellen.

I hoped not. Bram not only borrowed ideas from me, but tended to include the names of friends, people he met and places he’d been in his short stories. I prayed I’d never see myself as a literary character. It was bad enough I’d inadvertently helped inspire a story about child-killers and a book about the undead. God forbid I should inspire something else.

Bram hadn’t mentioned the undead idea again since Whitby, even though he’d continued to spend our remaining time in the library there, poring over books, and down on the foreshore with the fishermen, absorbing information, making copious notes. Just seeing the word ‘Dracula’ scrawled in his notebook conjured feelings in me I didn’t want to explore.

It was as if my dead man had found another way to bedevil me.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

London, 1891

The first time I saw Oscar after the controversy ignited by his debut novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, was at one of his mother's soirees. Published first in abridged form in a magazine and then as a book, it attracted reviews both judgemental and scathing, calling the tale 'mawkish and nauseous' and accusing the author of 'grubbing around in muckheaps'. They even attacked Oscar personally, calling him a pedlar of immorality.

Oscar sent me a copy, which was just as well because the books were removed from the shelves of all WH Smith stores the moment the reviews were out. It was about a beautiful young man, Mr Gray, who makes a pact with the devil so that regardless of his wicked hedonistic lifestyle, he retains his youth while his portrait ages in his stead. I was astounded. Why, Oscar had taken a rather fantastical conversation we'd had years ago at my very first salon and turned it into a book. The tale was notorious and, yes, immoral, but it was also brilliant. The whole point was that, though Dorian Gray sets his own most improper rules for living, he also pays a hefty price.

Bram and I discussed it at some length.

'Oscar, as always, knows how to push the boundaries of what's considered acceptable,' said Bram admiringly. 'People either love him or scorn him for it.'

'And what do you feel?' I asked.

'About Oscar?' His expression was inscrutable. 'Why, the same as you, of course.'

To Bram and Oscar's credit, despite my history with Oscar, they remained fast friends. Their families had known each other for years, even though in some minds, Bram had stolen me from Oscar.

But one can only steal something that's owned. Oscar never owned me; to be fair, nor did he want to.

'Everyone's reading it, Lemon,' said Ellen, one glorious Sunday afternoon. We were having tea with Violet at the ABC tearooms in Oxford Circus. The air was thick with steam, the blended aromas of coffee, hot chocolate and tea, as well as spices from the assortment of cakes, and heady gossip. 'Oscar's story has the city agog. The critics and moralists may not like it, but it's set tongues wagging.'

Violet agreed. 'And for all the negative press, I'm sure Mr Wilde's publishers are elated. Their coffers must be overflowing.'

One thing was certain, Oscar's 'effeminate' and 'unclean' book sold better than Bram's valiant effort, *The Snake's Pass*. Even I could see that Oscar's work was superior (not that I'd ever admit that to Bram).

One Sunday as we waited in the drawing room for our guests to appear, I took the opportunity to offer sympathy for Bram's lacklustre sales both here and in America, but he dismissed it. 'It's the fickle nature of publishing, my dear. We're dependent on a market of unpredictable readers. Currently, Oscar's brand of storytelling is the fashion.'

'I hardly think Oscar's novel is *fashionable*, Bram.'

'Well, in that you're wrong. There's nothing more fashionable than outrage – moral outrage especially. And Oscar excels at that – and not just in fiction.' He gave a pointed look, a flash of worry in his eyes, then donning a huge smile, prepared to welcome our first arrivals.



The unsavoury rumours that had dogged Oscar up until his marriage to Constance had recently resurfaced, becoming louder and more vitriolic. Rarely would a day pass when his name didn't appear in print, or in a cartoon causing tongues to wag. There was usually a young man depicted as well – of late, it had been Robert Ross, who he'd met in Oxford and who'd lived with the Wildes for a while. Not even being married with two sons dampened what was being said. Indifferent to the rumours, or perhaps determined to brazen them out, Oscar not only wrote pieces in defence of *Dorian Gray*, but was often spied about town, not only with Mr Ross. On every occasion I'd seen him, he was in the company of a handsome young

fellow, and though we greeted each other affectionately, we never really had an opportunity to talk.

I began to wonder whether Oscar was avoiding me.

No matter what was being said, Bram would ensure a place was set for Oscar at the Beefsteak dinners, a theatre seat reserved. He was always invited to our Sunday salons and, unless he was away, generally attended. Seeing Bram and Oscar together caused an odd sensation in my breast. They should be adversaries but took pleasure in each other's company. Bram would drape an arm over the back of Oscar's chair, leaning forward to catch something he said, laughing. Oscar would let a long-fingered hand tarry on Bram's forearm, and I'd observe them standing at the window, deep in conversation. I wondered what they spoke about and flattered myself that maybe sometimes I was the subject.

I wasn't sure what to make of the tittle-tattles. After all, this was Oscar, the man who once courted me; who expressed his feelings in ways that still had the ability to seize my heart. My eyes often strayed to the painting I now kept on the mantelpiece in my bedroom.

When I raised the gossip with Bram, he was contemptuous, but all the same, he was aware of every nuance and suggestion. I heard him discussing it with George one Sunday afternoon. George was worried lest what was being said about Oscar somehow reflected on his brother, as if the rumours were a disease that could spread.

'Ah, George,' said Bram, aware I was listening. 'I have Florrie. No-one can doubt *me* when my lovely wife is by my side.' He beckoned me over, put an arm about my waist and kissed me on the temple.

I wanted to point out that Oscar also had a wife, albeit one he scarcely saw, as well as two sons, but remained mute. It wasn't until I saw Oscar weeks later, at his mother's soiree, that the opportunity to speak with him presented itself.

Gilbert was my companion that afternoon, as Bram was off on another provincial tour. He'd recently not only started studying to become a fully-fledged barrister (I think because of the ordinary sales of his book and being privately piqued at Oscar's success on the back of scandal), but had invested in a publishing enterprise with William Heinemann, who we'd been friends with for a while. The idea was to release works by English authors to compete with the very popular German firm Tauchnitz and their series of English-language novels beloved by travellers especially. Thus far,

Bram and Mr Heinemann had bought the rights to novels by his dear friend Hall Caine, books by Henry James, George Meredith and Arthur Doyle (who was publishing as Arthur Conan Doyle) and Rudyard Kipling. When I asked if he'd buy Oscar's latest, considering how well it had sold, Bram simply scoffed. With this new venture, yet again, Bram was dedicating his scraps of spare time to it.

Though Lady Jane's house was walking distance, rain meant Gilbert and I took a cab. We'd barely divested ourselves of our coats, which were taken away to be dried by the maid and footman, when Oscar descended on me.

'Florrie!' he exclaimed. 'I'd so hoped you'd be here.'

I'd seen him approaching in the mirror, so was half-prepared. Barely acknowledging Oscar, Gilbert mumbled a pardon, cocked a brow at me, and scurried into the drawing room. Clearly, Gilbert was more worried about contracting any gossip-related sickness than I realised.

'It's nice to see you again, Oscar,' I said, taking his extended hand and proffering my cheek for a kiss. Dammit, if my treacherous heart didn't give a flutter. Oscar looked dashing in his woollen jacket, beautifully tied cravat and pocket kerchief. His clean-shaven face with its wide, mobile mouth and sea-dark hooded eyes barely revealed signs of the dissipation attributed to him. But it was the evident pleasure he felt at seeing me that I responded to most – at least, that's what I told myself. Bram was far too self-contained to show his feelings for me like that, I thought, pushing aside memories of him welcoming Henry into our home, or his unabashed excitement about travelling to America to meet Walt Whitman. Even the prospect of encountering Hall or any one of the many personages at the Beefsteak dinners elicited more of a reaction.

'Come now, Florrie. Banish those melancholy thoughts. Allow me to soothe both brow and soul,' said Oscar and led me into the already crowded room, calling out to all and sundry with a flourish of his arm, 'Look who has graced us with her divine presence, this angel fallen to earth, Mrs Florence Stoker.' He was like a major domo at a royal residence.

I slapped his arm playfully, laughing.

'And there it is,' said Oscar softly. 'A sound I've so missed.'

We paid our respects to Lady Jane, who, gowned in black and adorned with bright jewels and brooches, a slash of colour on her mouth, always drew the eye. She was warm and loud in her acknowledgement, but I was

grateful she didn't ask where Bram was. Few bothered to inquire these days, when the answer was always the same.

Oscar and I took a turn around the room, and I was introduced to some new faces and greeted familiar ones. I was pleased to see Hall. James Whistler was there and paid me outrageous compliments. Ellen and I warmly embraced. William Terriss was accompanying her. Oscar's friend, the cause of such salacious whispers, Robert Ross, joined us, bringing over a very pretty fellow, Lord Alfred Douglas. There were some members of parliament I'd met before, and the Prince of Wales, who was doing a very poor job of being incognito – 'call me Bertie'. A different woman to the one I'd seen him with at the theatre only a few weeks earlier was hanging off his arm.

Oscar signalled for drinks and, instead of taking one of the chairs positioned near a card table in the centre of the room, or over by his mother on the sofa as he used to when we were younger, sat me in a corner away from the other guests, and pulled up a seat. Looks were cast in our direction, Gilbert's most disapproving. I ignored them. Flattered by his attention, I was also curious why, after all this time, Oscar would single me out in such a public manner.

'Well, Florrie,' he began. 'Have you read it?'

I accepted a glass of sherry from the boy and, waiting until he was out of earshot, replied, 'You mean your novel or the gossip about you?'

'What gossip?' said Oscar, feigning shock. Then, he raised his glass.

'You got my thank-you note? Good. And yes, I have read it,' I said. 'I think it brilliant, Oscar. Awfully clever and cleverly awful. You transformed a speculative conversation from long ago into a gripping tale.'

Oscar chuckled in delight. 'It's been too long between drinks for us, hasn't it?'

We clinked glasses and I smiled. 'Between anything.' I took a sip. 'But I've also read the stories about you, and I must say, if scandal and scurrilous headlines sell books, then you must help Bram create some.'

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‘I would think Bram perfectly capable of generating his own, my dear, don’t you?’ He tilted his head, his eyes sombre and knowing.

What they knew, I didn’t care to find out, but my face grew warm.

‘How’s Constance?’ I asked, changing the subject. ‘And the boys? Cyril and Vyvyan, isn’t it?’

Oscar levelled a long look at me. ‘As far as I know, they’re well.’

‘As far as I know …’ I repeated slowly. ‘Then, you’re like all husbands and treat your home, your wife and family, like rooms only to be used for special occasions. Or when you need to rest your body.’

‘Or on my laurels,’ said Oscar.

I laughed. ‘I doubt you’ll ever rest on yours.’

‘You always knew me best, Florrie.’

‘Did I though?’ I finished my drink. ‘I think perhaps I scarce knew you at all.’ I looked pointedly in the direction of Mr Ross. Oscar followed my gaze before his eyes slid to Lord Alfred. Ah, that’s how the land lies.

Oscar sighed and focussed his attention back on me. ‘Maybe it was *me* who knew you.’

‘Really?’ I scoffed. ‘I think perhaps you scarce knew *me* at all.’

Oscar hesitated. ‘Are you happy with Bram, Florrie? He’s still spending more time with his Chief than his wife. Du Maurier’s going around saying Irving’s mesmerised him.’

Damn Du Maurier!

Surprised by the question and hurt by Mr Du Maurier’s perfidy, I waited while my glass was refilled before answering. ‘What is happiness? Fleeting, according to the poets.’ I sipped my wine. ‘I think I’m happier with Bram than I would have been with the alternative, don’t you?’ Oscar didn’t answer. ‘And what about you? Are you happy with Constance? With the vicissitudes of marriage, of being a husband and father?’

‘I’ve always been of the opinion that a man who desires to get married should know either everything or nothing.’

My lips twitched. ‘What do you know?’

‘Why, everything, Florrie. I know *everything*.’

‘Modest as usual,’ interrupted a deep voice. It was Lord Alfred. He stood slightly behind Oscar’s chair, smiling, drink in one hand, cigarillo in the other.

Oscar jumped to his feet. ‘Florrie, may I introduce Lord Alfred Douglas. Lord Alfred, this is a dear old friend of mine, Mrs Bram Stoker.’

I offered his lordship my hand, and he bowed over it.

‘Hardly old, Oscar,’ said Lord Alfred. ‘Mrs Stoker. The pleasure is all mine. And please, call me Bosie. Everyone does.’

‘I thought that name was reserved for only the closest of friends,’ pouted Oscar.

‘Any friend of yours, etcetera. Now, if you’ll excuse me, Mrs Stoker, I would like to steal this man away. There’s someone I wish to introduce him to.’

Just as Oscar was led off, Hall and Gilbert replaced him. ‘Honestly,’ Gilbert all but snarled, ‘it’s shameful the way that man parades his young lovers about like this is a molly house.’ He fell into Oscar’s recently vacated seat.

‘That’s what the scandalmongers are prattling,’ said Hall, watching Oscar across the other side of the room. ‘They say young Mr Ross is soon to be supplanted.’

‘By whom?’ I asked, already knowing and not even bothering to defend Oscar. I too had been shocked at how openly Oscar displayed his … preferences. My heart went out to poor Constance. No wonder she’d absented herself from this salon – from them all. I glanced towards Lady Jane. Did she know what Oscar was doing? Did she care? Perhaps she thought that if she allowed him to be with his friends under her roof, he was safe from judgement.

No-one was safe from that.

But then, what did Oscar care? He’d always flouted the rules, defied convention. He’d railed against the strict policing of moral boundaries for years, called out the hypocrites. Those who constantly broke the rules but were rich enough, or titled enough, for their behaviour to be overlooked. My eyes strayed towards the prince. Not everyone could flaunt their dalliances the way nobles did. Most had the sense to hide their indiscretions. Oscar was either too proud or too foolish to conduct what was widely regarded as his immoral business in the shadows.

How long would it be before the gossip grew to a roar and calls for him to be made an example of reached a crescendo?

‘Oscar may have bitten off more than he can chew if he sets his sights on the young lordling,’ said Hall, glancing at Lord Alfred. ‘He hasn’t taken into account the lad’s father.’

‘His father?’ I asked, trying to recall who that might be.

‘The Marquess of Queensberry,’ provided Gilbert.

My eyes widened. I’d met the marquess. A short, brutish-looking man with thick square eyebrows and coarse sideburns, he’d been divorced twice and had a reputation as an utter thug. He’d established some rules around boxing – a vicious sport – that were named after him. I cast a sympathetic glance at Lord Alfred. He, Oscar and Mr Ross were conversing with a very attractive woman of middling years. Uncaring who might see, Oscar draped an arm across Lord Alfred’s shoulders, much to the evident dismay of Mr Ross.

Lillie Langtry and her escort chose that moment to arrive, distracting everyone – especially Call-Me-Bertie.

Only Oscar was unmoved, remaining defiantly where he was, right by Bosie’s side.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

London, May 1895

Time is described in a myriad of ways by poets, writers, artists, merchants and even ordinary folk. We're all at its mercy in one way or another. We have too little, or too much. We rush, we loiter; we spend it wisely or foolishly. Too often we neglect to consider its passing until, one day, something happens to draw attention to what we've squandered. Then, all the days, weeks, months and years that have been and gone concertina into a singular terrible moment where time stands completely still.

This was that moment.



The bells chimed four o'clock as I alighted from the cab outside the Lyceum. Instead of entering through the public doors, I used the Burleigh Street entrance reserved for Bram, Harry and Henry.

The corridors behind the stage were busy with stagehands and chattering extras. I barely registered their voices as I pushed past them.

'What's Mrs Bram doing here?'

'She never comes backstage this time o' day.'

'What's got in her knickers?'

Bram was in the office. Much to my relief, he was on his own, bent over the never-ending paperwork.

'Florrie!' he exclaimed, putting down his pen and half-rising. 'Thank God. I've scarce been able to think. Is there a verdict? What's the judge said?'

I shut the door and leaned against it, trying to gather my scattered thoughts. It was one thing to reach the theatre swiftly so I could tell Bram what had happened on the last day of Oscar's trial, quite another how I was going to do it.

In the years since that afternoon at his mother's when he'd flaunted his young men, affected indifference towards society's disapproval, and continued to behave as if he was somehow exempt from the rules, Oscar had become increasingly reckless. The fears I'd harboured for him that day had finally been realised – in a court of law.

'You better sit down,' I said to Bram, pulling up a chair, taking off my gloves, removing my coat. There'd been a light rain, and the wool was damp. I stared at the dark stains on my shoes.

'Is it that bad?'

There was no softening the blow. 'Worse.'

'Tell me,' he demanded, smoothing a shaking hand over his cheek.

I took a deep breath. 'Oscar's been convicted of gross indecency and sentenced to two years hard labour.' I bit back a sob.

'Dear God!' Bram dropped his head into his hands. As he absorbed the news, my mind replayed the events of the last few months.

London had been transfixed by the growing feud between Oscar, the Irish playwright, dandy and wit, and Lord Alfred's father, the bellicose Marquess of Queensberry. Their quarrel was brought to a head after the marquess left a note for Oscar at a club they both frequented, the Albemarle, which read: '*For Oscar Wilde posing somdomite*.'

Misspelling aside, the marquess believed Oscar was perverting his son Bosie, the young gentleman I'd once met at Lady Jane's.

Affronted by the note, and the public manner of its delivery, Oscar was persuaded by a vengeful Bosie, who loathed his father, to sue the marquess for libel.

In the lead-up to the libel trial, the marquess threatened Oscar and warned him away from Lord Alfred every chance he got – in restaurants, hotels, and even on opening night of Oscar's play at St James's Theatre, the outrageously funny *The Importance of Being Earnest*. There he arrived with a bouquet of carrots and turnips to throw at the stage from his box. Fortunately, Oscar was alerted and the authorities were called. Gilbert and I had been forced to negotiate our way through at least twenty peelers before

being admitted to our seats. The police stood in the thick snow, doing their utmost to remain vigilant while trying not to freeze to death. Initially, I'd thought their presence a publicity stunt, much like the green carnations Oscar had distributed at the opening of *Lady Windermere's Fan* months before. I hadn't known what *they* meant until Bram told me when we arrived home.

I was just removing my wrap when I saw Bram twirling one of the pretty green flowers, a strange expression on his face.

'Did you get one as well?' I asked. 'Oscar was handing them out to certain men friends. Why would he do such a thing?'

Bram poured us both a whisky, passing me a tumbler. 'You really don't know what a green carnation signifies?' He held the bloom aloft.

I shook my head. 'It's a lovely colour. But, apart from being against nature —'

'Exactly. Just like Oscar.' He waited until I met his gaze. 'And he doesn't seem to care who knows or who else he identifies as being … like him.'

The colour drained from my face. 'You didn't wear it, did you?'

Bram scoffed. 'Of course not. I didn't even know I had it until just now. He must have slipped it into my pocket when we caught up after the performance.'

'What a selfish fool he's become.' I plucked the flower from Bram's fingers and threw it in the smouldering hearth.

'Selfish *and* indiscreet,' said Bram.

Our eyes met. 'One cannot afford to be indiscreet.'

'No, one cannot,' agreed Bram.

In the shadow of Oscar's case against the marquess, what had been bubbling away in London for years burst forth. In his stubborn insistence on pursuing the libel case, his defiance of social norms, Oscar unleashed a collective vengeance, not upon the marquess, as he'd hoped, but upon himself and what his relationship with Lord Alfred represented. Men like Oscar were seen as a threat – to marriage, family and civilisation. Accordingly, they must be punished.

Those who'd once sought Oscar's presence at their soirees and dinners now shunned him. Work that had once drawn praise and delight, his poems, children's stories, and essays, were discussed in a new and unforgiving

light. Those witty *bon mots*, his trips abroad to study antiquities, were all tarnished with a depraved brush. *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and all his wonderful popular plays, were now viewed through a glass darkly. Then, there were the green carnations …

I steadied my breathing as Bram absorbed the terrible news I'd just delivered from the court, his face registering despair, disbelief, denial, then fear. It was an echo of mine as I'd sat in the courtroom. Underlying it was also anger. Anger at Oscar that he hadn't heeded the advice of those who had his best interests at heart and had urged him when he lost the libel case against the marquess to flee the country. Lady Jane was partly to blame for that. Self-serving Bosie as well.

Above all the emotions I'd experienced in the courtroom was guilt. As Bram lifted his head to regard me, I could see it swimming in his eyes as well.

'Oh, Bram,' I whispered. 'Oscar won't survive this. Not hard labour.' I reached across the desk and our fingers entwined.

'No.'

'But *we* must,' I said, squeezing his fingers forcefully.

'Because of your insistence on caution, on staying out of … all this, we will,' said Bram.

The entire time Oscar faced court, giving evidence, having his private life made public in all its grisly detail, Bram and I had kept our distance – from Oscar and the courtroom. We'd relied on the newspapers and reports from others, devouring any news. At least if they're all looking at Oscar, I thought, they're not looking at anyone else.

After Oscar lost his libel case, then was charged with indecency and put on trial, I was unable to stay away any longer. With Bram's blessing, I'd thrown caution to the wind. With my face covered by a veil, I'd squeezed into the packed courtroom on the final day. I listened as the judge declared it to be the 'worst case he'd ever tried'.

Did it assuage my guilt for all but abandoning Oscar when he needed friends the most? Nothing would do that. But I was first and foremost Bram's wife and Noel's mother. I had to protect them.

Bram sat back in his chair, pinching the bridge of his nose. 'Tell me exactly what happened, Florrie. Details. I must know.'

I shut my eyes briefly and was transported back to the Old Bailey. The jostling and pushing, the scritch and scratch of pens on paper, the whispers, the gasps, the mocking laughter, the sniggers. Grey light streamed through the tall windows, revealing twists of pipe smoke. A man in front of me had ink-stained fingers and a filthy neck he kept rubbing. A moustachioed man kept pushing against me, breathing heavily. I was overwhelmed by the odour of onions and cigarettes. A mother and son were at the end of our row, the child wide-eyed, she with a kerchief pressed to her mouth and watery eyes.

Bram swallowed. 'How … How was he? His disposition, I mean.'

'As if he couldn't quite believe what was happening. I think he realised too late how serious this was. He'd been floating on the success of his plays, believing he was untouchable.'

Oscar had enjoyed a marvellous run with not one but three plays: *Lady Windermere's Fan*, *An Ideal Husband* and *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Not even the adulation their author had received could save Oscar from himself.

'If only he'd listened when he was advised to return to Paris …'

'If only he hadn't sued the marquess,' I reminded Bram.

Bram pushed away from the desk. 'Enough. I must go to him. Offer my support.' He went to the coat stand and lifted his from the hook.

'Bram, wait.' I rose and laid a hand on his chest. 'You can't visit him in gaol.'

Bram pushed his arm into a sleeve.

'Bram, please,' I urged. 'I know you want to prove your loyalty, your friendship. As you've often said, it's easy to be a friend in good times. Real friendships are forged in hot fires. Now is not the time to prove your thesis; not when you too will burn.'

'But, Florrie —'

'Listen to me. Please. You must wait. This is why *I* attended court, remember? We agreed. I did it for both of us.'

He met my eyes. A silent battle raged between us. We'd been over this so many times.

Bram's shoulders slumped. I felt the determination leave his body and resignation take its place. He slowly extracted his arm and returned his coat to the peg.

‘Did … Oscar see you?’

I resumed my seat. ‘Yes. Even wearing a veil. I carried a bunch of violets.’

‘For loyalty.’ Bram fumbled for his kerchief and blew his nose.

For a long time, Oscar had avoided looking at the gallery. But when he spied first Bosie, then Robert Ross, his back straightened. Then he saw me and his eyes widened slightly, his chin lifted, his lips trembling as he tried to smile. My heart had swelled. I was close enough to his lawyer’s assistant to tap him on the shoulder. He’d turned, annoyed at the interruption. I simply pushed the man with the filthy neck to one side and thrust the violets into the assistant’s hands.

‘For Mr Wilde,’ I said.

Oscar saw the flowers and managed to complete his smile. Then, he kissed the tips of his fingers and bowed his head. I returned the gesture.

As I was about to continue, there was a sharp knock and Ellen burst through the door, a newspaper clutched in her hand.

‘Oh my, have you heard … Lemon! I didn’t know you were coming tonight.’ She frowned when she saw my face. ‘You know.’

I nodded grimly towards the newspaper. ‘I can’t imagine what they’re saying about him.’

Ellen shook it. ‘No-one has to imagine anything. Not when it’s in print.’ She threw the paper on the desk and sank into a chair. ‘What are we to do? This is an outrage.’

Bram and I shared a glance.

‘There’s nothing we can do … for now,’ I said.

‘I’d pray,’ said Ellen, ‘only according to the press, God doesn’t acknowledge men like Oscar Wilde.’

I swallowed. Bram plucked the edges of the newspaper.

‘Like what?’ I asked.

‘Men who prefer the love of their own sex,’ she said sadly.

If Bram was aware of her eyes dwelling on him, he made no sign.



It was hard to concentrate as I prepared to attend the theatre that night. The very same day Henry Irving received a knighthood and achieved his goal of

elevating acting to a respectable position among the arts, one of the finest playwrights of the modern era was taken from Newgate to Pentonville before being transferred to Holloway to begin his hard labour.

It would be ironic if it wasn't so damn unjust.

I could scarce raise a congratulations for Henry, or Bram's brother Thornley, who was also knighted this day.

Sir Henry Irving. Sir Thornley Stoker.

Oscar Wilde: felon.

I managed to include a note for Thornley in Bram's effusive letter to him. As for Henry, there was to be a Beefsteak dinner to honour him, something Bram and I would have to sit through, pretending our hearts weren't breaking.

Before Bram left for the theatre, we'd sat quietly in his bedroom. Our chairs were side by side, facing the window. As we gazed upon the street, Bram reached for my hand and held it tightly.

Traffic was busy upon the Albert Bridge. Hansom cabs shared the roadway with broughams and even an omnibus that was swaying dangerously. Rain fell, as if the sky itself was weeping. I glanced at the lumbering clouds as a flock of birds winged their way south, towards the Battersea cricket ground.

'Thank you, Florrie,' said Bram after a while, dragging his eyes from the sweet young flower seller flirting with a fine-dressed gentleman below the window.

'What for?' I asked. The clock on the mantelpiece chimed five of the clock. Almost immediately, the nearby church bells rang. It was time for Bram to depart. As was customary, I would follow later.

'For persuading me not to attend court; not show my … allegiance to Oscar.'

'I don't know whether I should be thanked or beg the Lord's forgiveness.'

Now was not the time to admit to Bram I'd begun to visit the local Catholic church, to seek out solace in the old faith. Because of what was happening to Oscar, yes; but also because of the many demons, real and imagined, still nipping at my peace. One day I would tell him I intended to convert. Not today.

‘I’m so ashamed I didn’t offer Oscar support throughout the trial,’ said Bram.

‘You had no choice.’ I gave him no choice, I thought sadly. I didn’t want anyone examining *our* relationship too closely, or those Bram enjoyed with others.

‘Today Henry told me that not only have Oscar’s books been stripped from bookshops and libraries,’ said Bram, examining my palms the way one might a new fabric, ‘but his name has been taken off playbills.’

I wrenched my hands away and lowered my face into them.

Bram rubbed my shoulders. ‘Imagine what will happen once word reaches America.’

‘If it hasn’t already.’ My voice was muffled.

‘I also learned that Constance has taken the boys out of school and left the city. I wouldn’t be surprised if she files for divorce. Or changes her name.’

God in heaven, my chest felt heavy. I rose from the chair and leaned against the window. My breath turned the glass opaque. I began to draw a pattern with my fingertip. ‘Who told you that?’

‘A note came from Willie,’ said Bram quietly. ‘He also wrote that Oscar has made it clear he wants his friends and family to safeguard themselves. That, until he has served his time, it must be as if we never knew him.’

I swallowed a sob and twisted around to regard Bram. ‘The guilt of what we’ve done will continue to gnaw at me until my insides are hollow. Even so, I would do the same all over again.’ I placed my hands on his shoulders. ‘Imagine if it was your books being removed, or you lost your job at the Lyceum. What if it was you going to gaol?’

He lifted my hands into his own and shook his head. ‘I promised you once, Florrie, that will never happen. I’m not Oscar.’

I raised my face to his. First bestowing a chaste kiss upon my lips, he left the room.

I sighed and turned back to the window. Only then did I notice that the shape I’d drawn in the glass was a perfect O.



More than disturbed by what had unfolded, by the fear and guilt that had gripped me for weeks now, was it any wonder that as my maid, Maria, dressed my hair for the theatre that night, the ghastly presence made an appearance?

I stiffened when I saw him reflected in the mirror, leaning casually against the wall in the far corner of my bedroom, staring boldly.

'Are you alright, Mrs S?' asked Maria in concern. 'Did I stick you with a pin?'

'No, Maria,' I reassured, trying hard not to look in his direction. 'It's nothing.'

The red eyes still glowed with a furious heat, the grubby suit swagged off his large frame, the grey-tinged flesh was more cadaverous than I recalled. The cloak sat high on his shoulders and though there was no draught, it danced about his ankles as if directed by a ghostly breath. His flesh hung in folds from his cheeks, his skull bones were prominent on his forehead. He'd aged, decayed. Each time I saw him, he not only looked worse than I remembered, but as if he'd taken on the characteristics of the horrors happening in my own life.

I was reminded of Oscar's Dorian Gray.

But did my spectre represent the decadent, convicted man or the portrait? What sins did he embody? Whose?

Mine, Oscar's or Bram's?

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

St Leonard's Terrace, 1896

Christmas was almost upon us, the first in yet another house. A couple of months ago, just after returning from a visit to Dublin, we moved next door. While Number 17 St Leonard's Terrace had served us very well these last years, when a lease became available at the bigger, brighter and airier Number 18, I convinced Bram to take it. He even borrowed a hefty sum from Hall so I could redecorate the place. I suspect some of those monies also made their way to pay off the men who'd backed Bram's disastrous publishing venture with Mr Heinemann. Ellen and I had feared it was destined to flounder. I wish we'd been wrong.

It was a bitterly cold day, and I was on my way to meet Ellen, Lucy Gilbert and Violet Hunt at the tearooms in Fenchurch Street Station before we went to the Empire Theatre to see a demonstration of moving pictures. Bram had said we simply had to view them. Progress, he called it, and I supposed it was, but what were we progressing towards?

Snow had fallen continuously all morning, deepening the thick discoloured drifts mounded on the sides of the road by carriage wheels, horses' hooves and the tyres of motor cars. The air pinched and bit as I paid the cab driver and ran into the station. I paused to brush flakes from my coat when I spied, in the nearby WH Smith stall, multiple copies of Herbert Wells's novel *The Time Machine* and his latest, *The Island of Dr Moreau*. I'd only finished reading *The Time Machine* last night. A fanciful fiction about a scientist who travels eight hundred thousand years into the future, I'd found it engrossing. Everyone was talking about Mr Wells's books, and deservedly so, but no-one was giving a thought to Bram's. It was terribly heartbreaking.

Bram always claimed the very ordinary sales of his novels didn't discourage him, but I couldn't credit that. How could they not when around him his friends were so successful in the very field where he wished to excel? He'd had two published this past year. Set in Scotland's Cruden Bay, *The Watter's Mou'* (Gaelic for 'the water's mouth') was deemed tragic but worthy – damned with faint praise by any measure. Not that this stopped him setting another novel there. Sadly, *The Shoulder of Shasta*, though a marvellous romp, didn't fare well with the critics at all. One claimed it wouldn't appeal to many readers and accused Bram of putting the book together 'roughly and carelessly', even going so far as to declare that 'Mr Stoker can probably do much better than this'.

I knew Bram could too.

I was still thinking about the effort Bram put into his writing – not just the books, but the articles he was commissioned to deliver for various newspapers – the research he did, the lengths he went to for accuracy. It was astonishing. I pushed him, praised his talent, his boundless imagination and skill; of course I did. At least when he was writing, it was in service to *his* ambitions. Hall, whose quiet Manx books sold well, was very supportive of his endeavours. But in the end, it didn't matter what I thought, or the enthusiasm of his current publisher, Mr Constable, it was the reviewers and readers that counted.

'Lemon!' exclaimed Ellen, half-rising and waving as soon as I reached the top of the stairs. Sat near one of the large windows, Lucy and Violet were already there. I manoeuvred my way between the tables, most veiled in steam, nodding to the few women and couple of men I knew.

First kissing my friends and exchanging greetings, I collapsed into a chair. A waitress appeared and poured a cup of tea from the enormous pot that had been ordered. A slice of Victoria sponge was slid in front of me, oozing jam and cream.

'So,' said Lucy, once I'd settled and swallowed a mouthful of cake. 'Tell us about Dublin. How was it?'

'And the new house,' added Violet, delicately licking her fork. 'I can't believe you went to all the trouble of shifting next door. Ellen says it's impressive.'

'It is,' said Ellen. 'Big.'

'When are we getting an invitation?' asked Violet.

‘Soon,’ I laughed. ‘Of course! As for Dublin —’

‘We read about you in the paper,’ blurted Lucy. ‘You caused quite the stir at the Dublin Drawing Room Ball.’

I felt my cheeks pinken. ‘You saw the article?’

‘Saw it?’ exclaimed Violet. ‘Ellen bought multiple copies and gave them to everyone.’

‘Not *everyone*,’ drawled Ellen, nudging Violet. ‘How could I not share when you were declared the loveliest lady present?’ She framed her face with her hands and tilted her head.

We laughed.

‘Bram must have been proud,’ said Lucy.

‘He was.’ I smiled at the recollection. Almost as proud as when the portrait Walter Osborne painted of me was exhibited at the Royal Academy last year. My triumph had been short-lived, overshadowed as it was by Oscar’s tribulations.

‘Enjoy it while you can, Lemon,’ said Ellen, directing her fork at me. ‘Compliments dry up once you reach forty!’

‘That’s two years away yet!’

They sniggered at my indignation. Ellen’s words simply confirmed what I’d quietly decided. Once I turned forty, I’d no longer allow my picture to be captured whether in paint, by Kodak camera or one of those new-fangled Kinetoscope things. If I was to be depicted for posterity, it would be before I became a bag full of wrinkles and liver spots. Unlike Dorian Gray, I had no portrait in the attic to do the ageing for me.

Aware of three sets of eyes upon me, I started, teacup halfway to my mouth. ‘Sorry, what was that?’

‘I was asking after Noel,’ said Lucy gently.

‘I was away with the bog-fairies,’ I apologised. ‘He’s due home from Oxford tomorrow, just for a few days.’

‘Is he enjoying being there now?’ asked Ellen.

‘Depends on what you mean by “enjoy”,’ I admitted, swallowing some tea. The poor lad had been quite homesick when he first became a boarder. ‘He won’t distinguish himself the way his father did at school, but since when is ordinary a sin?’

The women nodded sagely.

‘Bram is already talking about him becoming an accountant and intends to raise the possibility when he’s home.’

‘I think Noel would do well in that occupation,’ said Lucy. ‘You know, where he wasn’t overwhelmed by large numbers of people.’

‘No, just large numbers,’ quipped Ellen.

‘I think you’re right, Lucy.’ I topped up my tea and stirred it distractedly. ‘I sometimes wonder if the kind of busy life Bram and I lead has made him disinclined to seek others. He’s ever been a boy – dear God, a young man!’

There were exclamations of mock horror.

‘Who’s quite content with his own company.’

‘There’s nothing wrong with that!’ exclaimed Violet.

We all began to laugh. Violet disliked being solitary and was always seeking out new friends, lovers and stimulating people. I was beyond flattered she included me among those she preferred.

‘And what’s Bram doing with himself now the theatre’s closed for a while?’ asked Ellen.

‘He’s busy finishing that book he’s been working on since – oh, since before we stayed in Whitby.’

‘That was years ago,’ said Ellen.

I nodded. ‘At least six.’

‘Six!’ exclaimed Lucy and Violet in unison.

‘A bit longer, really. He’s calling it *The Un-Dead*, though just between us, I think of it as *The Book That Will Not Die*.’

‘After that long, I’m not surprised,’ said Violet.

‘Is that the Count Dracula one?’ asked Lucy tentatively. She knew how important Bram’s work was to him – they all did and shared my disappointment in the lukewarm reception his books had thus far received.

I sipped my tea. ‘It is. He finished the first draft back in July when we stayed at the Kilmarnock Arms near Cruden Bay again. He loves it there. There’s something about the place that makes the ideas flourish and the words flow.’ I paused, then leaned over, lowering my voice. ‘He tells me it will be full of the supernatural and all kinds of things that seem to be the rage these days.’

‘And vampires,’ said Violet ghoulishly, widening her eyes and gnashing her teeth.

We recoiled in faux horror before bursting into giggles.

‘Bram says he’s going to read the completed manuscript to me after Christmas.’

‘Well, I hope this book brings him the recognition he deserves,’ said Lucy.

‘So do I, Lucy. So do I,’ I sighed.

We finished our tea and began to rise. It was time to head to the New Empire Theatre.

As we made our way back downstairs and into the train station, I thought about the vampire book. Bram was right to alter direction; so few were keen for his romances, sweet and dramatic as they were. Ghostly tales and those featuring the inexplicable and strange had never really gone out of style. As if to drive the point home, Lucy and Violet began to discuss the merits of the books on display in WH Smith as we made our way down to the train – Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque* by Edgar Allan Poe, *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* by Robert Louis Stevenson, and Mr Wells’s works. And there was our friend George Du Maurier’s *Trilby*, which had captured imaginations everywhere – including my own.

I read it the moment it was published and was astonished to discover it was about a young artist’s model, Trilby, who’s mesmerised by a wicked older musician, Svengali. Hypnotised by him, she becomes a famous singer, despite being tone deaf, and conquers the world. The story ends in defeat, death and shame. Clearly, Mr Du Maurier remembered our exchange by the aviary that day at Violet’s. Did he see me as a witless woman who fell under the spell of an older man? Only, Bram was no Svengali … Or was Trilby a feminine version of Bram? To me, Henry Irving was Svengali incarnate and I told Mr Du Maurier so the next time I saw him.

‘What can I say?’ he’d shrugged. ‘You inspired me, Mrs Stoker. But, any resemblance to an actual person is solely in your imagination. *Trilby* is nothing more than a work of fantasy …’ And then he winked.

I was still thinking about Mr Du Maurier and how much Bram had enjoyed his novel, even writing a congratulatory letter to him, as we boarded our compartment, fussing over who should sit where, taking the opportunity to brush our coats and repin our hats. As we pulled out of the station in a bluster of smoke and screeching metal, it occurred to me that Mr

Du Maurier had captured the contemporary mood with *Trilby*. People paid enormous sums these days to be hypnotised and even crowded music halls to witness acts performing it – willingly surrendering their self-mastery to another. There was also an increasing desire to seek affirmation of the spirit world, or something existing beyond. It wasn't just through stories like *Dorian Gray*, or Poe's or Charlotte Riddell's works. Even Lady Jane (God rest her soul – there's no doubt Oscar's internment finished her) had often had a psychic visit and loved reading Tarot cards at her Saturday luncheons and such. Poor O even consulted a woman claiming to be able to see the future before his trial. Her predictions of his great triumph predictably inaccurate. I hoped by embracing the supernatural, Bram's new book would bring him the kind of success Mr Du Maurier and Mr Wells enjoyed.

We arrived at the New Empire Theatre just in time to admire the light blue and salmon pink stage boxes and the plum-coloured upholstery of the seats before the vast auditorium darkened. On a huge screen in the centre of the stage, flickering black-and-white images appeared. Spellbound, the audience swiftly hushed.

I flinched as a train sped towards me, horses galloped across dry ground, kicking up dust, faces loomed then dissolved, buildings, too. Lights shimmered across my vision making my heart somersault and my breath catch. Why, it was as if *we* were being mesmerised or, better still, being given a taste of what Wells's intrepid time-traveller experienced – a glimpse of a possible future.

As the film ended and we sat in awed silence, I prayed it was a future where Bram attained the recognition he so deserved.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

London, January 1897

As was his habit when a manuscript was completed, Bram started reading me *The Un-Dead* – the book that had taken him almost seven years to write. For three consecutive nights, starting on New Year's Day, 1897, I listened to his chilling tale about a strange foreign nobleman who retained an English lawyer to buy real estate in England, and wrought destruction upon any who dared cross his path.

Bram poured us both a drink in preparation for bringing this wild, unnatural story to its conclusion. I peeped through the curtains and saw the moon was obstructed by angry clouds that roiled and transmuted into eerie shapes. At least half the streetlights weren't working, plunging the road into gloom. Thick fog curled and drifted, obscuring then revealing the few cabs and folk foolish enough to be abroad this wretched night.

I shuddered and drew the curtains tightly.

'Ready, Florrie?' asked Bram.

We assumed our usual places. Me, curled up in a chair, wrapped tightly in a blanket with my feet tucked under me, Bram with two lamps nearby so he could see the pages clearly. The fire crackled, throwing macabre silhouettes against the walls, turning Bram's face into a landscape of crags and gullies.

I was relieved the tale was almost over. I'd scarce slept since Bram had begun his reading, my dreams filled with skeletal men with long fingers, hairy palms and elongated teeth. Full red lips whispered in my dream-ears, fangs gnashed, blood flowed, and moans and screams both terrifying and carnal taunted my unsettled psyche.

A part of me wished to hear no more of this benighted tale. The stronger, braver, part of me had to know how it ended.

With a fortifying sip of wine, Bram picked up from where he'd left off the night before: with the brutal death by unseen hands of Count Dracula's factotum, the suborned and somehow possessed Renfield.

As Bram resumed, it was as if mother nature unleashed a protest against such a malevolent tale. Volleys of rain thrashed the windows, the wind howled and shrieked, shaking the glass. Beyond the drawing room, the floors creaked, and the walls shivered as if to expel unwelcome guests. The clock in the hallway chimed erratically.

With every page, the horror that had lodged inside my chest from the very beginning grew until I was filled with such dread, it was as if a huge sword hovered over me, threatening to skewer my soul. I was transfixed, scared to move. It was difficult to draw breath. My heart beat with alarming rapidity. The warmth of the fire, the blanket I clutched, didn't touch me. I was bitterly cold yet also somehow febrile as I journeyed alongside the courageous Crew of Light through the snow-bound Carpathian wilderness, fending off vampires and wolves, tracking the wagon that carried the coffined count back to his castle while the sun sank behind jagged mountains, towering silhouettes against a vermillion sky.

The climax of the story drew closer, Bram increasing the pace as, at last, the Crew of Light forced the cart with its cursed load to halt. Leaping aboard, the brave men prised the lid of the coffin away.

I was on the edge of the chair, a fist pressed to my mouth.

'*I saw the count lying within the box upon the earth*,' read Bram. '*He was deathly pale, just like a waxen image, and the red eyes glared with the horrible vindictive look which I knew too well*.' He paused. '*As I looked, the eyes saw the sinking sun, and the look of hate in them turned to triumph*.

'*But, on the instant, came the sweep and flash of Jonathan's great knife. I shrieked as I saw it shear through the throat; whilst at the same moment Mr Morris's bowie knife plunged into the heart*.'

The count's body turned to dust, vanishing as motes into the darkness.

The story ended.

The world was hushed.

I could neither speak nor move. I was completely untethered. Dire thoughts invaded my imagination, evil and foreboding. *Dear God*. I resisted

the overpowering urge to cross myself. I wished I'd a Catholic icon to protect me – a relic, the gold crucifix Oscar had once gifted me, the host, anything. But a crucifix hadn't saved the captain of the *Demeter* in the Whitby harbour chapter, had it?

I could scarce believe that my husband, the man who wrote children's fairytales, albeit dark, and adventure, mystery and romance novels, had penned this.

This was something else. I was reminded of the fear that held the city to ransom during the Jack the Ripper years and knew this vampire tale would arouse the same type of anxiety.

Once this book was published, London would never be the same again.

Bram waited for me to break the heavy silence. Did I tell him that though my mind spun in all sorts of horrendous directions as he read, conjuring creatures and happenings that had no place in a modern drawing room, there were sections, scenes, that beckoned me into other places? They stirred something deep within me, fires I'd believed quenched long ago. I'd been filled with disturbing heat and ribbons of pleasure; feelings of such longing as I imagined sharp teeth against my neck, being entangled in bedclothes, sharing such passion. The three women crawling over Jonathan Harker, the count telling them, 'This man belongs to me!' was so shocking in what it suggested, yet shamefully thrilling too.

To think *my* Bram wrote something so … so sensuous. So visceral.

If Poor O was condemned for writing *Dorian Gray*, how might judgement fall upon Bram? Would *The Un-Dead* be regarded as a dangerous, morally repugnant book too?

And yet, for all the darkness, the erotic and taboo, the ghoulish and evil, he offered Christian hope and light.

But hadn't Oscar also done that? Then again, Dorian had willingly made a pact with the devil. Count Dracula *was* the devil, and the characters Bram invented, Dr Van Helsing, Jonathan Harker, Dr Seward, Quincy Morris, Lord Godalming, Lucy and Mina, were either suborned and controlled like Mr Renfield and the crew of the *Demeter* or did God's work by setting out to destroy him.

I would say all this to Bram, tell him I was amazed and awed, afraid, too, and not just of the count. But not tonight, not until I'd calmed my mind. I took a deep breath.

‘You’ve changed some of the characters’ names,’ I said finally, reaching for my wine which, apart from a few fraught sips earlier, had sat untouched for hours.

My hands shook, so I swiftly put the glass back down.

Bram rose and refreshed my drink, topping up his own. ‘I did.’ His voice was husky from reading for so long.

First steadying my hand, I raised my glass to him. ‘I … I think the new names work wonderfully well. I think all the characters do. They’re very believable, even within such a disturbing and unlikely tale.’

‘You found it disturbing?’

‘Very.’ I gulped my wine.

‘And unlikely?’

‘Well.’ I gave a shaky laugh. ‘Of course. Vampires … creatures who drink blood, don’t exist, do they? Nor shapeshifters.’ I thought about the actors at the Lyceum, the Adelphi, the Haymarket, the Savoy and the Royal. Weren’t they all shapeshifters? Donning costumes and becoming someone else? Why, at times women became men – and vice versa.

Didn’t that make us all shapeshifters? Adopting a guise to suit the occasion? Hiding our real selves from the world, wearing masks and elaborate costumes, assuming socially acceptable behaviours to pass as one thing in a world that didn’t allow us to be anything else. I thought of Oscar, his defiance and the cost, and studied Bram beneath my lashes.

I cleared my throat. ‘I meant unlikely in the sense you portray them in the novel. The notion that someone can control another, take over their life, drain them of their will – that I do *not* find improbable.’ He averted his gaze. ‘It’s the means that makes it uncanny. The blood drinking, it’s a metaphor for stealing someone’s soul, isn’t it?’

‘Possibly,’ said Bram, holding his claret aloft so it caught the light.

‘But the actions the characters take, the good ones,’ I continued, ‘are so noble. The way the men band together to save Mina; even the awful choice they must make about Lucy … you’ve made their actions honourable, godly even.’

‘What about Dracula? What did you think of him?’

My glass suddenly appeared to be filled with blood. I put it down hastily. ‘I … I thought him …’ What did I say? He *was* Henry Irving to me, with dashes of the explorer Arminius Vambéry, Sir Richard Francis Burton,

Lord Tennyson and even his beloved Walt Whitman, an inkling of Svengali, but also my own damn spectre. Bram was a bowerbird, always borrowing from our life – the living and the dead. 'Deserving of his end.'

I forced myself to drink the wine. *Blood is life*.

'Thank you, Florrie.' He gave a weary smile that swiftly left his eyes. 'I know I've still work to do. Reading aloud has enabled me to see its flaws, where I need to make some changes. Once they're done, I'll take it to Constable; he's keen to publish it. Hopefully, *The Un-Dead* will appear later this year.' He stretched out his legs. 'Do you realise it will be my fifth book – sixth if you count the serialisation of *The Snake's Pass*?'

I made a suitable sound. *So much output, and yet you're still known almost exclusively as Henry Irving's menial*, I thought, maybe unfairly.

'If I might make one suggestion?' I was hesitant to criticise. I knew how hard Bram had toiled, sacrificed so much, working over holidays in Cruden Bay, when we were in Whitby, and every spare moment here in St Leonard's Terrace.

'Tell me. You've always offered sage advice with my other books, why should this one be any different?'

Sage advice that wasn't always followed.

I sat forward. 'I think you should change the title.'

'Change it?' Bram looked astonished. 'But it has been *The Un-Dead* since I first conceived it. It's what the entire story hinges on.'

'I know, my dear, and that's why I was reluctant to say anything. It's just that "The Un-Dead" is so …' I crinkled my nose.

'What?' He had *that* tone.

I knew enough writers by now to know though they claimed to be able to take criticism from loved ones and even encouraged it, they were like the finest porcelain and liable to crack or even break if it was offered. I trod very carefully.

'The count is such a strong presence, even though he hardly appears.' I paused until Bram looked at me. 'Actually, it's his absence that makes him such a powerful entity. Even when he's not there, he haunts the pages. The reader will always be anticipating his arrival and the ominous consequences he brings in his wake.'

God, I knew that feeling.

‘What do you think it should be called then?’ Bram sniffed, then picked up the poker and stabbed the coals a few times.

‘I think it should be called *Dracula*. Not Count, just *Dracula*.’

Bram replaced the poker and swung around. ‘Dracula.’ He pulled a face. ‘The name raises more questions than it answers.’

‘Exactly. As you said yourself, years ago in Whitby. It’s such a strong, interesting word. Foreign, odd. It will make people curious. Didn’t you say it meant “devil”?’

Bram gave a dry laugh. ‘Among other things, from what I can gather. Though I don’t see how placing it on the cover will sell the book.’

‘But you won’t have “devil” there, will you? You’ll have a word that arouses curiosity. Surely, that’s exactly what you want to evoke in a potential reader.’

Bram arched a brow. ‘Well, thank you, Florrie. I’ll think about it.’ Which meant he wouldn’t give it another thought. ‘Forgive me.’ He pushed his hair back from his forehead. He looked old tonight, as if the reading had drained his vitality. In that moment, I saw my husband’s mortality. My heart lurched. ‘I’m completely exhausted; I’m going to retire.’

I pulled the blanket off my shoulders and folded it. ‘I will too.’ I stood, picking up a lamp. ‘It’s very late.’ I glanced at the clock. Where had the time gone?

Taking another lamp, he gestured for me to precede him. ‘It’s very good, Bram. Truly. I think you’ve written something special.’ I thought back to the conversation I’d had with Lucy and Violet about books as we went to the train station. ‘Something that those who love Mr Wells, the Brontes, Mrs Shelley, Mr Verne and even Mr Du Maurier’s efforts will appreciate.’

Bram’s face fell.

He opened the door and stepped into the gloomy hall. It was bitterly cold. Nightmares had taken up residence. My lamp guttered and almost went out.

‘I hope one day, Florrie,’ said Bram, leaning wearily against the doorframe, ‘there’ll come a time when *I’ll* be the literary touchstone by which new works are judged.’

Before I could respond, he placed a fleeting kiss on my forehead and went to his bedroom.

I waited until he had shut the door before I released a long, weary sigh. Were all men seeking immortality through their work? Were they so greedy that their lives, their families and friends, were never enough?

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

London, 1897

It was May 18, and a pre-publication reading of Bram's book had been organised at the Lyceum. It may have been hastily planned to protect theatrical copyright, but in my heart, I felt so much more was at stake. This was the first time Bram's novel would be heard by anyone other than me.

Lurid green and black posters advertising the event were put up a mere hour before the reading was due to begin. A cast had been assembled from those in the current production of *Madame Sans-Gene*, with other thespian friends taking on the minor roles. Ellen's daughter, Edith Craig, was playing the part of Mina.

The greatest change, which Bram had either failed to tell me or kept as a surprise, was the title. It was now called *Dracula: The Un-Dead*. Not exactly what I suggested, but a good compromise.

A whole guinea was charged for admittance, and I pondered who had set such a costly fee. No wonder so few members of the public came. Most of the audience was made up of the Lyceum company – including backstage crew, cleaners and friends. Dear Mary Dunhunter, our cook, begged to attend. We were like fallen leaves in winter, scattered across the huge auditorium. The place had never felt so empty. Bram, who'd been nervously pacing the house before he left this morning, would be very disappointed. I wished I could console him, but he was nowhere to be seen.

For the reading, the book had been divided up into five acts and many scenes. Fifteen different actors would read the characters. It's hard to describe how I felt seeing Bram's name, not only as acting manager on the program, but as the author. It was only later I saw that, in a churlish gesture, someone had included a unique addendum on the back page.

Any complaints should be referred to the acting manager.

So much for mutual loyalty and support.

The reading started at ten o'clock and went for what seemed like hours (at least five). I didn't linger after it finished, as Bram was surrounded by well-wishers. At least he'd looked pleased.

The following day, when I caught up with Ellen at Violet's soiree, I learned that Henry, who I'd been surprised to see among the audience at the beginning of the reading, but not at its conclusion, had left before the second act was complete.

'Afterwards, Ma was foolish enough to ask Henry what he thought of it,' said Ellen, leaning back in a chair and shaking her head.

'Oh no.' My heart plunged. 'What did he say?' Bram had made no mention when I asked about feedback.

'One word.'

'Well, tell me,' I urged.

'*Dreadful*,' she said, imitating Henry's style of speech perfectly.

'*That* was what he said?'

Ellen nodded. ''Fraid so, Lemon.'

I resisted the urge to swear. 'Well, let us be thankful Henry isn't the only one asked to judge Bram's work.'



Eight days later, the book went on sale for six shillings, only this time, much to my satisfaction, the yellow cover bore a single word in bright red type: *Dracula*.

The publisher had buried *The Un-Dead* once and for all.

Was it childish that I was disheartened to see the novel was dedicated to Hall Caine? Not that many would recognise it was him. Bram opted to use Hall's nickname, a derivation of his baptismal name, Thomas Henry Hall. Called 'little Tommy', by his beloved grandmother, in his native Manx language it became 'Hommy-Beg'. Hall may have been Bram's friend and mentor, but surely I'd earned some acknowledgement as well? I'd been there from its inception, supported Bram's literary hopes in all manner of ways – and not just with *Dracula*.

I swallowed hurt and waited with bated breath for reviews to appear. Bram pretended an indifference I knew he didn't feel. Fortunately, far more

of them agreed with my assessment of the novel than Henry Irving's.

The *Daily Telegraph* described it as 'eerie and gruesome', *The Pall Mall Gazette* called it 'a book to revel in … Its fascination is so great that it is impossible to lay aside.' The following month, *Punch* magazine wrote that it was 'the weirdest of weird tales'.

Bram revelled in the positive reviews, cutting them out and sharing them with friends. I was proud and pleased, and continued to pray that this strange, wicked and, yes, weird tale about a demon who drains the life out of others, would allow Bram to get his own life back.

For all the wonderful reviews the book received in England and later in America, there were two that meant the world to Bram.

The first was from Charlotte Stoker. His mammy wrote:

> No book since Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* or indeed any other at all has come near yours in originality, or terror – Poe is nowhere. In its terrible excitement it should make a widespread reputation and money for you.

Bram wept when he read it. Tears filled my eyes – not so much because of Charlotte's pride, but Bram's reaction. When I pointed out to him that Charlotte had done what he hoped, made his work the yardstick by which she measured others, he gave me a wry, watery smile.

'It doesn't count, Florrie.'

'Why ever not?' I asked, perplexed he'd reject something so fulsome and sincere.

'Because she's my mammy.'

The second was also special: a letter from Arthur Conan Doyle.

> My dear Bram Stoker
> I am sure you will not think it an impertinence if I write to tell you how very much I have enjoyed *Dracula*. I think it is the very best story of diablerie I have read for many years. It is so really wonderful how with so much exciting interest over so long a book there is never an anticlimax.
>
> It holds you from the very start and grows more and more engrossing until it is painfully vivid. The old professor is most

excellent and so are the two girls. I congratulate you with all my heart for having written so fine a book.

With the kindest remembrances to Mrs Bram Stoker and yourself.

Despite the sterling reviews, a second printing, and an American edition – and the royalties which allowed us to repay Hall the six hundred pounds we owed him – no-one came forward to produce a play. Bram had fervently believed Henry would offer, taking on the role of the count himself. Ellen pointed out that Dracula wasn't on stage long enough for Henry to want to portray him.

Alas, the monies earned were never enough to free Bram from the shackles of the Lyceum and being under the thumb of his Chief.

The Chief I'd quietly come to refer to in my head as 'the count'.

God knew, he drained the life out of me. Or would have, had I let him.

I began to think I should be more like Mina Harker, fight for my life, my husband's, and slay the monster that would devour us both.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

London, 1897 to 1898

Two shocking events occurred before the end of 1897: the mindless murder of the delightful William Terriss by a down-and-out actor he'd tried to help, and the immolation of the Lyceum's warehouse in Southwark. Both were blows to the entire Lyceum family, and to Bram.

Is it any wonder then that the novel Bram composed after *Dracula*, the one he dedicated to me as a panacea for all the sorrow, was a romance? He titled it *Miss Betty*. When it appeared the following year, it did so with little fanfare and sorry sales. Quietly, I wondered if, after the lurid horror of vampires, the sweetness of *Miss Betty* (even if she could foretell the future) was not what readers wanted.

Once again, it stunned me how my husband could write with such feeling about passion, about pounding hearts and giddy minds triggered by the presence of another person. *Miss Betty* was filled with such moments. He'd even set it in the street where we used to live, Cheyne Walk.

Did he ever feel that way about me? About anyone?

Or did all of it come from his bountiful imagination? Did it matter?

Sometimes, when I looked in the mirror and studied my face and body objectively, a body that had birthed a son who was now about to turn nineteen, I'd wonder if I would ever know what it was like to be held with desire, to rhapsodise about the touch of a man, to listen with racing heart for his footsteps, to burn for his kisses. Oscar would float across my mind and memories of his hands, his lips, would cause my flesh to goose and my heart to quicken. I'd been so young, a different person then. He had been, too. I recalled the dangerously angelic face of Bosie, the freshness of Robert Ross, then Oscar as I'd last seen him, flaccid, grey and shattered. I would brush my once chestnut hair, seeing the way the silver threads among

the dark caught the light, note the way the lines around my eyes and on my forehead were deepening. My teeth weren't quite the bright white they used to be. My once taut jawline and neck were loosening.

The billionaire had one rule: no falling in love.

We all know how that goes. Browse Lokepub for your next romance.

I'd never been the dizzy, delightful Miss Betty, or Lord Godalming's Lucy, or any of Bram's other fictional heroines, fending off suitors and reeling over their charms. I was and would always be Mrs Bram Stoker, wife of a man who could pen the most wondrous and bizarre tracts that gave life to feelings I doubted he'd ever known.

Or had ever felt towards me.

It was a tough pill for this real woman to swallow. Still, after twenty years of marriage, I could console myself that while I didn't share physical intimacy with Bram, there was much we did. Bram trusted me to hold tight his secret and respect his work. I hadn't always appreciated the latter, true, and I'd resented the time it kept him away from home, resented the person I saw as responsible for that (and still did). But I'd become the principal sounding board for his ideas; was always the first person to read (or hear him read) his novels. Bram also respected *me*, valued my opinions. He appreciated the various people I'd brought into his sphere, many of whom had guided him to publication. For all that he'd said and done things that had hurt me profoundly, he'd never broken my heart. As far as I (or anyone else) knew, he never kept a mistress or visited bawdy houses (so many of our male acquaintances did and were not subtle about it), and he certainly didn't shunt me away to a country house or seek to assert his authority by withholding an allowance. On the contrary, he was a generous provider. He endorsed my housekeeping, my salons, indulged my delight in shopping and new dresses. As if he had a choice! Not after the last time a 'ladies column' rather maliciously pointed out I'd worn the same 'sensational' outfit twice. It was the shame that report caused that put me on the fateful

voyage to Paris with Noel and Mrs Simpson. To think, the desire to win approval, and from the gutter press, nearly cost us our lives …

If only that reporter knew the truth of my arrangement with Bram. Wearing the same outfit wouldn't rate a mention.

Marriage caused unhappiness for far too many – especially women. So many wore it on their dour faces, squinched lips and downcast eyes. One had only to hear how Sarah Bernhardt's brittle laugh improved after her husband died of a drug overdose, or recall Lillie Langtry's false smile regardless of whose arm she was on. Why, look at the twisted features of Florence Irving, Henry's estranged wife, formed by the bitterness her union had brought her. Then there was the Marquess of Queensberry and his string of broken wives. Not to mention poor Constance Wilde … Marriage had always been my goal. But I'd wanted an interesting life as well. Through Bram, I'd gained that. I should be content. I was – mostly. Yet, a part of me still fretted that my marriage was not what God intended, that I was a fraud, a fraud terrified of being exposed and shunned.

Was the life Bram and I chose to live together *that* unnatural? It was the question I'd repeatedly asked myself for years. Would I one day be punished for living a lie? Would Bram? I kept pressing God to provide an answer. Alas, the God of love was deaf to my pleas.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

London, 1900

The Lyceum company were once again on tour in the provinces and had gone as far north as Scotland. Naturally, I'd remained in London. A few weeks into their busy schedule, Bram wrote from Glasgow to tell me that Henry had fallen gravely ill. What was first attributed to 'clergyman's throat' was later diagnosed as both pleurisy and pneumonia. Bram's anguish leapt off the page.

> I allowed him to perform, Florrie. Against my better judgement and at Henry's insistence, I let him tread the boards. I doubt I'll ever forgive myself for such a serious lapse of judgement.

Henry was ordered to bed and the tour continued without him. Bram took over, travelling between each of the towns, keeping to the gruelling schedule, coming home briefly when he could.

Concerned he'd fall ill as well, I urged him to rest, to hand over the reins to Harry or at least share responsibility. He looked at me as if I'd suggested he dance naked down The Strand.

'I can't, Florrie. Henry's debts are crippling. The only thing I can do to ensure an income so the seventy people who perform each night can be paid, is keep the tour going. Henry's relying on me.'

Oh, I knew he was. There was, after all, no-one else. Those three men Henry hired years ago had, inevitably, proved worthless.

One night after visiting Henry in Bournemouth, where he was convalescing, Bram confided, 'Henry's a mess, Florrie.' The two men had spent the afternoon together. Once again, Bram tried to persuade Henry to

change his mind about Arthur Conan Doyle's offer to write a drama just for the Lyceum. Even though a play featuring his enormously successful character Sherlock Holmes would be guaranteed to fill every seat and a long run, it was to no avail.

'Henry said he'd rather the theatre remain dark and empty than put on some populist claptrap.' Bram shook his head in frustration. I poured him a whisky. Bram downed it in two gulps, then held out his glass for more. 'He's coughing up so much blood and pus yet refuses to see the doctor. I had to provide a fresh handkerchief at least a dozen times.' He gave a theatrical judder.

I made what I hoped were sympathetic noises. No-one should suffer like that. But Henry's stubborn refusal to listen to Bram, who'd always had his best interests at heart, failing to see *his* exhaustion, made the embers of ire stir within me.

Ellen had disclosed that Henry's finances were in dismal straits. If only he listened to Bram, they could be repaired. *He* could be repaired. Without Henry to perform beside, and with Bram's blessing, once the tour finished Ellen signed a short contract with Mr Beerbohm Tree's new theatre company.

'You organised for the doctor to attend Henry regardless of his objections, didn't you?' I asked Bram, joining him on the sofa.

The noise of the Sunday traffic intruded through the window. The sun was fighting a losing battle with bully-boy clouds, its weak light striking a vase of wilting flowers.

'Of course,' sighed Bram. He resembled the flowers, so worn and wan. His cheeks were pallid; his eyes lacked their usual brilliance. I wished there was something I could do to help reduce the burden that had always been his to bear when it came to Sir Henry. 'Henry might be over sixty, but he doesn't always know what's best for him.'

I rested a hand on his knee. He closed his over mine. With his other, he swept the hair from his forehead. I noticed all the grey among the copper-brown. The deep lines fanning from his eyes, the grooves in his forehead. When had he grown so old? None of us escaped time's march, not even the indefatigable Bram Stoker; only his vampiric creations did that.

'Fact is,' he said softly, 'if I don't look out for him, protect him from his own worst tendencies, ensure his finances are in some order, who will?'

Bram heaved himself off the sofa and dropped a kiss on top of my head, ‘Excuse me, Florrie, I’ve letters to write. There are more folk I need to notify about Henry’s condition; the alteration to the Lyceum’s schedule.’



Was Henry’s next decision the beginning of the end? Or had it been hurtling towards us like one of the comets that streaked across the skies? Perhaps the finale had been put in motion long ago when Henry first damaged his knee. Reduced the insurance monies weeks before the prop warehouse burned. Lavished money on his son Laurence’s failed productions. Refused to consider Arthur’s offer. Collapsed with pleurisy. Made Austin Brereton his press agent after the fire, effectively shutting out Bram and causing more friction between them.

Hindsight is a wonderful thing, but later, when Bram and I discussed these events, it was clear they all contributed to what I privately called the downfall of Sir Henry Irving. Bram would never be so direct.

While Henry was convalescing, and without consulting Bram, who happened to be in America organising yet another tour, enduring the worst storm the Atlantic had ever seen, Henry sold his rights to the Lyceum.

We only learned what he’d done after Bram returned. By then, nothing could be done. Bram felt betrayed. He was. But instead of railing against Henry, seeing him for the selfish bastard he was (oh, yes, I was cussing), Bram defended him. Again.

‘This damn consortium took advantage, Florrie,’ he said as I sat, aghast at the news. ‘They waited until I was absent and Henry in a weakened state. If he’d been in his right mind, if I’d been present, none of this would have happened.’ His voice began to break. ‘Oh, God, Florrie, Henry thought he was going to die … Yet he said naught of his fears. Imagine if he had …? How could I …?’ He buried his head in his hands.

Words from long ago echoed.

I can always have another son … What I cannot have is another Henry Irving.

Bram could not see what was so clear. Henry was purposefully distancing himself. Bram had done nothing wrong. Nothing. But he was being cast aside like an outgrown toy. Loyalty, devotion, meant nothing to Henry.

I went to Bram and gently rubbed his back.

‘This will be an unmitigated disaster,’ continued Bram, raising his head, the tremor in his voice gone. ‘Though Henry still retains artistic control, and I’ll keep my job, the only one to financially benefit from this new arrangement is the consortium.’

While we were preoccupied with these Henry-induced dramas, news arrived from Paris that plunged me into an abyss of despair.

CHAPTER FORTY

London, December 1900

I'd not long returned from a shopping trip with Lucy, Genevieve and Violet, when Maria admitted Ellen into the drawing room. I knew at once something was amiss.

'Ellen!' I exclaimed, taking in her red nose, puffy eyes and wind-blown hair. 'What is it?'

'Oh, Lemon,' she said, striding across the room and taking my hands. 'Brace yourself, dearest. I've heartbreaking news.'

'What?'

Tears began to spill down her cheeks. 'Oscar … Oscar is dead.' She released my hands and began to sob.

My head filled with roaring and the room, one moment pearled with grey light, became darker and smaller. I stumbled and would have fallen, except Ellen caught me.

'Come, come, sit. Maria!' she called, as she drew me to the lounge. 'Fetch drinks. No, no, not tea. Something stronger – much stronger.'

There was the clink of glass, the gurgle of liquid, then something solid was pushed into my hands. 'Here. Drink, Lemon.' Unable to do anything else, I obeyed. The whisky was fiery, and I drank it too fast and began to choke, then cough.

Ellen slapped my back.

'Tell me,' I said, my voice hoarse. 'Tell me it's not true.'

'Alas,' she said, wiping her eyes.

'How … how do you know?'

'Oscar's friend Reginald Turner wrote. You know I kept in contact with Oscar, mainly through Reginald, after he was released from Reading Gaol

and eventually went to Paris?'

She was a better friend than I'd ever been.

'Reginald was by his side, Lemon. With Oscar when …' She caught her breath.

'Tell me what he wrote, please.'

She drained her drink, asked for another, then began.

As I listened to Oscar's final days and hours, the lump in my throat travelled to the pit of my stomach.

'He'd been suffering for some time,' said Ellen. 'That damn ear of his – you remember it started when he was in Wandsworth prison, becoming worse after he was transferred to Reading.'

For all we avoided direct contact with Oscar, Bram and I made sure to be informed about his wellbeing, the terrible conditions he endured. It was a form of penance … How pathetic of us, I thought, as I listened to Ellen. How selfish.

'The doctor who attended him at the Hotel D'Alsace had a surgeon operate – a mastoidectomy or some such procedure. Positively ghastly.' She gave a tremulous sigh. 'It didn't work. Oscar was in agony and eventually developed meningitis or some such disease. Reginald says that's what killed him.'

I could scarce bear to hear any more, but I must. For Oscar. For Bram. God, how would he take the news? He'd wanted to go to Paris, see Oscar, give him whatever money we could spare. But with sentiment still against Oscar, I'd persuaded him not to. What if he had? What if extra money had enabled Oscar to afford better doctors? Better care?

'When did he die?' I asked softly.

'The thirtieth of last month. I found out yesterday. I didn't know how to tell you, Lemon. I know what Oscar meant to you.'

I stood up swiftly and went to the window. '*Means*, Ellen. *Means*. His death doesn't change how I feel about him.' Only about myself.

Ellen joined me at the window. I couldn't speak. I didn't have the words.

'Reginald said Oscar converted to Rome before he died.'

I swallowed a sob. Ellen was one of the few who knew about my visits to the Catholic chapel and my intention to convert. Strangely, this detail gave me comfort. I thought of the gold cross he'd given me. I touched my

breast and sent a swift prayer for Oscar's soul heavenward. Rain began to fall. Slow at first, it soon teemed, hammering the window, punishing the house. Presently, the park opposite was obscured by a thick curtain of water.

'The news will take a while to reach the British press,' Ellen went on. 'There's been some confusion over his death certificate and the burial. His alias, you see.'

Oscar had been using the name Sebastian Melmoth – a combination of the saint, and the title of his great-uncle's gothic novel. Well, Melmoth would wander no more.

'Reginald says the funeral, which Bosie paid for —'

I scoffed. As if that compensated for everything else that man had done.

'A quiet affair. About twenty attended.'

I recalled the opening night of *The Importance of Being Earnest*. The thunderous applause, the acclaim for Oscar – hundreds and hundreds of people. In death, a mere twenty.

We stood in silence, staring into the rain.

'Oscar once told me,' I began faintly, 'that one day, he'd be poet, a writer, or even a dramatist. Somehow or other, he swore, he'd be famous.' Words began to break apart, lose their form. I struggled to piece them back together. 'And … if he couldn't be famous, he … he said …' Ellen pulled me against her. 'I'll … I'll be notorious.' My eyes swam, my throat constricted.

'He had his wish, Lemon,' she whispered against my hair. 'He had his wish.'



Was it strange that Oscar's death somehow brought Bram and me closer? In our own very different ways, we'd both loved the man. For Bram, it was a love borne out of respect for Oscar's talent, their shared heritage – Dublin boys, Trinity College, Irishmen in London, writers, their passion for theatre, and maybe, I liked to think, their affection for me.

Foolishly, unrealistically, I'd hung on to the crazy idea that fate would draw Oscar and me back together. I didn't know how or why, but I'd always felt that as star-crossed lovers, we'd reunite and confess our feelings,

acknowledge that somewhere along the path of life, we'd taken a wrong turn.

That would never happen. Oscar was gone. My Poor O was no more.

I scarce remember Christmas that year, let alone lurching into the new one. Noel tried to jolly us out of our grief, before leaving us to wallow in it. I spent days collecting all Oscar had ever written or sent me – a signed copy of his fairytales, *The Happy Prince*, his translation of *Salome*. Every letter and note. Bram gathered all the works of Oscar's he had and placed them on a shelf where he could see them as he toiled. When Bram went to the theatre, I'd pull them out and sit in Bram's study, reading. Thinking.

Bram and I drifted through the days and weeks, occasionally colliding, sitting in respectful silences when together, filled with unspoken reminiscences. Bram would sometimes reach for my hand and give it a tender squeeze. My fingers would tarry on his shoulder when I took tea to his study or peered to see what he was scribbling in his journals. Whenever we parted, we would embrace, remaining in each other's arms just a little longer. It was as if we were giving ourselves permission to grieve and absorb each other's pain – the pain of lost love, the wound Oscar's absence left, of a terrible guilt but, most of all, if I am being entirely honest, relief.

Though it was never spoken between us, there was a sense of emancipation with Oscar's death and the cessation of the scandal surrounding him and his associates. Perhaps our secret would be safe.

We would be safe.

As if to mock my shallowness, my spectre began to appear more frequently, taking on something of the mien of Poor O. Not as I last saw him in the courtroom, swollen with profligacy, or, as he'd been reported later, scabrous, thin, with gold and white dentures and hollow eyes. But as he'd been the night he entered the Lyceum and given that wonderful paean to Ellen as Portia – distinguished, cloaked, with a wicked twinkle in those hooded eyes.

I didn't acknowledge the spirit openly, but stole many glances, drinking in the splendid presence and the memories it evoked. Only when the apparition (or whatever godforsaken being it was) sensed my awareness, he would metamorphose into his regular form, the skin becoming grey, the eyes blood-red, the hands attenuated and covered in hair. Finally, the teeth

would transform into glistening vampiric fangs and gnash in my direction, threatening to sink into my flesh.



PART SIX

1902 to 1912

Out, out brief candle

… never have I seen, nor do I expect to see, such absorption of one man's life in the life of another. If Bram's body had its rightful resting place it would be at Irving's feet …

Hall Caine's obituary for Bram Stoker, *Daily Telegraph*, 24 April 1912

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

London, 1902

18 St Leonard's Terrace
Chelsea
24th August

Dearest Phil,
Thank you for your chatty letter and the beautiful shawl. The gift was unexpected and so thoughtful of you. I find it a great comfort. The brief summer has given a last gasp, blown away by frigid winds that blatter the windows and stir the embers in the hearth. As I write, the parlour maid, Louisa (she's the one with the sprinkling of freckles and eyelashes that would be the envy of a dairy cow), is frantically trying to remove coal dust from the furniture. A lost cause at the best of times.

You asked what I was up to. Well, between visits to the theatre, an exhibition at the newly opened Leicester Gallery, dinner with friends, listening to Bram give lectures and after-dinner speeches (he's very popular), and my Sunday salons, in memory of Bram's mammy I've been raising money for the Royal Association in Aid of the Deaf and Dumb. I'm currently enjoying another of our friend Mr Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes, *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. Bram will read it too (when he has time), especially since Arthur sent such a lovely note regarding his latest novel, *The Mystery of the Sea*. I'm glad you and John enjoyed it; please feel free to pass it around the family. It's very different from *Miss Betty* or *Dracula*, isn't it? Quite the rollicking adventure with its buried treasure and secret codes. It was the use of codes Arthur particularly liked. Bram based the one in the book on a cipher used by Francis Bacon. The things one learns when you spend every spare moment (!) in the British Library or museum. Instead of being delighted by Arthur's praise, Bram became quite

despondent as anything with the name Conan Doyle attached serves to remind him of Henry's stubborn refusal to accept a play from the man. Turns out, the play Arthur intended for the Lyceum a couple of years ago has been an outrageous success in America. It's decisions like that which confirm Henry is losing touch (and has been for some time) – not that Bram is ready to admit it. It's quite depressing, really.

Frankly, Phil, these days melancholy rises to envelop me like a winter's brume the Thames. Over the last year or two, we've been beset by blows that would fell a much sturdier being. First it was Oscar dying (I still miss him so), followed by those trite and unkind obituaries, especially in *The Times*. Thank God Lady Jane wasn't alive to read them. Then, as if it wasn't enough, there was the death of our glorious queen. Imagine Bertie, who used to crook his finger at Lillie Langtry, drink until he tumbled over, argue over the roll of dice, is now King Edward VII.

Bram still has that terrible limp you commented upon when you saw him at his mother's funeral. The scar left from the trunk that struck him during that last Atlantic crossing is like a war wound. I doubt he'll ever walk properly again. But he did recover from the pneumonia he contracted, thank you for asking.

Now, what letter from me would be complete without a line or two devoted to Sir Henry. I know my complaints about the man must be tiresome, but Bram's distress as the fracture in their relationship widens is difficult to witness. I cannot discuss it with him anymore, and the Gilberts simply agree with me (they've always detested Henry); Ellen is compromised by having loved him and though she and Henry are no longer together (did I tell you? Not only will she be leaving the Lyceum Company, but Henry has a new amour), I don't feel right carping about him to her (I know it hasn't stopped me in the past, but she's also very despondent at present). So, I'm afraid it's you or no-one and you've always been such a good listener – especially by letter.

Just over a month ago, Sir Henry gave his final performance at the Lyceum, a matinee of *The Merchant of Venice*, playing Shylock. Ellen was Portia. As they took their bows (it was the thousandth performance – can you believe that? Bram had seen every single one) the applause was deafening. After the audience left and the company remained, hugging, crying, reliving stories from the past, an army of workers moved in and following orders from Bram, commenced dismantling the theatre. Unable to

watch, I removed with Ellen to her dressing room, which was virtually empty. We sat together, staring at our reflections in the mirror, sipping champagne that Harry Loveday had thoughtfully placed in the room, listening to Bram's booming voice echoing from the stage. For all the theatre held mixed memories for me, for Ellen and, of course, Bram, it also represented almost twenty-five years of dedication, hard work, glory and failures. It was a huge part of our lives. The fact the curtain had come down due to Henry's foolish business decisions (honestly, that consortium!), it's his total disregard for Bram's advice that's equal parts infuriating and frustrating.

Ellen hadn't even finished her drink when she broke down. Yes, me too, mainly because of the realisation that though the theatre has shut its doors, Bram was still as committed to Sir Henry as the day he agreed to become his acting manager.

As if to prove me right, not only will there be a provincial tour in a couple of months, but Sir Henry had Bram book the Theatre Royal for an entire season next year. The play will be *Dante* and, in usual Sir Henry fashion, a spectacle. Bram said the budget was already in excess of twelve thousand pounds! I'm convinced Sir Henry thinks he'll be able to magic the funds or find a cave of thieves and command 'open sesame'. Then, to top it all off, Sir Henry intends to tour *Dante* – with all the expensive sets and lighting, plus cast, around America. Bram will be gone from October to March and, before you ask, I've no intention of accompanying him. Expect to see me then.

God, Phil, I can only imagine how exhausted Bram will be after that, in addition to finding someone to replace Ellen, who has signed a contract with Beerbohm Tree, then this grand American venture. There's talk of visiting thirty-three cities in five months. Thirty-three! When I said to Bram, Sir Henry is mad, Bram replied, 'Not mad, he just wants to leave a legacy.' I think leaving his profession with his health intact would be a better one, don't you? The man is ailing, and it's apparent to all.

It's not only Sir Henry whose health is in question. Bram has recently lost weight for no explicable reason (other than overwork). On top of all his commitments, he's been writing articles for newspapers, short stories, tracts, speeches, answering so many letters I cannot begin to tell you, and working on another novel. A person just needs to cry 'Help me, Bram!' Or 'Some advice, please, Bram!' and my husband drops everything and does

all in his power for whoever. He's also developed some painful sores on his arms.

The good news is that with the Lyceum shut for the rest of summer, Bram has returned to his favourite place: Cruden Bay in Scotland – alone this time. He's abandoned our regular haunt at the Kilmarnock Arms and is staying in nearby Whinnyfold. He may call it a holiday, but it's not. All our holidays, such as they are, end up becoming about work of one kind or another. Why, during our last sojourn, at St Ives, I rarely saw him as he was finishing *Mystery of the Sea*. He tells me his next novel will be called *The Jewel of the Seven Stars*. Such an intriguing title, don't you think? It never ceases to amaze me what comes out of my husband's head. Those looking for another *Dracula* might be disappointed. Did I mention that *Dracula* is now in its sixth reprint?

Let me tell you about Noel. He's now a fully-fledged accountant (he would have told you when you saw him at Charlotte's funeral?), living in London and recently brought home a most delightful girl for us to meet, Neelie Sweeting. Sweet by name and nature, and Noel is clearly smitten. Young love. Was that us once, Phil?

What I have with Bram may not be the kind of love I thought I longed for, the troubled, passionate, Cathy-Heathcliffe doomed-but-forever sort. (Remember how one of us would pretend to see her ghost at the window and scare the bejesus out of the other?) Over the years, I've come to appreciate that love comes in many guises, and I find that one tended like a garden, grown from small seeds to flower gently, suits me. Hot fires can burn one to ash and rarely rekindle once they're doused. What's your preference? Fierce and burning? Or love that flourishes over time?

I think when love, in any form, is returned, there's something secure and enduring about it.

On that final note, please, give my love to the family. Oh, and tell the girls I received their list of requests for various items from Harrods. I'll do my best between now and my next visit to be a good aunt and fulfil them.

Love always,

Your Florrie.

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

London, 1905

The weather was unusually warm for October. Bram was in the provinces again, managing the Lyceum company's latest tour. Determined to get me out of the house, Gilbert had invited me for a drive in the country in his new Rolls-Royce motor car. By the time he delivered me home, I was bone-tired. All that fresh air and bucolic scenery was incredibly wearying. My head had not long hit the pillow when a pounding on the front door woke me.

Before I'd even reached the top of the stairs, Bram's younger brother Tom came bounding up them. Not quite as tall as Bram, he was a slender man, with kind, deep-set eyes and a marvellous moustache waxed into curled ends. After he retired from the Indian Civil Service a few years ago, he and his wife Enid had moved close by.

'Tom!' I exclaimed, clutching my nightgown, staring at his anxious face as Ada, our maid for the last year, frantically lit some lamps.

I ushered him towards the drawing room, carrying a lamp with me. 'What brings you here at this hour?' I glanced at the clock. It was after two. 'Oh, God,' I said, hand flying to my mouth. 'Bram. Is he alright?'

'He's in good health.' Tom waited until Ada left the room. I knew she was listening at the door.

'What is it? Are *you* alright? Enid?'

'I'm fine, Florrie. Enid too. But I'm afraid I've some very bad news.'

My heart was thudding painfully. 'Is it Phil? James? Catherine?' I didn't stop to wonder why Tom might know anything about my siblings.

Tom forced me to sit down. 'It's not them.'

'Then who?'

‘It’s Henry Irving,’ said Tom.

‘Henry? But why —?’

‘I’m afraid he’s dead.’

I fell back in the chair as if struck.

‘How?’ I asked, trying to gather my scattered thoughts.

‘He collapsed —’

‘No,’ I waved my hands. ‘How do *you* know?’

‘Bram telegraphed and asked me to come and tell you. He didn’t want you to read it in the morning papers. He wanted someone to be with you when you learned …’

I sucked in my breath. Even when faced with such a catastrophic loss, Bram thought of others. And this time, he thought of *me*.

Tom knelt on the floor by my side.

‘*Now* give me details,’ I whispered. ‘I know he’s been very ill. Bram’s been most concerned.’

Tom nodded. ‘My understanding is Sir Henry collapsed in the foyer of the Midland Hotel in Bradford. After the performance —’

‘Of course after.’ I gave a dry laugh. Henry was playing Beckett, a role he loved.

‘He didn’t make it to his room. Bram hadn’t long left him and was called back. He found him in his valet’s arms, already dead.’

‘Poor Bram.’ I prayed they parted well, despite everything that had happened between them of late, the disagreements, the recriminations over the failure of *Dante* in America, the cancellation of the next American tour, Henry’s growing irascibility as his health worsened, his refusal to slow down.

I began to rise. ‘I must go to him.’

Tom gently forced me back down. ‘Bram knew you’d want to but said to assure you he’ll be home as soon as he’s made the necessary arrangements. He asked that you remain in London.’ Tom patted my knee and stood. He went to the bureau and poured us both a whisky, returning with full glasses, one of which he pressed into my hands. Grateful, I drank.

The sounds of the streets were suddenly loud, intrusive. A series of shouts from somewhere nearby; the clop of horses abroad late; the mournful dirge of a tugboat horn. I could hear Ada and Maria whispering in the hall. The glow of a streetlamp shone through the window, falling on a folded

magazine. From where I sat, I could see the article. It was one Bram wrote about Ellen.

Oh, Ellen. She and Henry may not be together anymore, but this would break her. If I couldn't go to Bram, I could go to Ellen. I made to stand again, then took in the darkness, the shadows. I would go in the morning. She would blame herself, reasoning that if she hadn't left Henry, this wouldn't have happened.

I sat sipping the whisky, examining my feelings about 'the Chief' who had dominated our lives and controlled my husband for so damn long. Every decision we'd made – appointments, trips, dinners, invitations, openings, every holiday we'd taken, every separation we'd endured, even our wedding – had all been timetabled around Sir Henry and his needs. I'd carried my burning anger at his power over our lives like an unwanted child. And now he was gone.

Out, out, brief candle.

Henry had haunted our existence when alive. Would it be any different now he was gone? Would Bram finally be free? Would he be able to become the man I'd always hoped? Devote time to his writing?

I drank in silence, lost in thought, the clock ticking. Did Henry know he was dying? What was he thinking about in his last hours, minutes?

'I know you'll be concerned about what Bram will do now Henry's dead,' said Tom, interrupting my musings. 'I've no doubt he'll be able to pick up work with another theatre company. With all his experience, they'll be clamouring for him.'

I stared at Tom in first bewilderment, then horror. '*Another* theatre company? Oh, Tom, Bram won't want to do that. Not again. Not anymore.'

'Why ever not?' He gave a little huff of disbelief. 'It's what he's good at. It brings in a decent wage.' He looked around the room, at the Whistler on the wall (a gift from James), the other fine paintings, tapestries, the lovely ornaments, rugs and furniture. Yes, Bram's wages had paid for all this and more, I thought, plucking at my silk robe.

'Because Bram's a *writer*,' I said more earnestly than I intended. 'He wants to write books. He does write them. Now he can devote time to that and make his name in the literary world.'

Tom set down his glass and began to chuckle. Then, he saw the look on my face.

‘You’re serious? *That’s* how Bram wants to make a living? I always thought of it as a … pastime.’

Tears of indignation began to build. I blinked them back. I couldn’t credit his brother had laughed.

‘*Pastime?* It’s a great deal more than that, Tom. It’s what he’s always wanted to do. Part of the reason we came to London.’ Another promise Henry had broken, to introduce Bram to publishers.

Tom stared at me incredulously. ‘Really? Then I’m afraid he’s going to have to get a damn sight better at it.’

I sniffed. ‘What do you mean?’

‘Come on, Florrie, you’re a practical woman. Bram may be outstanding at many things, but when it comes to penning novels, his efforts haven’t set the world on fire, have they? I mean, when I mention my brother is Bram Stoker, folk don’t say, “‘Oh, you mean the author?” They always say, “Oh, Henry Irving’s man”, or “Henry Irving’s secretary”. Some even refer to him as “Irving’s shadow”. Don’t look so surprised. Good God, he’s been at the man’s beck and call for twenty-seven years.’

I’d accused Bram of the very same. What made me despondent was that other people shared the same view. But then, hadn’t they always?

I thought of the books Bram had written – none of them had sold as well as he’d hoped. Even *Dracula*, though it continued to sell, only brought a small amount of royalties each year.

Tom was right. I wanted to deny it, but I couldn’t. No-one thought of Bram Stoker as an author, any more than they thought of him as a lawyer, yet he was that too – a barrister, no less.

‘It’s only because he’s been so busy helping others find success,’ I said defensively, ‘helping them realise their dreams, that he didn’t have time to spend on his own. Now he’s freed from any obligation to Henry, he will. You’ll see.’

‘Well, I hope you’re right, Florrie,’ said Tom amiably, finishing his drink and standing. ‘I really do, because one thing I’ve learned about being a husband is that sometimes you must forgo your lofty ambitions for the sake of your family. Dreams don’t pay the rent.’

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

London, 1905 to 1906

Henry's funeral took place on 20 October 1905. It was a sombre yet grand affair. Thousands of mourners lined the streets from Baroness Burdett-Coutts's house to Westminster Abbey. Ellen and Arthur Conan Doyle, along with the Prince and Princess of Wales, whom the king and queen sent as their representatives, attended. So did Bram and I. But that was the extent of our involvement. The moment Sir Henry died, his family and the executors of his will moved swiftly to ensure Bram had no say in the funeral arrangements or in any of Henry's affairs going forward. Henry Irving's devoted acting manager and supposed great friend, Mr Bram Stoker, was effectively frozen out.

It wasn't only Henry's family who excluded Bram, but the man himself. Despite all Bram had done for him, there was no mention of him in the will. Not a thank you, not even a small token of appreciation. It was as if Bram had never been a part of his life. Neither was anything bequeathed to Harry Loveday, and only a small annuity to his devoted valet, Walter Collinson.

While friends sought to comprehend such a huge oversight, I wasn't surprised. Henry had never given Bram much consideration – look at his business decisions over the last years. Ellen blamed Henry's sons, who were anti-Irish. Gilbert believed that Florence Irving held Bram and Harry Loveday responsible for barring her from the inner circle at the Lyceum (no, I told him, she'd managed that all by herself) and worked hard now to ensure Bram was punished.

All that may have been true, but their reasoning neither fully explained Henry's choices nor exonerated him. The only redeeming moment was when I learned Lady Irving didn't receive anything either.

It was hard not to be chewed up with bitterness.

Noel would pop by every other day, often bringing Neelie with him. Hall travelled from his home on the Isle of Man and stayed just over a week. To hear laughter coming from Bram's study late at night was such a restorative. Hall and I would talk when Bram was otherwise busy, both of us worried about the impact of Henry's death.

'Given time, I've no doubt Bram will recover,' said Hall, unconvincingly.

While I hoped Henry's demise would present opportunities for Bram, the pragmatic part of me was concerned how he'd make a living. The piecemeal writing, speaking engagements, his novels – they weren't enough to support a household. When I said something to Hall, he tried to reassure me.

'Bram will be inundated with offers, you wait and see.'

I threw up my hands and looked purposely around the room, towards the door, at the empty chairs. 'It's been weeks, Hall. Someone is yet to proposition him.'

'People are just allowing him space to grieve,' replied Hall. 'That's all.'

'Grief doesn't pay the bills,' I said wryly, paraphrasing Bram's brother Tom.

Whereas I thought our life would be easier with Henry Irving gone, in the following months he became a burden we couldn't shift. Bram spiralled into a black place, reliving the recent failures of the company he'd helped steer, instead of the years of joyous successes. I lost my husband to melancholy and didn't know how to summon him back.

Then, as if a switch had been flicked, before we left for Dublin in December, he began to write another book.

At first, I was delighted. I wrote to Hall, '*At last, my husband is shedding the pall of grief that enveloped him and is wielding his pen again*.'

One night, Bram revealed to me what he was working on. We were in his study. That very day, he'd attended the auction of Henry Irving's possessions. Denied anything in the will, he was determined to own something, even if it meant purchasing a memento. If this was what Bram needed, then so be it.

I stared at what he'd bid for – a portrait drawn by Bernard Partridge three months before Henry died. In it, Henry was smiling. There was also one of the great actor Edmund Kean that used to hang in the Beefsteak

Room, and something resembling a cast of a face or body part. It was hard to see, covered as it was by some loose pages.

Uncharacteristically, the study was in disarray; Bram had pulled books and manuscripts from the shelves and stacked them on the desk and upon the floor. Atop a pile of his diaries, many with notes sticking out of the pages, was the magnifying glass he was starting to use as his eyesight began to deteriorate.

Bram himself looked … frayed. Frayed and timeworn. The lines of his face were emphasised in the dim light of the lamp. His hair needed a good brush, and I could see he'd been biting his nails. When had he commenced that frightful habit? There was a musty, stale smell in the air. At first, I attributed it to the purchased items, before it occurred to me that it arose from Bram.

'As I was saying, I'm putting aside my current novel, *Lady Athelyn*, to work on a new project.'

'Oh? What's that?'

Bram gave a small smile of … triumph? Pride? 'While other people, like that good-for-nothing Austin Brereton, have written biographies of Henry —'

My heart began to tilt precariously. We knew the awful Austin was writing a second book about Henry. There was still money to be made from the actor and those keen to exploit even the weakest of associations. The newspapers had been filled with anecdotes, poems, personal thoughts and more about the knight. Each one had galled Bram and contributed to his black mood.

'No-one has my insight, the access I had to Henry's thoughts, the impact he had not only on the people he met, but the places he went as well: the provinces, Ireland, America, Canada. The influence he had on British theatre.'

'There are many who would say the same of you, dear,' I managed as coolly as I could, even while my chest felt it was going to fly open and my heart fall out.

'Maybe,' conceded Bram. 'But it's what I'll say about him in *my* book that will really count.'

'You're writing a book.' My soul started to shrink. 'About Henry.'

'I'm going to call it *Personal Reminiscences of Henry Irving*.'

I couldn't move.

'It will be my way of honouring a great man,' continued Bram, completely unaware of the effect of this revelation. 'A great friend.' His voice began to break. 'Showing a side of him the world never saw from the person who knew him best.'

Hot anger coursed through my chest and down my arms. I half expected to raise my palms and find imprints burned into the surface of the desk where they rested.

'Have you nothing to say, Florrie?' he asked gently.

Oh, I had plenty. I was furious that now, when Bram had the chance to break free of whatever damn spell that man had cast over him, he refused to try. I was livid that even in death, Henry Irving wouldn't let Bram go. Let *us* go.

But mostly, I was furious with myself for not predicting this; that I hadn't steered Bram in a different direction. Instead, I'd left him alone to mourn in his own way, knowing that when he emerged, I'd be there for him.

Bram looked so pleased with his decision, so ignorant of the storm brewing inside me. I should have known that Bram would always, always, serve Henry's interests before his own.

I couldn't bear to look at him; to be in the same room. I turned and wrenched the door open.

'Florrie?' cried Bram. 'What is it? What have I done?'

I paused but didn't turn around. I'd been right all along; my husband was incapable of change. 'Nothing, Bram,' I said steadily. 'You haven't done a single damn thing.'



Less than a year later, between giving speeches, soliciting interviews with other writers and politicians to be published in the newspapers, visiting the Harland and Wolff shipyard in Belfast for an article about a large ocean liner they'd been commissioned to build, and a few weeks at Cruden Bay to go over the proofs, Bram's *Reminiscences* was published in two volumes.

For the year it took him to complete, I did whatever was in my power to avoid being in his company. Did that make me a poor wife and friend? Maybe. But sharing a house while he worked on the book was hard enough.

A day didn't pass without Henry's name being spoken, memories of his performances recounted, anecdotes of the time Henry did this, said this, asked for that. Though Ellen, the Gilberts and some of my closest friends understood that hearing his name was anathema to me, they couldn't avoid being drawn into the conversations. Why, even my Sunday salons became dedicated to Henry for a while.

Noel would visit and together we made a pact never to say the Irving name in each other's company. Out of everyone, Noel felt the same antipathy as me.

'That man stole my father from me,' he said.

Yes, I'd think. But your father let him.

I can always have another son. What I cannot have is another Henry Irving.

When the two volumes were published, we received gratis copies. Bram happened to be meeting with an American opera singer, David Bispham, with a view to becoming his business manager, when they were delivered. I wasn't entirely happy about the prospect of him working in theatre again, especially on a musical production that hadn't been proven, *The Vicar of Wakefield*. But, without a regular wage, our situation was becoming desperate. Bram needed to take whatever work came his way.

Ada carried the box of books into Bram's study, and I cleared a space on the desk. About to follow her out, I changed my mind and, waiting until I heard her descend to the kitchen, closed the door and, as carefully as I could, opened it.

The books were hardbound in red cloth, with the title and a profile of Henry embossed in gold on the cover. Rather childishly, I held one up to his portrait.

'This is all about you, sir. Except this is the last time you pull his strings. You're dead, your kingdom has been sold, and all your princes, lords and ladies vanquished. Never again will my husband do your bidding.'

Around me, the spines of Bram's library glared, as if they knew what I really wished to do with their new recruits. Restored to its usual tidiness, the study looked ready to welcome its regular occupant. I took no comfort in that. Not even its discernibly Bram smell of ambergris, cigars and whisky.

I was about to fling the book back into the box when curiosity overcame me. Instead, I sank into the armchair near the hearth and, first listening carefully lest anyone approach, opened the cover and turned to the table of contents.

Dear God, Bram had covered Henry's life from his first impression of him as Captain Absolute way back in 1867. I began to flick through the pages. There was so much detail, including, I noted as I reached for Volume Two, lists of guests who attended the Beefsteak dinners. It was an impressive roll call of royalty, literary worthies, politicians, adventurers, scientists, actresses and so much more. Why, even Mr Shaw was there, the man who disliked Henry so much, he refused to come to the funeral. Bram had given him the middle initial F instead of B. No doubt, deliberate; as was the omission of one name.

Though I searched, there was no mention of Oscar, one of the most celebrated guests at the dinners. In fact, as far as my cursory look allowed, Oscar appeared nowhere.

As I was flicking through, a particular line arrested my attention.

Looking back, wrote Bram, *I cannot honestly find any moment in my life when I failed him, or when I put myself forward in any way*.

I snapped the book shut. What kind of man admits to such a thing? Not just to himself, but the entire world? It confirmed him as the servant he'd been. Like Renfield in *Dracula*, suborned to his master's will.

Bram had written a hagiography of a man who cared nothing for him, admitting openly he never advanced himself, only served, while a real friend, a dear, beloved friend with whom we shared so much, was erased.

I glared at Henry's portrait. 'Happy now?' I scowled.

It was most definitely smirking. Even my husband's memories had been sucked dry by this man so he might live beyond the grave.

I marched up to the painting.

'You can't have him,' I snarled, daring him to step out of the frame and contradict me. Then I remembered a line from *Dracula*: '*This man belongs to me!*' I spat, and stormed out, slamming the door.

Truth was, Bram didn't belong to me. These two volumes, Bram's own words, proved what everyone knew: my husband always had been, and still remained, the property of someone else.



When the reviews came in, apart from one or two that appreciated the depth and breadth of Bram's work, they confirmed my worst fears. Described as 'disappointing', as not being critical enough, the book didn't do anything to further Bram's literary reputation.

Still, it sold well and kept the debtors from the door for a time, especially when, on the back of *Reminiscences*, Bram was invited to speak to various clubs and groups – speaking about Henry.

I didn't accompany him.

When he finally came home after delivering yet another talk, I was at a gallery function. When I returned around ten in the evening, and Maria helped me undress, I didn't even ask after him. I knew he was back because his portmanteau was in the hallway and a light beamed beneath the study door.

Sensing my mood, Maria didn't mention 'the master' either. I climbed into bed, reading when I was unable to sleep. I was halfway through *The Scarlet Pimpernel*. I'd seen the play a couple of years earlier at the New Theatre and been thoroughly captivated. Though the book was excellent, not even the adventures of Lord Percy and his wife could keep my mind from wandering. I kept thinking about Bram, about how I could excise the canker that was Henry Irving from our lives once and for all.

What would it take? The morning gave an answer.

There was a scream, running feet, then my door flung open.

'Mrs S, Mrs S!' cried Ada from the doorway. 'Dear Lord in heaven! Come quick. Quick!'

'What's wrong?' I threw back the covers, pushed my feet into slippers, reached for my gown. 'Tell me.' Ada was shaking like a trapped coney.

'Oh, Mrs S,' she sobbed. She tried to speak but gulped air instead.

'What is it?' I said, firmly.

'It's the master.' She swallowed, took a breath and stared at me with panicked eyes. 'He's dead!'

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

London and Deal, 1906

I stumbled into the frigid corridor, past Bram's bedroom, to find Maria and Louisa in the doorway of his study, crying and wringing their hands.

With a gelid heart, I pushed between them. On the floor, lying alongside the desk, was Bram. Scattered around him were copies of *Personal Reminiscences of Henry Irving*.

His eyes were shut, his cheeks colourless. I dropped to my knees beside him, scanning his body swiftly, my hands drifting above, not knowing what to do, where or even if I should touch him. He was still in his suit. His tie had been loosened, his waistcoat partially undone, but it was evident he'd never gone to bed. He must have been in here all night. If only I'd put aside my stubborn animosity, come to his study, welcomed him home.

I lowered my head and shut my eyes, forcing back the welling tears, sending a silent prayer for forgiveness to the Lord. While He may forgive me, I doubted I could ever forgive myself.

I opened my eyes and, with trembling fingers, reached out and stroked his cheek. I drew my hand back with a gasp. 'He's warm!'

That wasn't entirely true. He was very cold, but as soon as I realised there was life in him, I began to loosen his collar, push his hair from his face. I felt the ever-so-slow rise and fall of his chest.

'Bram?' I whispered. Then, louder, 'Bram?'

His senses were shut. But he was alive.

Overwhelming relief flooded me, followed by a strange calmness. I'd been given a reprieve of sorts. Nevertheless, something was terribly wrong.

'Quick, Ada,' I snapped, glancing towards the swollen-eyed maid. 'Cease your wailing. Light the fire.' Ada blinked at me in confusion, then at

Maria, who flapped her hands at her.

‘You heard the missus. Do what you’re told.’

‘Maria,’ I said, picking up one of Bram’s limp hands and holding it tightly. ‘Fetch Dr George and Mr Tom at once.’

‘He’s not dead?’ She bit back a sob.

‘Not yet,’ I said, my voice breaking. The urge to scream and beat my chest was strong. ‘Do as I bid.’

She didn’t need to be told again.

‘Louisa.’ I didn’t even look at her. ‘Help me get him closer to the hearth.’ Reluctantly, Louisa came forward.

I rudely shoved the books out of the way and lifted one leg. Louisa took the other and we pulled. Once Bram was atop the rug in front of the fire, I grabbed the blanket draped over the armchair and covered him. I reached for his coat, which was flung across his chair, folded it and pushed it under his head. He was so ashen-faced, so gaunt-looking. This hadn’t happened overnight. How had I not seen this before?

Bram was a sick man.

‘Bram,’ I said softly, kneeling over him so my lips were close to his ear. ‘I’m here, my dear. I’m here. George and Tom are on their way. All will be well, I promise.’

As my tears fell onto his cheek and ran down his neck, I prayed. *Don’t let him die, please, Lord, don’t let him die*. The grip his spirit had upon the world felt tenuous. How long I knelt there, willing him to open his eyes, to speak, I’m uncertain. It wasn’t until I heard familiar voices downstairs and then two faces I’d never been happier to see enter the room – George, followed by Tom – that normal time was restored.

Tom helped me to my feet, gathering me in his arms, then tenderly placed me in the armchair. I’d begun to shake uncontrollably. My teeth were chattering, my hands and legs behaving as if they belonged to someone else. I couldn’t tear my eyes away from what George was doing, but it was as though I watched from a different planet. Everyone and everything seemed far, far away.

George checked Bram’s pulse then his breathing. The brothers spoke quietly, opening his shirt, wrapping him in the blanket, ordering a variety of spirits and medicine. Another blanket was fetched and put around my shoulders, a warm drink shoved into my hands.

‘What’s wrong with him, George?’ I asked once he’d finished another whispered conference with his brother. ‘Will he be alright?’

A frown furrowed Tom’s usually serene brow and his cheeks were suspiciously wet. George rose from Bram’s side, wiping his hands on a huge white handkerchief. ‘Not sure yet,’ said George. ‘I’ll have to conduct a few more tests to be certain.’

‘Will he be alright?’ I insisted. ‘Will he live?’

George exchanged a long look with Tom then, squatting so his face was level with mine.

‘He’ll live, Florrie.’ He rested a hand on my knee. ‘But whether he’ll be alright is in God’s hands.’

I stifled a moan. ‘What do I do?’

‘Pray,’ said Tom.

And so I did.

After some time, another doctor and his assistant arrived. Bram was carefully lifted and carried into his bedroom. Ada began to pick up the books, stacking them on Bram’s desk. As far as I was concerned, it was no coincidence Bram had a turn whilst revisiting his time with Henry Irving.

I went to follow, but George prevented me. ‘Florrie.’ His tone was so kind, his eyes too. ‘You can do nothing for now. Go, make yourself presentable, eat something. Then, join us. I hope to have some answers by then.’

I nodded. ‘Alright. Thank you.’

‘And, Florrie —’

I paused near the doorway. George held a copy of *Reminiscences*, turning it over in his hand. ‘If Bram recovers, we’re going to need to discuss his work practices. Seems not even Irving’s death has slowed him down.’

If. Such a small word to carry so much portent.

‘No,’ I sighed. ‘Just almost killed him.’



‘How are you feeling today?’

I carefully slid the tray I’d taken from the maid onto the table in the conservatory. Bram was seated in a large cushioned chair he’d appropriated

the moment we arrived at George's country house in Deal. He was dressed in his favourite jacket and waistcoat, a tartan blanket tucked around his thighs. Several books competed for space on the smaller table beside him, as did newspapers. It was a cold autumn day, though the sun shining through the glass was very pleasant and provided excellent light for reading. The magnifying glass Bram required lay dormant in his lap.

Being an invalid didn't suit him. He resented being shut away and watching the world through a window instead of being out in it. It reminded him too much of his childhood. There were days he chose to punish those he felt were responsible for his confinement. Usually by pretending he didn't hear us.

Today was one of those days.

I chatted lightly about the progress on the Piccadilly line of the Underground (something that had interested Bram in the past) and told him that the Gilberts had written to say they'd paid a visit to the first crematorium in London – Golders Green (being fascinated with the macabre, I felt sure Bram would comment). When he didn't, I poured him a cup of tea and, still talking, sat beside him. I cast a sideways glance as he drank. He didn't like anyone looking lest his hands trembled too much, or he spilled the liquid. I was pleased to note he did neither.

Bram returned the cup to its saucer with nary a clatter and released a long, heartfelt sigh. 'The cook here knows how to brew tea, does she not?' he said.

'She does,' I agreed. Then, as was our usual practice, I picked up one of the unread newspapers and proceeded to share its contents with him.

We'd been at Fairlight Lawn for over two weeks now, guests of George and Agnes and their brood of mostly well-behaved children. The eldest were already away at school, while the three youngest relied on a governess, a rather frivolous woman named Minna. Although it was initially a relief to be away from London and reminders of Bram's collapse, I was starting to miss my friends, and Mary, Ada and Louisa (Maria had come with us), and the bustle and chaos of London. But in consultation with George, we'd agreed upon four weeks' rest in the country. I was secretly glad we'd only ten or so days remaining of this medical exile. I suspected Bram felt the same. Anyway, he'd work to return to – *The Vicar of Wakefield* to stage. The American who hired Bram had been relentless in his messages, wanting to know when Bram would be well enough to return.

When George first diagnosed Bram with both Bright's disease (which was, I learned, an affliction of the kidneys) and a paralytic stroke, I feared for the future.

'What caused it?' I'd asked.

George had taken my hand (never a good sign). 'It's difficult to say exactly, but in Bram's case, it's likely been brought on because he works so damn hard. The man never stops. He'll have to now,' he added.

'Stop work?'

Suddenly, the life we'd enjoyed flashed before me and a new one rose: no more parties or Sunday afternoons, no more theatre, art shows, exhibitions, speeches, trips to Paris, Dublin or Scotland, or indeed a writing career for Bram. The line from John Donne's poem came to me, *In that the world's contracted thus*.

'At the very least,' said George, interrupting my nightmare, 'as I've said numerous times, he must slow down.'

Dismissing the memories, I said, 'You seem better today.'

'I am,' he smiled.

The palsy I feared was permanent and which made his hands shake so he couldn't hold a pen or grip a knife, was almost gone. His speech, initially slow and slurred, was improving.

I handed him the two letters that had arrived in the morning post. They were from Hall and Ellen. They'd also written to me. Many of our friends were doing that, corresponding with each of us separately, determined to only relay positive news to him, buck up his flagging spirits with wicked stories and funny anecdotes, anything to avoid asking after his health. Questions concerning that were my province, as were their worries for his prospects. Apprehensions I still shared, though not with my friends. It was hard to believe that after all these years of steady, well-paid employment, we'd so little in terms of savings.

There was only one person I blamed for both our change of fortune and Bram's stroke. Even from beyond, Henry Irving managed to control my husband, working him almost to death. I couldn't shake the idea that somehow, like a vampire, Henry would reappear and claim Bram.

I began to draw the curtains tightly at night, shut the windows in Bram's bedroom. I'd ensure a fire was lit in the grate, that the lamps were left burning to discourage any restless spirits. Not mine, however. He'd

followed me to Deal, lurking in corners, an expression on his benighted face I could almost mistake for sympathy. I wondered if he was there to offer the dubious comfort of the strangely familiar. Or was he here to reinforce that I couldn't escape him? Bram would watch my nocturnal preparations with a bemused expression.

'It's in case you call for me during the night, dear,' I'd explain weakly, 'and I have to come to you.'

Before I'd leave the room, I'd pray to the Lord to watch over my husband, help his broken body and spirit mend.

'Please, God,' I'd whisper, 'keep his immortal soul safe.'

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

Durham Place, 1907 to 1908

No longer able to afford the spacious house in St Leonard's, in the spring of 1907 we shifted to a smaller flat around the corner, 4 Durham Place. Its claim to fame was that Captain Bligh of the *Bounty* had once lived there. Our belongings were brought over by cart, and I supervised them being unloaded while Maria, Mary, Louisa and Ada bustled around unpacking. (Ada and Louisa were to leave us at the end of the month. We could no longer afford – nor did we need – four servants.)

Bram had gone back to work the moment we returned from Deal. When *The Vicar of Wakefield* closed a couple of months after it opened, no-one, least of all Bram, was surprised. Even so, it was a blow. Managing a theatre company had been Bram's main source of income for almost three decades. Who would take him after the failure of this production?

Kept awake at night worrying about how he was going to rescue us from our impecunious straits, Bram was up before dawn each day. Unable to do anything by halves, and ignoring his brother's advice, he threw himself into finding work. He applied for so many jobs, often dictating the letters to me just so they would be written quickly and make the morning's post. He published a book, started another, wrote some short stories, planned others, gave talks, accepted freelance work with the *Daily Telegraph*, interviewing our famous friends and acquaintances – including Gilbert, and Randolph Churchill's son, Winston. Ironically, young Winston, who was making a name for himself, only agreed to talk to Bram because we'd known his father and because Bram was 'the author of *Dracula*'.

Dracula. Of all the books Bram had written, it was this one that continued to make money for us; not much, but it was consistent. The Germans had recently bought the rights to a translation.

While it must have been a blow to Bram's ego to be interviewing some of those he'd helped find success, he took whatever work was offered and refused to accept that perhaps he should consider 'slowing down'.

'Don't say those words in my hearing again, Florrie,' he complained one evening. 'I'll slow down when I'm dead.'

'That's what worries me,' I said. He laughed and planted a kiss on my cheek before retreating to his study.

Though our residence had changed, the location hadn't. We were still in Chelsea, in the hub of things, and I soon resumed my Sunday salons with Bram's blessing. Though the guest list had shrunk, and the wine wasn't as fine a quality, the number of platters of food not quite as generous, and the room smaller, no-one complained. Our friends still attended, and we even welcomed a fading Mr Samuel Clemens one afternoon, who'd crossed the ocean to receive an honorary degree from Oxford.

Yet, I'd never felt so impotent, so feeble, so utterly dependent. Along with my husband, my currency was in decline, even though Noel, bless him, would always tell me how proud he was to escort his lovely mother anywhere.

Sons should say that kind of thing to their mothers, shouldn't they? It didn't mean anything. Likewise, I put little stock in Bram's pretty reassurances. It was his duty. And like most duties, he performed it well. We'd reached a stage in our lives where we could appreciate each other in ways we maybe hadn't before; build upon our strengths and ensure we kept our weaknesses securely hidden.



One Tuesday evening in mid-winter, as the snow fell thickly, muffling the cabs and motor cars outside, cocooning the house in its icy embrace, I heard a loud bang from the study. Afeared Bram had collapsed again, I burst in the door, only to find him sitting behind his desk with his head in his hands.

He looked up, bleary-eyed.

'Bram!' I exclaimed. 'Are you alright? What was that noise?' I crossed to the desk, put a hand on his shoulder and looked about the room. Only then did I see the magnifying glass on the floor in front of the fire.

'I'm fine.' He tried not to snap, but I could hear the frustration in his voice.

‘Really?’ I retrieved the magnifying glass and slid it towards him. ‘You’re lucky it didn’t break.’

‘I’ve others.’ He leaned back in his chair and opened the desk drawer. Tucked inside were more magnifying glasses. Noel had bought him one with an ivory handle for Christmas. Violet and Hall had also gifted him one each.

I sat opposite and lay my hands on the desk, palms up. He hesitated a moment and then placed his huge hands over mine. We sat, looking at each other. I studied him, this great bear of a man I’d been married to for nearly thirty years. Now sixty, he stubbornly determined to press on as if he was half that age. The fire crackled and coughed to our right. I could just hear a ship’s horn sounding in the distance.

The white lacing his hair was prominent in the lamp’s soft glow. So was the evident strain in his eyes. The large pupils, the broken veins that surrounded those lovely grey orbs. ‘Let *me* be your eyes,’ I said finally.

Bram withdrew his hands and made a scoffing sound.

‘I’m serious, Bram.’ I was a little affronted by his reaction. ‘You let me write letters for you, read through contracts and other important documents before you sign them. Let me write your —’

‘Books? You want to write my books?’ Bram pinched the bridge of his nose and shook his head. ‘Honestly, Florrie, you want to take away —’

‘No, you great eejit,’ I said. ‘I don’t want to write your books. As if I could. I want to write your *words*. If you dictate to me, because God knows I can’t decipher your codes and shorthand or read your dreadful handwriting, I can scribe on your behalf. It doesn’t have to be all the time. Just when you need to rest your eyes, when holding the magnifying glass *and* writing becomes too arduous.’

He didn’t say anything, just perused the top of his desk. Half-written pages were strewn about, many with great lines through them.

‘I’d be like one of those New Women, hired as secretaries and such. I can’t use a typewriter, though I’d like to.’ It was true. I did. ‘But I have a neat hand. You’ve said so yourself.’

I waited.

‘You don’t ask for much, my dear,’ I continued softly. ‘I want to help. Let me help *you*.’ I laughed quietly. ‘Imagine what your publisher will say when you hand over pages he can actually read without transcribing them.’

Bram followed the direction of my gaze. Then, he began to chuckle. ‘Thank you, Florrie. I’d be most grateful.’

After that, a few evenings a week, usually when he wasn’t committed elsewhere, I would sit with Bram, and, as his latest work flowed from his mind, write. I didn’t pen the entire novels; there were days and nights where Bram worked on them himself. But when I did, it fascinated me that so rarely would he alter a phrase or change a plot point or reconsider a character’s motivations or action. It was as if the story landed fully formed in his head and just had to stroll out.

Gone were the days he’d read a first draft to me. Now, the tables were turned, and I would read the completed work back to him. Only then, and only very occasionally, Bram would ask me to make a correction, changing a word or sentence, sometimes deciding he didn’t like a character’s name. Overall, the first draft didn’t suffer much adjustment and was what the publisher would see. Perhaps that was the problem. Perhaps if Bram had taken more care; if I’d gently persuaded him to rethink a scene or plot (frankly, there were places in the stories where I felt a rethink would have served them better), he might have listened. I didn’t feel I’d the right. I told myself I was merely the conduit; these works were not my creation. They were Bram’s.

All the same, I couldn’t help but think it was no coincidence that the book that took him almost seven years to write was considered his best to date.

We toasted each other when, in 1908, *Snowbound* was published. A semi-fictitious recounting of Bram’s travels across America with the Lyceum crew, it had been difficult for me to transcribe and even harder to read aloud. Though Henry Irving had by now retreated into the background of our lives, it reminded me he was always there, waiting in the wings for his cue. Or like my phantom, skulking in corners. I imagined he was biding his time until he took centre stage again.

I sometimes wondered, when I caught Bram in repose, a finger pulling his lip as ideas flourished, how often he thought of the man he’d called ‘the Chief’. Did he still miss him? Were the memories excruciating or pleasant? Did he dream about Henry (I pushed back the memory *that* thought conjured) and, if so, was it the man’s final flagging years, or those early triumphant ones where nothing, not the Wife, children, lovers or distance, could tear them apart?

I never asked. I humoured myself it was because I knew the answer. Truth was, I was afraid of it.

CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

London, 1910

Though Bram wrote more books over the following two years, what I recall most are the great difficulties and sorrows that afflicted us. I began to feel that we'd frittered away that early period when the world really was our stage and Bram and I made entrances that turned heads.

I'd wasted so much time feeling bitter towards a man who likely didn't give me a second thought, and being fearful of a malignant spirit. I'd always blamed Henry Irving for consuming my husband, draining him of energy and ruining any chance Bram and I had of a normal relationship. If it wasn't Henry, I was blaming Bram. But as time passed, I came to understand that I'd *allowed* them to devour so many of my waking hours. Likewise, I began to wonder if the spirit or whatever it was that still occasionally haunted me and had metamorphosed into something akin to a shadowy warden, was nothing more than a projection of my own anxieties, my own dread of death, ageing, of being rejected, of public humiliation. I felt sure that psychoanalyst who was all the rage, Dr Sigmund Freud, would have something to say about it.

I'd kept Phil abreast of most of our situation (I didn't like to reveal just how grim things were), and whilst I didn't tell Thornley about our financial tribulations (did Bram?), I maintained regular correspondence.

Poor old Bram is not worse, I wrote. *This wet weather stiffens him so; it makes it hard for him to get about. He is an angel of patience, and never complains, and it is so hard for him being so helpless*.

That was the crux of it. Bram might smile and pretend he was still his once robust self, but nothing could be further from the truth. Yet he continued to write, accept invitations to speak, to attend opening nights, exhibitions, dinners and clubs, the races.

Then, out of the blue (or so I thought), Lady Ritchie, a writer and editor herself, and the daughter of no less a luminary than William Thackeray, approached Bram with an offer. Excited about what it might entail, I helped him dress for the meeting. He looked resplendent in tails and top hat. Even with a walking stick, he still cut a fine figure.

I paced the drawing room until his return, imagining him being invited to edit some collection, take up a post in a publishing house, accept a contract at an esteemed newspaper. My imaginings were boundless and, it turned out, fruitless.

When he finally hobbled back into the room, I could tell by the look on his face that the news wasn't good.

I stayed by the window, gripping the back of a chair. 'What did she say?'

First removing his hat and coat, which he passed to Maria along with his cane, he sank onto the sofa. Maria lingered, wanting to hear. There wasn't a thing happened in the house that either Maria or Mary didn't know about. Bram remained stubbornly tight-lipped.

'Maria, could you please fetch a tea-tray,' I asked finally.

Flashing a look of disappointment, she went to obey.

'And bring some more whisky, if you please,' added Bram.

Somehow, I didn't think it was for a toast.

The door closed and Bram leaned over and grabbed the poker, breaking up the coal in the hearth with surprising fierceness. Sparks sizzled in protest.

'I gather whatever it was Lady Ritchie offered you, it wasn't to your liking.' I sat in the chair, stiff-backed, hands clasped, trying to ignore the traffic outside. The engine of a motor car was whining.

'As it happens, she wasn't offering me anything.' He ceased prodding.

I pulled a face. 'I don't understand. Why did she ask you to attend her if it wasn't you she wished to engage?'

Bram carefully placed the poker against the hearth. 'Because,' he faced me, 'she wished to utilise *your* services, my dear.'

'Me?' My astonishment knew no bounds. 'What could she want from me?'

Bram paused, waiting until I met his clear grey gaze. 'For the princely sum of three shillings six pence, she wanted you to read to her in the

evenings.'

A wave of red-hot shame seared my chest, rose up my cheeks. 'You cannot be serious.'

'Oh, but I am.'

'I hope you declined.'

'I thanked her, Florrie, and then yes, I declined.'

How dare she? Had we fallen so far that Lady Ritchie would deem it appropriate to offer what was akin to charity? 'Does this mean …' I began, then pressed my lips together.

'That our financial troubles are common knowledge? I'm afraid it must, Florrie. How else are we to understand it?'

My vision wavered as I regarded Bram. He was sallow beneath the flush of indignation that coloured his face. So tired-looking, yet also determined. He leaned over and took my hand in his. 'I don't want you to worry. I'll fix this. My publisher has high hopes for my new book.'

We all did. Called *Famous Imposters*, it was a non-fiction about a range of well-known historical figures and rogues who'd fooled royalty and the public. The most contentious chapter was about the great Queen Elizabeth who, Bram asserted, was really a boy from Bisley.

I held his hand tightly as sparks whirled and burned my mind. Bram, my dreamer, my spinner of tales, my flawed man who seemed destined to forever miss the greatness so many – including me – had believed him preordained for.

'I do too,' I said finally and, standing, kissed his soft dry cheek. 'I do too.' Without another word, I left.

In the privacy of my bedroom, I lay on the bed and burned with humiliation, railed silently against the unfairness of life, refusing to acknowledge the dark figure in the corner.



Thoughts of our own penury were quickly forgotten when news reached us that Samuel Clemens, who'd proved such a good friend to Bram, a real comfort after the loss of Henry and our change in fortune, had died.

Once more, Bram was thrown into depression. He locked himself away in the study. He no longer requested I take dictation but soldiered on.

Despite his poor vision and the difficulties he had holding a pen, he started a new novel. The title was enough to stop the heart: *The Lair of the White Worm*. He'd always loved the legends of the Lambton Worm of Durham and the serpents said to have laid waste the land around Bamburgh. His writing was painstakingly slow, but unceasing; as if he could write away our sorrows.

Not even preparations for Noel and Neelie's wedding diverted Bram from this new novel and the smaller writing commissions he accepted. I was glad to have something to focus on. Despite the parlous state of our funds, I ordered a new dress.

It was with mixed feelings I attended the dressmakers. Shown a range of fabrics and accessories, with colours and styles so varied and wondrous, I settled on a pastel pink with black and gold trim – my favourite combination. Gone were the days when a man could span my waist with his hands. Like everything else about me, my middle had thickened, my face was broader, my legs and stomach too. My hair was threaded with almost as much silver as brown. The dressmaker, Mrs Cardew, resorted to the usual flattery as she measured and draped swathes of silk and taffeta across my shoulders, pushed velvet ribbons under my chin, scolding me for being too hard on myself, assuring me I was still a beauty. I knew what I saw in the mirror, and it was an elderly woman whose time to dazzle had passed. It was only when Neelie's mother, who was sitting with her daughter awaiting her turn to be measured, exclaimed as a mock-up of my gown was pinned against me, 'Why, Mrs Stoker, that will not do. You'll eclipse my Neelie in that ensemble!' that I examined my reflection with a more objective eye.

Perhaps I wasn't so bad. I was comparing the girl of my youth to the woman before me. A woman who had lived through much. I was soon to be a mother-in-law, and in time, a grandmother, too. Was I ready?

What woman conscious of time's weary passage ever was? The role of grandmother announced old age in a manner nothing else quite could. I prayed I'd be ready to embrace it when it came.

I looked at Neelie, chattering away beside her mother, all slender limbs and soft, unmarked complexion. What kind of mother would she be? Better than me, I'd no doubt. I'd been an absent mother in many ways. Not physically so much as emotionally. I don't think I'd been designed for motherhood. So much for it being woman's instinct.

Bram and I were better matched than anyone realised. He'd never embraced being a father … or a husband, either. But I could look back on our years together and, while those early ones were a trial and I despaired of ever being happy, we'd found a contentment of sorts, hadn't we? What was that saying? Familiarity breeds contempt? With us, it had bred acceptance, and respect. At least, for me it had, especially as he relied on me more. It was nice to feel needed, to have a purpose.

'What are you thinking, Mrs Stoker?' asked Neelie, rising to stand beside me.

I stared at her in the mirror. She came to my shoulder. Her eyes were dancing, her mouth mobile. Yes, she was exactly what us Stokers needed. New blood: a fresh outlook on life that would chase away the doldrums of the past – and the present. I prayed she and Noel would find real happiness together, the kind I feared he'd not experienced with me or his father. Too concerned with making a life beyond Henry Irving's reach, Noel had been forced to create his own childhood, substituting other adults for Bram and me – I thought of the closeness he had with my mother, with Phil, his Stoker uncles and aunts. With Mrs Simpson and Nounou Yvette, too.

Now he'd found someone special to build a life with.

'I was thinking how lucky Noel is,' I said, reaching for Neelie's hand and drawing her towards me. 'How lucky we are that you're to be part of our family.'

Neelie's large eyes filled and, much to my surprise, she threw her arms around me.

I froze briefly, then melted into the hug.

In that moment, I believed we were truly blessed.



Two days later, I'd just returned from choosing flowers with Neelie, Violet and Lucy, and was busy removing my hat, when I heard a commotion coming from Bram's study.

'Is the master home?' I asked Maria. I was certain Bram had an appointment at one of the gentlemen's clubs he frequented to meet a publisher to discuss Hall's work (and, he secretly hoped, his own).

‘Why yes, Mrs S,’ said Maria, lifting my hat free from my hair, the long pins carefully arranged in her hand. ‘He’s been in his study all morning. Said he didn’t feel up to the Garrick today.’

My heart began to quicken. I glanced at the clock. It was mid-afternoon. There was another thump.

I threw a look at Maria. ‘Something’s wrong.’

I took the steps two at a time, dragging myself up by the banister, Maria close on my heels.

I charged into the study and there, slumped in his chair, face whiter than the pages scattered across the floor, was Bram. His mouth hung wetly open, the left side of his face drooped strangely, as if it were a half-melted candle.

‘Florrie,’ he moaned. At least, I think that’s what he said. His voice was little more than a guttural expiration, the cry of a monster.

‘Bram!’ *Oh, dear God, no*.

I rushed to his side and heaved him upright. Maria helped by pushing his other side. He was a great lumpen weight. He’d wet his trousers; the smell of urine was pungent. His eyes flickered across our faces, the fear in them was shocking.

‘Florrie.’ My name was a wail. Tears welled in his eyes and rolled down his cheeks.

‘Maria,’ I said, inhaling all my terror, my shock. ‘Fetch George Stoker, please. At once.’

Maria raced out of the room as I tucked a cushion down the side of the chair, so Bram didn’t topple. There were calls and cries, the sound of doors slamming. More shouts, a peeler’s loud whistle. A carriage was hailed.

I knelt with my arms around Bram, my cheek pressed into his chest. ‘It will be alright, my dear. I’m here. I have you. Your brother is coming.’ I repeated the words like a mantra, aware of Bram’s body beginning to shake, of the effort it took to try and speak.

‘Hush, hush,’ I tried to soothe. I don’t know how long I stayed in that position, only that while I said one thing out loud, inside, I was praying with all my might to God above that He would look after my husband, make him whole again, bring him back to me.

I refused to show Bram my fear as I silently prayed: Dear Lord, don’t let him die.

CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

St George's Square, 1910

When I married Bram all those years ago, I never thought I'd end up not only nursing the man once considered an athlete, an exemplar of muscular manhood, but, like my namesake Florence Nightingale, enjoying it. While George attended him in those immediate hours after we found him, Bram's care was ceded to his personal physician Dr James Browne. (Of late, Bram had felt peculiar relying on his brother – I'd no such qualms when it came to emergencies.)

After Bram's second stroke, his recovery was protracted. Able to attend Noel and Neelie's wedding in June 1910, the physical effects were nonetheless still very apparent, though everyone was too polite to mention them.

We were forced to move again, to a small flat at 26 St George's Square, across from St Saviour's Church and not far from Lady Richie (not that I was inclined to visit her – well-intentioned as her offer was). It was much easier to manage, and Maria and Mary came with us, though I was forced to sell some of our possessions, as not all would fit. There was a lovely drawing room, Bram had a warm and elegant study, and the kitchen was well equipped. This house also had gas installed, which made cooking and lighting much less onerous, even if it was at times mercurial.

The traffic was noisier and the people walking past numerous, but I enjoyed the feeling of being in the centre of things again. Bram did too and when he wasn't at his desk, he would sit in a large armchair by the window, a book and newspaper beside him, his magnifying glass at the ready, and gaze upon the world as I read to him, or we simply talked. Determined I should be sociable, he would bully me into accepting invitations. I was reluctant to leave him, especially as he seemed to grow frailer before my

eyes, often retiring to his bedroom to rest. Upon my return, I'd seek him out. Sometimes, he was sound asleep, at other times, he'd be sitting upright or lying beneath the bedclothes, staring into space. What did he see, gazing so intently? Was he reliving happy memories? Or was he recalling his life with regret? Regret that a life which once held so much promise would only ever be recalled as one of mediocrity?

The very idea splintered my heart.

While he made every effort to continue as he once had, Bram was physically and, I suspect, mentally unable. I discovered an admission of his weaknesses accidentally one day when I went to his study to fetch a book he was after. There, on his desk, I found an incomplete letter to Thornley. A casual glance led me to read the entire thing. I told myself it was to ensure I didn't repeat any information when I wrote to his brother.

I can now stand for a few seconds at a time on one leg, he'd written in his sloped and shaky hand, *and better still I am able to work, the book is getting on* (he was referring to *Lair of the White Worm*). *Anyway, happy memories are all anyone can ask for*.

Tears welled, and I brushed them away. What a sense of finality those words had. Was that what Bram relied upon now? Memories to motivate him to rise each day, to work and keep living?

Then, further down the page, I saw my name.

It is harder on poor Florence (who has been an angel) than on me. She had to do all the bookkeeping and find the money to live on – God only knows how she manages.

Overcome, I collapsed in Bram's chair. He called me an angel. A person less like an angel it would be hard to find. Dear Lord. I ached for my husband in that moment, ached with an intensity that blistered my very core. I also ached for Thornley who, just like his brother, was declining.

With a huge sigh, I dried my eyes, stood, and, rearranging the letter, found the book I was looking for.

If Bram's happy memories were what sustained him, I determined then and there to make some more with him.



Our finances became so straitened during Bram's recovery – partly because of the move and because the earnings on his books and other writings were so paltry – that given his poor health, he felt compelled to apply to the Royal Literary Fund for a grant. Another loan Hall had generously made us the year before was gone. Uncertain about admitting his financial as well as physical difficulties, Bram asked me to read over the application before he sent it. My worst fears were confirmed. Never had we revealed ourselves in such a way. I felt raw, exposed.

When I paused towards the end, Bram urged me to keep going.

'If you're sure …' I waited for him to tell me this was a mistake. He didn't. I cleared my throat. '*At present I do not know whether I can in the future do much, or any literary work, and I am emboldened to look to my fellow craftsmen in my difficulty*.'

What it must have cost him to write that. I know what it cost me to read.

Now our plight was official – Bram's inability to secure another position and, worse, his failure as a writer, would be a matter of public record. As I anticipated, once our situation became known, some among our acquaintances were swift to abandon us. However, our real friends (and there were many) behaved as if nothing had changed, asking after Bram's health, visiting, extending invitations. Just as I'd always done, I continued to show one face to the world – optimistic, cheerful – and hide the other. The one that, like Dorian Gray's portrait or Dr Jekyll's alternate personality, was kept concealed.

I wondered what that face looked like, what my picture in the attic would depict. It didn't bear thinking about …



Fortunately, both Gilbert and Charles Dickens's son Henry supported Bram's application to the Royal Literary Fund. We received the princely sum of one hundred pounds. I had to swallow fury at their paltry offering and write a letter of thanks on Bram's behalf. If he was disappointed, he didn't say. Despite the difficulties he experienced, the pain he suffered, his laboured breathing and terrible fatigue, he'd almost completed *The Lair of the White Worm*.

When I told Lucy and her recently adopted daughter Nancy, who I'd met at the tearooms in Princes Street, that Bram would soon have another

book out, they were delighted and took it to mean that he was fully recovered. I didn't enlighten them. No-one wants to hear another's woes and fears, not really. As the two women chattered about their new house guests, a Miss Preece and another whose name I didn't catch, I allowed the convivial atmosphere to wash over me. Women sat at adjacent tables, drinking tea, coffee and cordials, exchanging news and gossip. Some had shopping bags and hat boxes at their feet, others pored over newspapers, reading excerpts aloud. Earlier in the year, the very first International Women's Day had been celebrated. As a sex, we'd come far. Why, in some countries women were even being granted the vote. I wondered if we'd achieve the vote in my lifetime. I wasn't sure how I felt about it, though I knew if Bram's mammy were alive, she'd be marching with the Pankhursts and hunger-striking like that woman, Marion Wallace Dunlop. I told myself I'd more pressing issues to concern me.

I overheard someone reading a review of George Bernard Shaw's latest play. It was excellent. To think, Henry Irving had once refused to consider staging anything written by him. He'd be rolling over in his grave at the accolades the man was attracting.

'So, does next Sunday suit, Florrie?'

I stared blankly at Lucy. 'Pardon?'

Lucy and Nancy were both smiling.

'I'm sorry,' I said, flustered. 'What were you saying?'

'We were asking if you and Bram would be free for luncheon next Sunday,' said Nancy, just as Lucy reached across the table and covered my hand with her own. I could feel the texture of her kid gloves, noted the lovely fawn colour.

'Are you quite alright?'

'Of course. Yes. And next Sunday would be fine. Delightful.'

'Good! It's been an age since you've been to Grim's Dyke.'

'I'll show you the new trick I've taught Paul,' added Nancy.

I had to think quickly who Paul was before I remembered it was one of the lemurs. Would Bram be up to a drive, let alone a visit? I knew he'd enjoy catching up with Gilbert and the entire family. He loved watching the antics of the animals. Maybe we could take a slow walk around the lake. A flutter of excitement tickled my stomach. An outing to the Gilberts would be just the panacea. I began to think of what to wear.

We parted outside the tearooms, Lucy and Nancy opting to take the train and me signalling a cab – horse drawn, thank you very much. I was still nervous about the motorised ones, even though there were more of them on the road. As the women waited with me, we remarked on the unseasonably warm weather.

'No doubt Gilbert will be in the lake when I get home,' sighed Lucy. 'He does so love a swim. I only wish he wouldn't sit on the furniture before he's changed out of his sodden trunks.'



When a note arrived at the house three mornings later, I recognised the writing and knew it was from Nancy. Probably a reminder about the luncheon. Instead of opening it immediately, I returned to my cup of tea, pausing to look over the street, admiring the cornflower sky, the scudding clouds and thinking how much better Bram looked yesterday. We'd taken a short stroll along the Embankment and the fresh air, the birdsong, interrupted by endless honking, shouts and chatter, then browsing in a bookshop, had done much to restore his spirits. The new cane I'd bought him was much better suited to a man of his height and he looked quite distinguished using it.

I finally broke the seal on the note.

'Oh, God,' I gasped. I couldn't breathe. I pressed the note to my breast. My eyes filled. 'No, no,' I panted. I looked out the window. In a matter of seconds, the glorious day had transformed into a mockery of the despair surging inside me.

I read the note again, dashing away tears. Then, I bowed my head and wept.

Time collapsed. A delivery arrived. A hollow knock on the door, the deep voice of a man. Footsteps echoed throughout the flat. I heard Bram leaving his bedroom. He said something to Maria and then went to his study.

Lord, I would have to tell him.

But how? How did I tell Bram, when we'd already lost so much, that one of our dearest and most beloved friends, Sir William Schwenck Gilbert, had suddenly, quite unexpectedly, died?

CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

London and Whinnyfold, May 1911

‘Gilbert died as I would wish to, Florrie,’ said Bram after we returned home from the funeral and sat in quiet memory in the drawing room. Maria fussed about, arranging crockery and pouring tea.

‘How is that, Bram?’ I asked, taking a cup and indicating Maria should just place Bram’s by his side. I would lift it into his hands once she left the room. Ever since I’d broken the news to Bram about Gilbert’s death, he’d had a setback. His breathing was harsher, he barely ate a morsel, his skin was a ghastly yellow, the whites of his eyes, too. No matter what delicacies Mary cooked for her beloved master, he returned trays either untouched or looking as if he’d attacked the food without tasting it.

‘He died trying to save that house guest of his … What was her name?’

‘Ruby Preece,’ I supplied.

Miss Preece, who’d decided to go for a dip in the man-made lake at Grim’s Dyke, despite not being able to swim. She’d ended up out of her depth and was crying out for help when Gilbert, returning from a drive, heard her. He’d stopped the motor car, shucked off his shoes and, without another thought, dived in. While he managed to get Miss Preece to safety, he found himself in difficulties. The doctor declared his heart had given out and he drowned before anyone could render aid.

‘Thank you, Maria. That will be all.’

Maria bobbed and left the room soundlessly.

Only once the door shut did I rise and pour Bram a whisky. He took the glass from me carefully and tossed back the contents.

‘He answered a young woman’s cry for help,’ said Bram. ‘He died a hero.’

Two days after Gilbert died, Bram and I went to Grim's Dyke to offer our condolences. And to do precisely what I did: hold Lucy and Nancy tight and remind them they were not alone in their grief. We'd loved Gilbert, too.

'They're calling him a hero, Florrie,' Lucy sobbed. 'But what good is a dead one? Tell me that?'

I didn't want to say 'no good to anyone' to Lucy then, nor Bram now.

'I'd rather you don't go throwing yourself in a body of water trying to be a hero again,' I said, gently reminding him that he'd already earned that accolade.

A repressed memory fought its way into my head: the grey-fleshed body dripping on the dining room table, the blue lips and sharp teeth, the strange blood-shot eyes, the D burned into the chest …

I could sense the dead man now. Not quiescent in the corners and shadows, but in my husband's jaundiced flesh, his red and yellow eyes. The stench of whisky and something rotten that floated on his breath.

'In fact, I'd rather you don't die, hero or not, if you don't mind,' I said, exchanging his empty whisky glass for the teacup. 'Anyway, you're too young. Gilbert was seventy-five and you're only sixty-three. You've at least thirteen more years before you consider leaving me.'

Bram didn't drink but stared dolefully into the cup. The milky liquid shook and sloshed as if a small storm was raging.

'Truth is, I don't think I've thirteen more years, Florrie.' He tried to drink his tea. I swiftly wiped the dribbles from his beard.

Truth was, I didn't either.



'Is Mr Stoker alright, ma'am?'

Lost in thought, it took a moment to realise the kindly query was directed at me.

I followed the gaze of the maid, Lizzie, who came with the cottage we'd leased in Whinnyfold for a few weeks. We were back in Scotland, Cruden Bay. Over summer, many of the fisherfolk sought employment in Peterhead, choosing to rent their cottages out to holidaymakers. Lizzie was the owner's niece, a lovely lass of about eighteen who hadn't yet learned to school her curiosity.

From the front windows, there were views right down to the arc of sand. Upon them, as was his habit, walked Bram. Once upon a time, he'd cut such a strong figure, striding along the harbourside at Port Erroll, stopping to make notes, talking to the fishermen and other holidaymakers, all of whom spoke about the nice Irishman they met. Now he marched upon the shores of Whinnyfold, his peculiar gait drawing attention.

This was his much-needed time to think, to sieve through the contents of his ever-busy mind. Though I often accompanied him, today he'd chosen to walk alone.

And he was, completely. There was not a soul abroad that I could see, thank God. Just the sea, the sand and the steep grassy slopes. And Lizzie, who reminded me how others viewed my husband.

'Why's he's stompin' about and shoutin' into the wind like that? Is he angry, missus?'

I watched as Bram struggled against the sea gusts, lifting his legs high and bringing them down in rather a dramatic fashion, as if he were a child playing at being a soldier. With each step, he teetered before righting himself, turning to face the rolling waves and scream at nature, his stick waving above his head. He looked quite mad.

Or perhaps Lizzie was correct, and he *was* angry. He'd every right to be. Only, I was usually the one brimming with that emotion, not my amiable husband.

'No, dear,' I said patiently. 'It's not anger. He's just …' I searched for an answer, but it eluded me.

Lizzie waited a moment, then grunted and collected the breakfast dishes. I remained by the window, a half-written letter to Matilda before me, wondering what Bram was shrieking. At whom? God? The supernatural spirits that abounded in his books? Himself? Or was it me?

I offered my own prayers to God, asking that Bram's latest book, *The Lair of the White Worm*, and the article he'd written on Henry's influence on damn stage lighting succeeded. My poor husband deserved that at the very least, didn't he? One last chance at glory before he shuffled off this mortal coil.

'Dear Lord,' I muttered under my breath. 'Please don't let it be the article on Henry Irving that gives him renown.' I couldn't bear it. All I wanted was for Bram to achieve something in his own right. All his

sacrifices, the endless devotion and hard work had to amount to something, didn't it? Was I so very selfish that when all was said and done, I needed Bram to amount to something so all our years of marriage meant more than naught? Otherwise, what was I? Who was I, but *the Wife*?

Yet even as Bram had lain in bed, trying to regain his strength, dictating letters and such to me, he'd thought of Henry. Thought about him so much he'd put pen to paper. Again. He simply couldn't let the man go.

Or perhaps it was the past he couldn't relinquish, the past where he was somebody, where he was important, even if it was in service to another.

I reached for my handkerchief and blotted the tears that suddenly fell. Mother Mary! I was doing that a great deal of late. Weeping. I stared at the louring sky, the lumbering blue-grey clouds that heralded an approaching storm. Sprays of water rose from the rows of rocks that were only partially submerged at low tide.

This place, Whinnyfold – and Port Erroll, Cruden Bay, and all the other marvellous sites around them, the harbour, the Skreals, the Watter's Mou', Slains Castle, the roaring seas, the thick haar, the laden clouds, the hell-dark nights – had given Bram so much fodder for his stories. Perhaps they still did.

Just then, Bram fell onto one knee and toppled over onto the sand. I jumped up and pressed my hands against the window.

'Bram,' I gasped.

Before I could grab my coat, he rolled onto his side and clambered clumsily to his feet. He glanced about as he carelessly brushed the wet sand from his trousers, leaning heavily on his stick. Satisfied he hadn't been seen, he raised his face to the cottage. I stepped back from the window and watched his slow progress across the sand. How he'd navigate the steep embankment, I wasn't sure. He despised this new vulnerable version of himself; fought against it every single day. He would hate that I had witnessed his fall.

I gathered up my writing implements, the book I'd intended to read and scurried to my room. I'd pretend I hadn't left it, that I was busy finishing the letter to Matilda and writing to Phil and Noel. At least that way he could maintain some dignity.

It was such an important thing when little else was left.

CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

London, 1912

I stared at the headline in the *Daily Mirror* in disbelief. Dated 15 April, it declared that the *Titanic*, the unsinkable ship, the largest ever to sail the ocean, the pride of the White Star Line, had struck an iceberg and sunk. A couple of years back, Bram had gone to the shipyard in Belfast to witness the hull being floated. Why, he'd reported on it, filled with excitement at the progress it represented, the cleverness of mankind. Now it was at the bottom of the ocean, taking hundreds of souls with it.

I rose, sat back down, and clasped the necklace at my throat. Once again, I was aboard the steamship *Victoria*, fighting to reach the lifeboats, choking on smoke, trying to keep hold of Noel. Praying to Almighty God to save us.

I resumed reading, this time from *The Globe*. The numbers of dead were too large to comprehend.

A commotion outside distracted me. I put the newspapers aside and went to the window. A veritable throng had gathered below. A couple of enterprising newspaper boys had wandered into the square and were doing a roaring trade.

'The *Titanic* at the bottom of the ocean!'

'Hundreds dead in freezing seas!'

Their high-pitched voices carried as men and women flocked to purchase the papers and discuss the catastrophe. Two women held each other, sobbing. A rather large lady with a huge feathered hat snatched a newspaper from the hands of a bespectacled gentleman and began to exclaim, beckoning others to her side. Another woman reeled and would

have tumbled to the ground but was swiftly caught by a tradesman in an apron and carried to a nearby bench.

As Bram always said, ‘bad news sells’. This was the worst kind. I couldn’t remember feeling like this since Jack the Ripper stalked the streets.

I glanced at the clock, then scooped up the newspapers. Bram would want to know.

I burst into his dim bedroom. ‘Oh, Lord, Bram, you won’t believe what has happened.’ I dropped the newspapers on the end of the bed and dragged open the curtains.

Ever since we’d returned from Whinnyfold last summer, Bram had steadily declined. Not that his condition had prevented him from trying to work. With my help, he’d been selecting which of his short stories to include in a new collection. We’d managed to sort at least three editions for the publishers. There was also a novel he’d started years earlier called *The Russian Professor*. I doubted it would ever be finished.

It aggrieved me to see all that work, that imagination, for so little reward.

‘What is it, Florrie?’ Bram’s voice was cracked, as he made a feeble attempt to sit up, blinking against the grey light.

I rushed to help, holding his body forward while I plumped the pillows behind him. Then I heaved him upright. It wasn’t as hard as it used to be. Before my very eyes, Bram was diminishing, until I imagined him rising, mist-like, from the bed to join the fog that lurked outside the windows most mornings.

‘Do you need the bedpan, dear?’ I asked. He was badly in need of a wash. A rather sour smell surrounded him, an odour not even the most perfumed soaps could disguise. He didn’t like me bathing him and insisted on completing the task himself. Not very well, it seemed.

Bram shook his head. ‘Not yet.’ He preferred to await the doctor, who, in the last weeks, had taken to calling twice daily. ‘There are some things a man doesn’t need his wife to see,’ he muttered.

He leaned against the pillows with a deep sigh, closing his eyes. I tucked the bedclothes around him. ‘What’s got you acting as if the house is afire?’ He opened one eye. ‘It’s not, is it? I’m not about to be cremated alive, am I?’

For all Bram was so very ill, he managed to keep his sense of humour.

‘No, Bram,’ I said solemnly. I perched beside him and reached for the papers. Some of his work slid onto the floor. I left it there.

‘Why, Florrie,’ he said, both eyes open now. ‘Have you been crying?’

I raised a hand to my cheek. ‘Yes, I have. I’m afraid I’ve some terrible news.’

I felt him stiffen, bracing himself.

‘Oh, no, dear, it’s not Thornley.’ Like Bram, his older brother’s health had worsened in the last months and he was mostly bedridden. The men had written the most plaintive letters to each other. I know because I wrote Bram’s and read Thornley’s to him.

I cupped his bearded cheek. It was so soft, the skin above so desiccated. Almost yellow-grey in colour, like aged porcelain. He leaned into my palm.

‘Then it can’t be very terrible.’

‘I’ll let you decide,’ I said and, inhaling, began to read from the *Daily Mirror*.

A marriage on paper. A kiss that felt a little too real.

For nights when you want the feelings to sneak up on you, try Lokepub.

Bram sat breathing heavily. Every intake of air was an effort, as if his lungs were antique bellows that should have been retired long ago. I tried to ignore the painful sound, the monstrous wheeze, even as a racket grew outside. Within the house I could hear the women, hurried footsteps, doors opening and closing, agitated chatter drifting about the corridor. There was a series of knocks on the front door, rushed conversations as maids from neighbouring flats, workers, and a voice that was distinctively the postman’s, debated the sinking.

Bram remained motionless, his gaze fixed somewhere over my left shoulder. His frown deepened; his lips disappeared. A look of distress flashed across his face.

Before I could finish the reports in *The Globe*, Dr Browne arrived. I hovered briefly as he undertook his usual assessment, listening to Bram's heart, looking into his mouth, prodding and poking. The entire time, he discussed the *Titanic* disaster. Bram grunted and nodded, tried to raise an arm in dismay, not that Dr Browne seemed to notice. When he began to move Bram out of bed so he might relieve himself, I repressed a gasp. The night clothes had ridden up his legs, and his shirt was mostly open. When had *those* sores appeared? When had he become so gaunt? I knew he'd lost weight, that his once burly body was naught but a memory, but my husband had become a hanger upon which a swathe of scabrous flesh draped.

I had to leave before he saw my face and the knowledge it now held.

Death awaited him.

A shadow shifted in the corner. A constant presence of late. His eyes glowed red, his cape rippled. He began to smile. Only, he no longer resembled the drowned man, or Oscar, or even Henry Irving. I risked another look.

The deathly spectre hovering in the darkness wore the face of Bram.

Sick to my stomach, I swiftly excused myself, shutting the door with unseemly haste and falling against it. My hands were shaking; I tried to catch my breath.

'Are you alright, missus?' Maria came out of the kitchen.

No, I'm not.

'Dreadful news about the *Titanic*, isn't it?' Her ever-present duster glided across a demilune table as she waited for me to agree. She manoeuvred around a clock, a vase, a peculiar statuette that had been a gift from Sarah Bernhardt. Her neat white apron, the ridiculous thing she wore atop her head, her sensible shoes, which had dirt from the stoop upon them, brought me back.

'Appalling,' I answered. About to go to my bedroom to compose myself, I changed my mind. 'Maria. Please see to it that warm water for bathing is brought to Mr Stoker's bedroom. Add some fragrance to it; I don't care what. Oh, and ask Mary to prepare Mr Stoker's favourite broth. Serve it with bread and butter.'

'Yes, Mrs Stoker,' said Maria, and with a compassionate glance, went to the kitchen.

I crossed to the drawing room and scrawled a note to Noel.

Make certain you come to see your father today.
Love, Mother.

Noel had been dropping by the house more often of late. It was more important than ever he was here.



Five days after the sinking of the *Titanic*, Bram died. His death wasn't peaceful, though I know that will be said. It wasn't a kind death either, not in the sense most mean when they refer to someone dying at home surrounded by loved ones, because though Noel and I were there, Bram had been dying for weeks. A kind death, I've decided, is a quick one. Not brutal, like those poor women Jack the Ripper killed, or like Henry Irving, who was a spinning top careening everywhere before gradually slowing and toppling; nor what the victims of the *Titanic* suffered, drowning in a frigid sea. Rather, a kind death is one where one moment, you're embracing life, planning your next adventure, what you'll eat for dinner, who you'll visit, what book to read next. Then, nothing.

Perhaps Bram was right. Gilbert had the best death. Not because he was a hero attempting to save someone, but because he didn't know that the Grim Reaper was coming for him.

CHAPTER FIFTY

I don't recall much in the immediate aftermath of Bram's passing. Noel organised for the doctor to attend the house and confirm his death, fill out a death certificate. He also arranged for messages to be sent to George and Tom. I would write to Ellen, Lucy, Violet and Genevieve, Phil, Thornley, and the remaining Stoker family in Ireland in due course. Maria and Mary came and paid teary respects to the master they'd adored, standing at the foot of the bed, expressing their sorrow and then, almost as an afterthought, their condolences to me. Numb to the core, I think I mumbled something in return. What the women must have thought, let alone the doctor, as I sat dry-eyed and still as a statue, I'm reluctant to think. I refused to move or relinquish Bram's hand. Relieved his suffering was over, that the long months of waiting for the inevitable had finally arrived, I don't think I truly understood he was gone. As the minutes then hours ticked by, it slowly dawned on me that this wasn't something he would stir from and reach for me. This was the end.

What I had yet to realise was that it was Bram's end, not mine. At first, it was as if I too had died. After all, my life for better and worse had always been defined by Bram, whoever and whatever he was.

It was only when Noel escorted the doctor into the drawing room and left me to bid my husband a final farewell, telling me the coroner would arrive shortly to remove the body (no longer 'Father' or 'Bram', but 'the body'), that the tears came.

'Oh, Bram,' I whispered, stroking his beard, marvelling at how young he suddenly looked without pain and struggle on his features. I kissed his hand, those lovely fingers, then rested my head on his motionless chest. 'What will my life be like without you?' I muffled my sobs against him.

I couldn't bear the thought.



Once news of Bram's death spread, friends poured into the house to pay their respects and offer the comfort only loved ones can: George and Tom, Ellen, Lucy and Nancy, Genevieve and Violet. Arthur Doyle, George Bernard Shaw and so many of Bram's writer friends and acquaintances from the Lyceum either called or left cards. Noel and Neelie, reluctant to leave me alone, surrendered me to Ellen's care. It had taken much persuasion, but I'd finally convinced her to go home: I needed solitude.

Thus, I was quite alone when Dr Browne called a few days before the funeral to give me Bram's death certificate – the piece of officialdom I needed in order that our lawyer might act for his estate. I pulled it out of the envelope, intending to only give it a cursory glance, when I saw there were three causes of death listed: Exhaustion. Granular Contracted Kidney (he'd had Bright's disease for some time, so no surprise there). But then there were words I didn't understand.

Locomotor Ataxy 6 months.

'Locomotor Ataxy?' I looked at the doctor. 'What on earth is *that*, Dr Browne? I've never heard of it. Bram had it for six months?'

Dr Browne shifted uncomfortably. He put down the tea Maria had served and began to swiftly do up his satchel. 'Indeed.' He cleared his throat. 'Likely longer. Years, if I'm not mistaken.'

'Years?' I stared at the certificate, then at Dr Browne. 'What is it?'

He swallowed. 'Err … It's not uncommon, Mrs Stoker. Not really. I've treated many patients with the condition. Some recover, others … well … Oh, is that the time?' he exclaimed, pulling out his pocket watch, a poor actor reciting his lines. He stood. 'I must be on my way. More patients, you understand. Thank you for the tea.' He donned his hat.

'Wait. Dr Browne.' I stood in his way. 'What is Locomotor Ataxy exactly? It's not a term I know.'

Dr Browne cleared his throat twice more and wouldn't meet my eyes. 'It's … err … it's syphilis, Mrs Stoker.'

'*Syphilis?*' I gave a laugh of disbelief. 'What do you mean?'

'I mean that your husband died with syphilis.'

Before I could ask any more, Dr Browne made a rapid exit, his footsteps receding down the stairs.

The word echoed in the cavern my mind had become. *Syphilis*.

I fell back into my chair. I picked up the certificate and read it again, as if the words might magically alter under increased scrutiny.

Locomotor Ataxy … *Syphilis*, six months. I struggled to comprehend what it signified – about Bram. The doctor must be mistaken … surely?

I wasn't so naive as to not be aware of the talk surrounding men believed to have contracted the condition, some passing it on to their unfortunate wives. When someone disappeared from society without good reason, it was oft thought it was for treatment – mercury, arsenic compounds. The supposed cure often worse than the disease. Why, some gossips had attributed Poor O's death to syphilis, blaming his debauched lifestyle. Thank God, dear Mr Turner had set that right.

But syphilis was associated with depravity, with immorality of a specific kind. It also suggested a libidinousness and choices of the kind I found hard to attribute to Bram. And yet … I sat there as the room grew darker and colder. Maria came to light the lamps, tend the fire. Oblivious to her ministrations, I was like a scientist, examining Bram's life through a microscope. His friendships, his travels, the time away from home; his long evenings at the theatre, talks at gentlemen's clubs, returning after the sun was up. Where had he really been? What had he been doing? Was he dallying in some bawdy house? Paying someone to satisfy his urges?

From the moment we arrived in London he'd been surrounded by other women – fascinating and beautiful ones – actresses, writers, other men's consorts and wives. Unable to help himself if a damsel needed rescuing, Bram was there. There'd been talk, of course there had. Initially confused by the female attention he received, wondering if it was something more than genial (they called him Uncle Bram, after all), and if I was being credulous, or worse, fooled, Ellen had reassured me Bram didn't stray. But how would she know? How would anyone? When I confronted Bram about his indifference towards conjugal relations, and realised it wasn't women he was interested in, I was relieved people might consider him a philanderer; it was an excellent diversion. For while people were looking one way, they weren't looking the other, were they? But how had he contracted the disease? Was it from a man? Men? 'I'm not Oscar,' he once said to me. I'd assumed he meant he wasn't reckless. What if *I'd* been looking the wrong way? What if my husband had alluded to preferring men so he might pursue women? What if he had dalliances with both? What if everyone knew

except me? Were they all laughing at me? Stupid, blind Florence. Is that what Bram thought of me?

After all, I was merely *the Wife*.

I closed my eyes and let my head fall back against the chair.

Bram once told me that life wasn't fair. I'd thought him bilious and paid scant attention. But he was right. Four words had turned my life upside down; made what I thought fair most foul.

Locomotor Ataxy. 6 months.

He was meant to be discreet. That had been our agreement.

Dying with syphilis was hardly that.

Did others know? Had he given it to anyone else? Dr Browne said the disease wasn't uncommon, as if that somehow made the diagnosis, and the reasons for it, more palatable. Bloody men! God, he couldn't look me in the eye when he told me. Of course, Bram *must* have known he had it and for months. More likely years …

He never told me. Not a hint. Not a whisper.

My face grew hotter; my mind was afire. I needed to discuss this with someone who could, if not reassure me, give me some understanding. Before I changed my mind, I phoned Bram's brother, George.

'Florrie! Do you know what time it is?'

I glanced at the clock. It was ten past ten in the evening.

'What's wrong?' George asked when I didn't respond.

I told him. When I finished speaking, there was silence. It went for so long, I thought the operator had lost the connection.

'George? George? Are you still there?'

'Yes, Florrie. I am.'

'Well? What does it mean? What's the significance of it? Did Bram know?'

'Really, Fl … Fl … Florrie,' said George, stumbling over my name. 'I'm not sure you should be asking me.'

'Why on earth not? You're Bram's brother. You treated him for years. You must have known.'

George went silent again before releasing a long, long sigh. 'I'm coming to see you.'

'When?' I asked, staring into the mouthpiece as if he might manifest.

‘Now.’

When George sat me down, looking quite ruffled and tired, poor Maria stumbling out of bed and insisting on making a pot of tea and ensuring whisky was on hand, I tried to prepare myself for whatever I might hear.

‘According to the certificate,’ said George, placing it down carefully, ‘Bram’s syphilis was advanced – tertiary.’

‘Tertiary? There are degrees?’

George nodded.

My stomach clenched. ‘I see. So, he had it longer than six months.’

‘Much longer.’

‘How long do you suppose?’

George shrugged. ‘I don’t know. I doubt Dr Browne would, either. Once contracted, it can remain dormant in the body for years, up to thirty in some cases —’

Thirty!

‘But my guess is Bram had it for a couple of decades, at least. His symptoms fit.’

‘What symptoms?’ I snapped. ‘He had Bright’s disease. We all knew that. He was exhausted.’

‘Yes. Yes. He did. He was,’ said George, losing patience. ‘But the ulcerated sores, the strokes … well, they can also be a symptom of —’ He indicated the certificate, reluctant to pick it up again. ‘He was also losing his eyesight, had difficulty with his balance. In the last couple of years, he struggled to walk normally.’

An image of Bram stamping on the sands at Whinnyfold, shouting at the ocean, bloomed. Not eccentric after all. Syphilitic.

‘These are all signs of … the other underlying condition. So was his moodiness, his sometimes strange behaviour.’ George ran his fingers through his hair. Despite the chill the fire couldn’t keep at bay, he was sweating. ‘Do you recall when he started handing out oranges at the king’s coronation? He was like a lunatic street vendor, passing them to all and sundry. People didn’t know what to make of it, this gentleman pushing fruit into their hands.’

I did remember. We laughed it off that day. Decided Bram was caught up in the splendour of the king’s formal ascension to the throne after the drawn-out mourning for the queen.

‘I didn’t know …’ My voice faltered.

George’s expression softened. He regarded me kindly. ‘Most don’t.’

As if the Thames had burst its banks, memories rushed into my head. I recalled how, especially in later years, whenever he was writing a novel, Bram would have trouble divorcing the story from reality. He’d start talking about smugglers as if they were in the next room. On one occasion, he draped garlic around his bedroom window and asked if he could borrow a rosary to wrap around his wrist while he slept. He’d even take on some of the characteristics of his protagonists. When he was writing *The Mystery of the Sea*, he left coded notes for me to decipher and spoke in an American accent. Then there was the time he bought strange Egyptian artefacts from an antiquities dealer near St Paul’s, and started going to meetings of some occult group, despite being a sceptic. There were other instances. I’d put them down to enthusiasm, to research, to anything but sickness.

George released my hand and downed a whisky. ‘It’s evident he was suffering from it when he died.’ He glanced at me. ‘Bram always did love women.’ George gave an apologetic chuckle. ‘Beautiful ones especially.’

‘Loved women …’ The words were hollow in my mouth. My husband the womaniser. I prayed that was all they called him, that no-one else knew his … proclivities. He’d promised me … And in return, I’d promised to honour and obey, to maintain the edifice of our marriage, even if I couldn’t love. But I *had* loved. In the end. A deep, abiding platonic love.

Now, I didn’t know what I felt. It was hard not to feel revulsion.

‘Is it … is it catching?’ I asked George in a small voice.

‘Only if you’ve …’ His hands twirled aimlessly.

‘Been intimate,’ I finished.

He nodded.

Be thankful for small mercies.

‘If you’re concerned at all,’ said George, clearly uncomfortable, ‘I can recommend some —’

I lifted my palm. ‘Please, George. Enough.’

We sat in silence a moment, broken only by the pitter-patter of rain, the rumble of an omnibus in the distance. I glanced at where the certificate sat on the table, illuminated by the lamp. ‘Who needs to see that?’

George followed my gaze. ‘No-one, Florrie. Except the coroner. Not if you don’t want them to.’

I stood quickly and swept it off the table, stuffed it back in the envelope and clutched it to my chest. ‘We can keep this to ourselves, can’t we, George? You’ll not tell anyone, will you?’

‘Of course not,’ he said, rising, wiping his hands down the front of his trousers. ‘I took the Hippocratic oath. Just as Bram’s consultations with me were private, everything between us tonight is confidential.’

Ah. He wasn’t telling me everything then.

‘Anyhow, Florrie,’ he added. ‘You’re family. We look out for each other. What I’ll do is put it about that Bram died from kidney disease.’

‘And exhaustion,’ I added. ‘Don’t forget that.’ It wouldn’t surprise anyone, especially those who remembered how he’d run around after Henry Irving.

After George left and I’d sent Maria to bed, I sat in the drawing room, my chest aching, my mind working furiously. I watched the dawn approach, and skylarks take wing, though I was deaf to their sweet song. Fog curled around the street, muffling the sounds of folk going about their daily business. Still, I didn’t move. I couldn’t. I was weighed by anger, disgust, and such a sense of betrayal. How was putting himself into a situation where he contracted syphilis being prudent? Who had infected him? Had he infected anyone else?

Imagine if word should escape, how would people view him? View me? Our marriage? No matter the awful truth, they’d assume I was diseased as well. I would become a social outcast.

It was all I could do not to fling open the window and scream at the heavens, *You bloody fool, Bram; you inconsiderate, immoral fool!*

This was yet another albatross to hang about my neck, another secret I’d take to my grave. Shame washed over me. Shame, resentment and confusion, a virulent mix.

‘Curse you, Bram Stoker.’ I bowed my head and wept. ‘Curse the day I married you.’



PART SEVEN

1922 to 1937

She differs from all others

She has a man's brain – a brain that a man should have were he much gifted – and a woman's heart.

Bram Stoker, *Dracula*

CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE

London, April 1922

It was the tenth anniversary of Bram's passing and, as he had every year (except during the war), Noel came to visit. It was obligation rather than genuine affection or concern for my wellbeing that brought him to my door, we both knew that. He'd still not forgiven me for what he called my outrageous behaviour following his father's death.

It wasn't Bram's death per se that had made me act as I did, oh no. Rather, it was the reasons for it. My memories were forever tarnished. I was possessed by the knowledge Dr Browne had given me. It had been a stake to the heart.

Consequently, I did the worst thing a mother, a widow, could do: I became a source of tattle and rumour.

First, I'd auctioned Bram's precious books, manuscripts, the artworks he'd collected, the items he'd purchased from Henry Irving's estate, and all his other paraphernalia. Any reminders of him, his foiled ambitions, the mementoes of our life together, had been too painful to keep. They had to go and, if I profited from their removal, well, it was the least I deserved.

Dismayed I was being so cavalier about things that had been dear to Bram, my family and friends tried to dissuade me. But receiving four hundred pounds for what was, in my view at the time, largely dreck, was a windfall. I'd been ready to burn the damn lot.

Then I insisted people stop referring to me as Mrs Bram Stoker and call me Mrs Florence Stoker instead.

Within weeks, I'd cast aside my mourning garb and thrown myself into a range of distractions: lunches at Foyles with Lucy, Nancy and, occasionally, Ellen. Opening nights at the theatre, often with Violet. I went

to dinners, book readings, invited people for afternoon tea. Services at Brompton Oratory soothed my soul and gave my life a sense of ritual and meaning. I went on a Hellenic cruise, taking a companion with me. I returned to Paris to do some shopping. I spent time with Genevieve, made regular visits to the family in Dublin. My appearance became more important than ever as doubt ate my soul. I'd hear people referring to me as the 'merry widow'. It wasn't a compliment.

I joined Noel, Neelie and my granddaughter Ann for summers on the Isle of Wight. I knew they invited me out of a sense of duty, but I went all the same.

After years of being content to let Bram steer our lives in the direction he chose, I took the helm. Before the auction even took place, I sent the publishers a curt letter informing them that all matters pertaining to Bram's works must come to me.

It was a difficult time. Inside, I was reeling, seething with anger, betrayal and humiliation. A heady combination as it turns out; restrained emotion can make you do things that seem, to those who don't know the reasons, rash, selfish and cold.

I heard Lucy tell Nancy one day it was 'grief' that made me act so; in the kitchen Maria and Mary muttered that my husband's death had changed me.

'Unhinged', 'frivolous' and 'superficial' were among the kinder epithets. I wore them stoically. Only George understood. He kept his word, and the secret of Bram's death followed him to his grave two years ago.

Today, I hoped to breach the defences Noel had erected. No, that wasn't fair. It was my own conduct that had caused him to put distance between us.

I studied him as he sat on the lounge, the cup of tea in his hand, the dark, tailored three-piece suit; his brown hair, lighter than mine had once been but with a touch of Bram's russet, was just starting to grey at the temples. I wasn't convinced the moustache suited him, not that I'd dare say. He'd done well for himself, had Noel. He had a fine house, a loving wife and lovely daughter.

'And Ann is well?' I asked after we'd discussed the weather, the state of the roads, the new pope and the Prince of Wales's visit to Japan.

'Very,' said Noel, a tad cautiously. 'She's showing a real talent for painting.'

‘On top of her music? Clever girl.’

‘Where’s Phillippa?’ asked Noel, looking around as if my niece and companion might suddenly manifest out of the walls.

‘Taking Moonbeam for a walk,’ I answered, glancing out the window, half-expecting to see a slender figure with a little Pekingese in tow.

When Phil first suggested her daughter, Phillippa, move to London and become my companion, I bristled. Old women had companions. But Phillippa, with her bright laugh, twinkling eyes and clever observations about people and things, her ability to know when I wanted time to myself, was a delight. I saw the world anew through her eyes – her unaffected joy at London, her excitement at meeting my friends and acquaintances, an enthusiasm that hadn’t diminished over the years she’d been with me.

‘I can’t believe that Mr Conan Doyle comes to dinner!’ she’d exclaim. ‘You aren’t dazzled at all, are you, Aunty Florrie?’

‘My dear,’ I’d said, repressing a smile, ‘when one counts the likes of Ellen Terry, Genevieve Ward and Sir William Gilbert among their dearest friends, has laughed with royalty, watched Jules Verne dance on tables, been snowbound in a hotel with an American president, it’s hard to be overwhelmed by anyone anymore.’

I sank back into the chair, hands gripping the wide cushioned arms, as Noel crossed to the window. The faint warble of a blackbird welcoming the shafts of sunlight piercing the rain clouds sweetened the day. A motor car drove through a puddle. I liked that sound, the lovely swish. It reminded me of Gilbert. Dear God, that was so long ago.

It’s funny how time can alter how one feels about something, about someone … including my husband.

After Bram died, I became the executor of his literary estate, such as it was. Almost immediately, I was approached to finish putting together a collection of short stories Bram had been collating before he died. Instead of three volumes, only one was commissioned, but this was to include a deleted chapter from *Dracula*. The last thing I wanted to do back then was finish Bram’s incomplete work. Everything was too raw, so I declined. Then I was asked to write the preface. This was offered to appease me but, because it gave me latitude and authority, a recognition of my new role in relation to Bram’s creations, I capitulated. The collection was published as *Dracula’s Guest* and the subsequent royalties were very helpful, which was

just as well, because apart from *Dracula* and *Jewel of the Seven Stars*, earnings from his other publications were pitiful.

Over the years, through Bram's publisher, I'd sold some translation rights, fielded interest in the reprint of one or two books (rarely did these amount to anything), but nothing of any significance had arisen … until now.

'Noel,' I began cautiously. He turned around. 'There's something I need your advice about. It's to do with your father's literary estate.'

In the past, Noel had suggested I reach out to the Society of Authors for counsel, but I'd been hesitant to do so. I was still bridling over the pathetic one hundred pounds the Royal Literary Fund had given Bram when he'd sought help and, consequently, had developed a general distrust of literary organisations.

I picked up the thick envelope I'd been sent anonymously and extracted a large sheet of paper. 'Take a look at this and tell me what you think.' I handed it to him as he sat down.

It was an advertisement for a film and featured a figure, more monster than man, bald, with a bulging forehead and a small mouth from which two rat-like teeth protruded. He had a large hooked nose and enormous malevolent eyes. When I first saw it, my mind filled with wasps that buzzed and stung, and my hair stood on end. An old memory pushed itself forward. It was as if whoever had composed the artwork had drawn inspiration from the dead man who once haunted me.

After Bram died, and I slowly rebuilt my life, my apparition appeared less and less until, one day, I realised he was no longer there. Initially discommoded, as if I'd lost yet another acquaintance, I'd search for him in the shadows. To no avail; after all those years, he was finally vanquished.

Yet, the moment I laid eyes on the flyer, it was as if my revenant had returned. The resemblance was uncanny.

Noel's brows crept to the top of his forehead. 'Good Lord!'

'I doubt He had anything to do with it,' I said dryly. 'Ghastly, isn't it? This came with it.' I handed him what else had arrived in the envelope: a booklet, a program to be exact. 'Keep reading,' I said, flapping a hand as he looked at it, then me, in disbelief. 'Seems a German company have made a moving picture of Father's novel, *Dracula*.'

‘Prana Film,’ read Noel. ‘I didn’t know you’d sold the rights, Mother,’ he added snippily.

‘I haven’t. I knew nothing about any of this until the package arrived in the mail.’ I leaned over and stabbed the flyer. ‘It states here the director’s a fellow named Murnau and the so-called screenwriter is Henrik Galeen. Together, they’ve “freely adapted” your father’s book and turned it into a film. Look. It says that right there, without so much as a by-your-leave or anything in the way of compensation. The gall of them!’

Noel shook his head in disbelief. ‘For a professional company, they’re either incredibly foolish or indifferent to the implications of what they’ve done.’

‘Perhaps both,’ I huffed. ‘As you can see from that program, the film was shown at the Berlin Zoological Gardens last month. Hundreds paid to see it.’

‘I wonder why they called it *Nosferatu* when they “freely adapted” *Dracula*?’ Noel returned the offending pages to me. ‘Since they openly admit to using Father’s work, why change it?’

‘They probably thought by calling it *Nosferatu*, no-one would notice they’d plagiarised Bram’s work.’

‘Somebody noticed.’ Noel picked up his neglected cup of tea and finished it, pulling a face. ‘Do you have any idea who sent these to you?’

‘Not a clue. But *somebody* is looking out for me.’ I smiled lest my words be misinterpreted as a criticism of him, but not before a frown marred his usually serene brow. Once more, I’d said the wrong thing. ‘Which is why I need your assistance,’ I added hastily. ‘What can I do about this? I can’t let them get away with blatantly copying *Dracula*, can I? Stealing your father’s work.’

‘Of course not,’ said Noel indignantly.

‘Well, what do you suggest?’

Noel sighed. ‘What I’ve been saying to you for years now, Mother. You must join the Incorporated Society of Authors, Playwrights and Composers.’

I buried a smile. I’d known what Noel would say, of course. But I enjoyed the ‘told you so’ tone all the same. ‘Frankly,’ I replied, determined to remain stubborn a little longer, let him believe he was persuading me, ‘I don’t see what they can do for me.’

Noel gave a half-laugh of exasperation. ‘For a start, they can ensure your rights as Father’s literary executor are honoured. They can see to it that you’re paid for … for that.’ He gestured to the advertisement. ‘If you’d joined when I first mentioned them, you wouldn’t have had all those problems with that publisher in Leipzig.’

‘You mean Max Altman. The one your father gave the German translation rights to *Dracula*.’

‘The man who’s given you grief over accounts and royalties.’

I gave a dramatic shudder. ‘Horrible man. Makes everything such a chore. Maybe he’s behind this Prana Film thing. I wouldn’t put it past him to have sold the rights to *Dracula* without telling anyone, let alone paying me. He’s probably never forgiven us for winning the war.’

‘Mother!’ exclaimed Noel in faux shock.

The one good thing about getting older was you wise up to the benefits of being able to say what you think. No-one checked an old woman. Too often, they simply ignored her.

‘The thing is,’ continued Noel, ‘the Society can help you deal with men like Herr Altman. You need expert advice, Mother, about contracts, copyright, the legalities, and they’re the people to provide it.’

I cocked my head and regarded my son. ‘Alright,’ I sighed. ‘If you think so. I’ll approach them. See what they have to say for themselves.’

‘Well,’ said Noel, leaping out of his chair. ‘What are you waiting for? Call them.’

‘Now?’

‘Why not? It’s business hours. There’s no point delaying, not once you’ve made up your mind.’

I pretended to procrastinate.

‘I’ll be here to help.’ He held out his hand.

Together, we entered the hallway. I was about to reach for the telephone, when he gently caught my wrist.

‘Ask for the secretary. His name is George Thring. But, if I may offer extra advice?’

‘By all means.’

‘Don’t mention this *Nosferatu* business, not yet. Wait until you’re a member.’

‘Why? The whole purpose of joining is to get their help sorting out this mess.’

‘I know that. But these societies have rules. If Mr Thring thinks you’re only joining to get something out of them, he might become difficult; create obstacles. Just say who you are and that you want to become a member.’

‘You’re sure?’

‘Years of dealing with bureaucrats does give me some idea of how they operate. Call him, Mother, and let’s get you signed up. Oh, there’ll be a fee.’

‘Of course there will.’

I quickly looked up the number Noel had given me years ago in my little telephone book. I smiled at my son. He gave my shoulders a squeeze. Unaccountably, tears pricked my eyes. I blinked them back. My plan had worked. I’d hadn’t felt so close to him since we sat across from each other the day of Bram’s death.

But it was more than that. It may have taken years, but my hot anger and wretched confusion over Bram, my shame and deep hurt, *had* altered. It had softened. Our dark confidence, the secret of his death, remained that. Now others were attempting to dishonour him, albeit in a different way, and in doing so dishonouring *and* underestimating me. They were attempting to tread on Bram’s legacy, render what little we *had* achieved valueless.

This was my chance to pay tribute, if not to Bram, then to his work – work for which I was the custodian. It was up to me to protect it. How it would be remembered in the future was down to my actions now.

If it so happened I was rehabilitated in my son’s eyes during this process, that was a wonderful bonus.

Before I could change my mind, I picked up the receiver and dialled.

CHAPTER FIFTY-TWO

London, 1923

Having been a member for a year or more, I finally paid my first visit to the offices of the Incorporated Society of Authors, Playwrights and Composers. I was given a brief tour of the book-lined and smoke-filled rooms, accompanied by the clatter of typewriters, before being ushered into Mr George Thring's office by his secretary, Miss Chandler. Since joining, I'd done what I could to keep the case against the Germans at Prana Film at the forefront of the Society's mind.

'As I outlined to you in my last letter, my dear Mrs Stoker,' began Mr Thring after we'd exchanged pleasantries and I'd taken the offered seat. His voice sounded different in person. Deeper, more considered, less inclined to reveal the limits of his patience. 'There are those among our members who feel that the Society's, ah … energies, have been consumed by your … frequent demands. I've had dozens of letters from you.' He rested a hand on a nearby file filled with the blue stationery I favoured. 'On top of numerous phone calls. Need I remind you that you joined only when you were in difficulties.'

I cocked a brow. 'Indeed. But what's the point of the Society if not to help members when in *difficulty*?'

Mr Thring cleared his throat. 'Well, the management committee feel their time would be better spent on supporting *longstanding* members. Those perceived as more … deserving of our support.' He drew breath. I took the opportunity.

'My dear Mr Thring,' I began, deliberately imitating his tone and style. Heat travelled up my neck and a furnace burned in my centre, a fire that had been stoked by the endless (and mostly useless and repetitive) correspondence from this very man.

I tried to bring him into focus, his neat swollen suit, finely trimmed moustache; a neck that rolled over the edges of his tight collar. Well fed, my mother would have said. Corpulent, would have been Bram's word. All the same, I wondered if Mr Thring was echoing the committee he represented or whether he had taken a set against me and was determined to fob me off. After all, I was merely a writer's widow, not the talent himself. And yet, when I first joined the Society, they'd taken my complaint about *Nosferatu* seriously. They'd assured me that yes indeed, I was owed money from Prana Film, who were most definitely in breach of copyright.

As time passed, I received what can only be described as wishy-washy replies from Mr Thring: 'We're still dealing with the matter', 'It's not as clear-cut as first appeared, Mrs Stoker', 'These things are complex'. It was as if I was a child dabbling in an adult world in which I had no business.

I took a deep breath and rested a hand against the desk. '*Deserving*, you say. Explain to me then, Mr Thring, what is *your* purpose if not to help members in a crisis? Or do you simply exist to take membership fees and ensure your salary is paid?'

There was very little point remaining after that. Mr Thring muttered some platitudes about following due procedures and that I must be patient – advice that always rankled, more so now I was older. Time was not on my side.

As I made to depart, he said one last thing. 'Rest assured, Mrs Stoker, when there's news regarding your case, you'll be among the first to know.'

I paused in the doorway. He'd already picked up his pen and opened a ledger; a passive dismissal.

'And *you* may rest assured, Mr Thring, I will ensure I am.'



I made no friend of Mr Thring that day. From then on, he refused to take any of my calls. One time, I even overheard him telling Miss Chandler to say he was in a meeting.

Left with no recourse but to write, I did, and often. After all, if I didn't pursue the matter, who would? When Mr Thring wrote that the Society would no longer embroil itself in the 'messy' *Nosferatu* business some weeks later, I turned to friends. Arthur Conan Doyle used his influence to speak to the Society's committee on my behalf, as did George Bernard

Shaw and Mr Heinemann. For a brief time, their weight added to my cause and momentum was achieved. Until everything once more ground to a halt. It was a confounding time.

Then, in June, I received the news that Prana Film had declared bankruptcy.

I telephoned Noel immediately.

'Well, Mother, no-one can say you didn't exhaust every possibility,' he said. I could hear Ann singing in the background.

'Have I, though?' I sighed. 'Has the Society?'

The telephone crackled. Noel never felt the urge to fill silence. Nor did I. That had been Bram's role.

'What upsets me most, Noel, is that if these filmmakers don't face some consequences, what's to stop anybody else doing the same? Stealing another writer's work?'

Noel chuckled. 'I think bankruptcy is a fairly large consequence, don't you, Mother?'

I didn't answer.

'Look, if you're a bit short, I can always forward you —'

'No,' I snapped. The last thing I wanted was my son loaning me money. 'I'm fine.' I wasn't fine, not by my standards. But I was deeply disappointed. Of all Bram's works, *Dracula* was the one book that continued to pay royalties. Admittedly, these were on the decline. I'd hoped pursuing the makers of *Nosferatu* might at least provide me with something.

But there was a bigger issue at stake. Once again, Bram was being cast in the shadows. Worse, someone was taking credit for his creative labours. Hadn't I sworn to do all in my power to ensure Bram got the recognition – and me the damn money – he deserved? Oh, to hell with these annoyances!

What was fast becoming apparent was that Mr Thring and Prana Film hoped to wear me down. Well, I was Mrs Florence Stoker and nothing and nobody would accomplish that, not while I lived and breathed.

CHAPTER FIFTY-THREE

London, 1924

4 Kinnerton Studios,
William Street,
Knightsbridge, London
13 July

Dearest Phil,
I cannot tell you how relieved I was to read that John is much improved. I confess, I was shocked at how gaunt he'd become when I saw you both back in March. Let's pray he's soon back to his former self.

Thank you for your kind thoughts about Genevieve. We may not have seen each other much in her final months, nor as often as I'd have liked, but eighty-five is a mighty age to reach, don't you think? Especially when you consider those we lost far too soon.

I'm still lighting a candle for Poor O. It's funny, Phil, but the longer Oscar is gone from this life, the greater a presence he is in mine. Time has been kinder to his memory, and I find people are now content to discuss him quite openly and fondly, recall his great wit and talent and politely forget the scandal that marred his final years. Not that there haven't been those still trying to profit from it. Did you see that so-called friend of O's, Robert Sherard, has written *another* biography about him? The first left a nasty taste. I don't know why he penned it, except to make money (not that there's anything wrong with writing for bread, unless it's to mar a person's name, especially one who can no longer defend himself). I was most disappointed with Bosie's effort, too. Mind you, Oscar's plays are, dare I say it, wild(e)ly popular again.

Whenever I hold my little Sunday soirees, I make sure to draw attention to the books Oscar signed for me, and his lovely painting. O's little

watercolour creates much envy in the breasts of the Oscar cult. That's what I'm calling them, these women and men who gush over him. Did I tell you I met the brother of Robert Ross? Mr Ross was one of the few people who stood by O through thick and thin and was with him in Paris. A lovely man, he'd kept in touch with O's sons. Sadly, Cyril died during the war – a German sniper in France. They say his other lad, Vyvyan, has ambitions to be a writer. Quite the name to live up to, isn't it, being the son of Oscar Wilde. Though Vyvyan uses the name Holland, so maybe not. It was arranged that Vyvyan would visit, and I told all my guests, but he never showed. He was talked about at great length, though, as was his father. O would love that he's still the subject of gossip, wouldn't he?

I've been out no end this season, with theatre and parties and dinners thrown in. It's tiring, but I enjoy every moment. I've reclaimed the zest I thought extinguished long ago. Wherever I go, there are those who, once they learn I'm Bram Stoker's wife, insist on telling me about the time they met him, or what he did for them, and this more than twelve years after his death.

Just as it was when he was alive, he's best known for the Lyceum and Henry Irving. I try to give a different perspective on *that* arrangement, explain how essential he was, how important, and while some are curious, I find most people would much rather remain fixed in their understanding. However, when I mention that I'm currently in the midst of a legal battle over the rights for Bram's novel *Dracula* with a German film company, interest is suddenly kindled.

I can honestly admit I don't think anyone would give two figs for me if I wasn't once married to Bram. It's as if I've no identity of my own, as if Florence never existed. I'm subsumed. Yet, who else is fighting to keep Bram's literary accomplishments alive? Only me. So, I've decided that going forward, I'm going to sign myself Mrs FAL Bram Stoker. If I have to use his name again in order to be taken seriously, to fight for his legacy, then I think it only fair I have equal billing.

Next week, I'm meeting with a young Irish producer and playwright by the name of Hamilton Deane to discuss bringing *Dracula* to the stage. I was very set against the idea for such a long time. Well, I've changed my mind. (Older women may not be entitled to much, including film rights, but I am to this!) Mr Bang (William Heinemann's friend), who I seem to have collected along the way, has become my agent. He says there could be a

‘tidy sum’ to be made. Noel agreed. So, I’ll meet Mr Deane (who used to perform with Henry Irving’s Vacation Company – am I never to escape ‘the Chief’?) in two days’ time and see what he has to say. The more I think about it, the more I like the idea of *Dracula* being a theatrical production. It’s what Bram always intended (though a part of me feels he’d love seeing it transformed into a film as well – just not the German version). If it all goes ahead, I’m quite determined to have a say. This might be my last chance to shape *Dracula* into something more palatable for the public and, I pray, successful.

I’ll let you know the outcome of the meeting in my next letter dear one.

Love always,

Your Florrie, to be known henceforth as Mrs FAL Bram Stoker

CHAPTER FIFTY-FOUR

It was a Monday when I first met Mr Hamilton Deane. He came to my flat just past ten of the clock. Mr Bang had arrived earlier, and we'd swiftly gone over the kind of questions I should ask. Phillippa took Moonbeam for a walk, promising to stay away for a good couple of hours.

It was one of those spring mornings that announce nature's rebirth with a burst of colour, comforting warmth and a delightful breeze. Well, it would have been delightful had it not carried the odours of the streets. The sun was shining, birds were twittering and the cheery voices of neighbours drifting in the window lifted my heart. Why, even Vera, my maid, was singing.

Mr Bang was most congenial, and we agreed about everything – except my intention to have a say in the production, should it proceed. Mr Bang was of the mind that we should hear what Mr Deane had to say before I put in my tuppence worth lest I risk the opportunity. I disagreed. It was against this setting that Mr Deane made his entrance.

There was something about Hamilton Deane that, despite my determination to keep him at arm's length and act like the consummate businesswoman, I warmed to immediately. It wasn't only that he grew up in my old neighbourhood of Clontarf, or that his mother knew Bram many years ago, or that he possessed the roguish charm of so many of my former countrymen. It was quite simply that he reminded me of Oscar.

There wasn't a physical resemblance, not really, apart from the high forehead and the expressive mouth. It was more his style, the hand gestures, the confident walk. The way he gave such a formal yet enchanting bow over my extended hand before collapsing with fluid grace into the armchair near the window.

I made a conscious effort not to touch my hair, my skirts. Not to stare as, barely drawing breath, he excitedly told me how much he admired

Bram's work, the drama of it, the way he was able to create worlds, evoke such deep emotions with words.

My heart swelled. I couldn't recall the last time someone spoke so generously about Bram's writing.

'You've read all his books then?'

Vera chose that moment to enter with a tray containing tea and slices of Battenburg.

'*All?* Erm … why, yes. I mean, I'm not certain. I'm referring of course to *Dracula*.'

I inwardly groaned. 'I see.' Frost framed my next words. '*Dracula* was not the only book Bram wrote. In fact, he wrote a total of eighteen.'

Mr Deane took the teacup from Vera. '*Eighteen!* I … I'd no idea he'd written so many. I will amend my oversight immediately. I'm afraid all my spare time has been devoted to the one I'm here to talk to you about.'

'You disappoint me, Mr Deane. You can hardly declare yourself an aficionado of my husband's work if you've only read *one* of his books.'

Mr Bang choked on his beverage. 'Excuse me,' he said, wiping his mouth with a napkin.

'Oh, but, Mrs Stoker,' continued Mr Deane, smiling in a disarming way, 'I *am* an aficionado of *Dracula*. I've read it so many times, I defy anyone to claim they know it better.'

It was on the tip of my tongue to remind him that there would be at least one other person, but he was dead. Mr Bang discreetly coughed into his napkin. Mr Deane then proceeded to prove how well he knew *Dracula* by taking us through the book blow by blow. When he began to recount Renfield's predilection for rats, I put a stop to it. Nevertheless, I felt guilty that, unlike this stranger, I was not as well acquainted with the tale. With my eyesight so poor, I doubt I could manage a whole book anymore. I determined to ask Phillippa to read it to me.

Mr Deane placed his cup and saucer on the table. The china clinked repeatedly. Why, the poor man was shaking.

My frost began to melt.

'So, Mr Deane,' I said. 'Let us get to the heart of the matter. The reason you're here. I understand you wish to turn my husband's novel into a play.'

Mr Deane's shoulders lifted; his spine straightened. 'I do, Mrs Stoker. I do. I'm an actor-manager who fancies himself a novice writer.' He grinned.

‘For my sins, I’ve a small troupe that performs under the name the Hamilton Deane Company. We tour the provinces mainly. *Dracula* would, I’m afraid, have its premiere and initial run there.’

It was hard not to express relief.

‘Though, naturally,’ he continued, ‘I’m hoping that the big cities will call —’

‘Naturally,’ I said.

‘And I’m of the conviction that if any play can turn around the fortunes of my little company, it’s *Dracula*.’ He hesitated, flashed a grin at first me, then Mr Bang. ‘As I envisage it.’

I tried not to pull a face. This novice had lofty ambitions. I still remembered the only time *Dracula* had been in a theatre – the copyright reading at the Lyceum. The last thing I wanted was a production replicating that effort. ‘You’ve just spent the last twenty minutes expressing your admiration for the novel, Mr Deane, yet you would change it. In what way?’

Mr Deane cleared his throat. ‘As I’m sure you’re aware, Mrs Stoker, a play is a very different beast to a novel. Cuts are required. Reorganisation. A fresh vision, if you like.’ He inched forward and lowered his voice, as if he was about to share a confidence. ‘If I may be so bold, I’ve already taken the liberty of commencing a draft.’ He nodded, smiling, like a child seeking approval.

Mr Bang’s considerable eyebrows travelled up his forehead and he opened his mouth.

‘Have you now?’ I said before Mr Bang could interject.

Mr Deane’s smile fled as he became aware of the miasma of displeasure filling the room. He held up his palms. ‘I’ve no intention of taking it further, not without your consent. I’m aware there have been … issues … A foreign company taking liberties with copyright and such. I wouldn’t dream of doing anything so unethical. Why, that’s theft.’

‘It certainly is,’ piped up Mr Bang, taking a cautious sip of his tea. ‘And that attracts penalties, you understand.’

‘Oh, I do. I do. But unlike those *German* filmmakers,’ said Mr Deane, nonplussed, ‘I intend to not only pay you for the privilege of adapting the novel but remain true to the original.’ He reached for the satchel he’d brought with him and pulled out a very worn journal. There were crumpled

pages sticking out, notes and other pieces of paper crammed within the leather covers. ‘I bought two copies of *Dracula* and cut out every piece of dialogue and pieced it together. See? I removed all the descriptive passages so I might hear the characters speak.’

He opened the journal at a random page and carefully held it out for me and Mr Bang to study.

He wasn’t exaggerating. Even though it was a bit of a blur, I could make out ribbons of printed paper. They were glued one above the other. He flicked the pages to reveal more of the same.

‘Mrs Stoker, Mr Bang,’ he continued, ‘if I may say so, Mr Stoker had an ear for dialogue, and I want to use as much of it as possible. But I can’t proceed any further without a binding contract.’ He shut the book and Bram’s characters ceased to talk.

‘I’m relieved to hear that, Mr Deane,’ I said as calmly as I could. It was quite unsettling seeing Bram’s work carved into pieces like that. I put my empty teacup beside Mr Deane’s and was pleased to note my hands at least were steady, even if my stomach was not. ‘Dialogue aside, why don’t you tell me exactly how you envisage a theatrical production of *Dracula*. After all, the book is vast in scope, moving from somewhere in Europe, to London, Whitby, and other locations. I can’t imagine it being easy to adapt, let alone stage.’

‘In that, you’re absolutely right, Mrs Stoker.’ First putting the journal back in his satchel, Mr Deane wiped his hands down his trousers, inhaled deeply and leapt to his feet. The movement was so unexpected, Mr Bang and I startled.

Poised before my chair, he towered over me. ‘Imagine this, if you will.’ He flung out his arms. His voice was deep, husky and beguiling. ‘A darkened auditorium, lit only by a few tremulous candles. A large, arched window at the rear through which the tenebrous sky can just be discerned. Slowly, the lights brighten to reveal a large room, lined with books, some comfortable leather chairs, a desk and table. In this room are three men and a woman, all of whom are grieving the mysterious death of a beloved friend …’

For the next few minutes, Mr Deane gave what I suspect was the performance of his life. What he described was an abridged version of

Bram's novel, which not only removed many of the settings and characters but had most of the action taking place in one room in a house in London.

As he spoke and glided about with leonine grace, the day grew dim, the sunshine weaker. His onyx silhouette followed the walls, climbing across the mantelpiece, the sideboard, swallowing the silverware, the books, the flowers in their vases. It grew and diminished, reaching, yearning, camouflaging Mr Bang's features, casting mine into temporary shade as the tale of Count Dracula and the Crew of Light was told anew. The mouth I'd thought mobile and generous became thin, cruel, a hollow space from which I expected elongated teeth to protrude. Gone were Mr Deane's kind eyes, replaced by fearsome, all-seeing bloodshot orbs. I couldn't tear my eyes away. Neither could Mr Bang.

Once again, Bram's vampire had entered my home. I'd invited him in.

I wasn't aware Mr Deane had finished until the thrumming in my ears alerted me. How long I'd sat there without speaking, one hand pressed to my breast, I'm uncertain.

'I must say, that's a very interesting adaptation, Mr Deane,' said Mr Bang, finally. 'Very good. What do you think, Mrs Stoker?' Mr Bang pulled out a huge handkerchief and blew his nose. Such an ordinary gesture.

As Mr Deane helped himself to a piece of cake, I took my time refilling my teacup, offering to pour for the men. Mr Bang declined but Mr Deane helpfully held up his empty one. His hands were no longer quivering.

'Yes, what do you think, Mrs Stoker?' he asked, swallowing the last morsel of cake and brushing crumbs from his jacket. 'I should add, though I've removed all the Transylvanian scenes, I'm considering opening the play with the count climbing down the castle walls. A prologue, if you will. It's such a powerful scene in the novel, when Jonathan Harker sees the count doing that, the batwing-like cape. It's the first time the reader has confirmation of what Harker's dealing with.'

'I doubt you'd be able to stage that convincingly,' said Mr Bang. 'Not without compromising your drawing room opening.'

Rather than being offended, Mr Deane nodded. 'That was my concern, too. But maybe, with Mrs Stoker's approval, we could use the image on the posters and other advertising? Alert people to the gothic nature of the play. That it's based entirely on Mr Stoker's work.' He regarded me with hope-filled eyes.

‘I think,’ I began slowly, then paused to have a sip of tea. It was lukewarm. Though I’d already made up my mind, I wanted to delay gratification. Perverse of me, I know. But Count Dracula had escaped my control before, and I was in no hurry for him to do so again. I had to assert my authority over this, my imprint too. For all his fine ideas, Mr Deane still needed my permission to proceed. ‘Opening scenes and posters aside, before I make any decision, there are a few things I must insist upon if I’m to allow this adaptation to go ahead.’

Mr Bang stifled a moan. A frown flashed across Mr Deane’s face before he schooled it. With studied nonchalance, he leaned back against the cushion and waved his arm dramatically. ‘Please,’ he added, as if he were the host and I his guest.

‘It’s about Count Dracula,’ I began. ‘I’ve always felt that portraying him as more beast than human somehow lessened his … evil.’ I raised a hand to prevent Mr Deane’s protests. ‘I know Bram describes the vampire in no uncertain terms as having hair on his palms and shocking halitosis. He’s able to alter his shape, transforming into —’ I searched my memory, ‘wolves, mist, rats and other creatures. He pursues his own desires at any cost and murders ruthlessly. Why, in their film, the Germans linked the vampire with rats, or so I’m told.’ If Mr Deane was to truly base a play on Bram’s book, then his Dracula – *our* Dracula, I reminded myself – must bear no resemblance to the film one.

‘I would insist that for the stage, Count Dracula be portrayed as a gentleman.’

Mr Bang made a noise of – what? Disapproval? Surprise? Mr Deane sat upright, his eyes never leaving my face.

I repressed a small smile. ‘I want him to be someone fit to mingle with lawyers, doctors, lords and ladies. Enter their drawing room world without causing a murmur.’

‘How … how might he do that?’ asked Mr Deane.

‘He could wear a dinner suit for one.’ An image of Bram looking resplendent in his top hat and tails as he escorted people around the Lyceum or presided over a Beefsteak dinner came to mind, followed by a memory of Oscar. ‘Maybe a cape as well.’

Mr Deane reached into his satchel and drew out another journal and pen. He began making notes. It was hard to hide my pleasure. I was being

taken seriously. About *Dracula*. Oh, the irony.

'I would like him to have excellent manners, be beguiling in a way that the novel's Dracula isn't. Be both fearsome and yet utterly irresistible. Noble. He is, after all, a *count*.'

Mr Deane finished what he was writing, then rested his elbow on the arm of the chair, twirling the pen. His eyes narrowed.

Mr Bang's head dropped into his hands.

'What do you think, Mr Deane?' I asked. Young enough to be my son, I fought not to overlay my memories of Oscar on him.

'You see Dracula as … domesticated.'

I laughed. 'I do. And yet not so domesticated he can be tamed. That would defy his purpose, would it not? But the suggestion he could be should … *linger* as a possibility in the audience's mind.'

First putting his pen and notebook aside, Mr Deane slid forward and, with great reverence, took the teacup out of my hand, placed it on the side table then folded his long fingers around mine.

'I think you're a genius, Mrs Stoker. A bona fide genius.'

We shared a long smile.

'Do we have a deal?' asked Mr Deane softly.

I hesitated, pretended to consider his proposition. He squeezed my fingers.

'We do.' The smile deepened.

'Good. We're agreed then,' said Mr Bang, his voice cutting through the moment. 'Time to discuss percentages.'

And so the conversation turned to money.

Over the following weeks, contracts were negotiated and signed. Bram's vampire would live again.

CHAPTER FIFTY-FIVE

Derby, 1924

Dracula, the play, made its debut on 5 August at the Grand Theatre, Derby. Accompanying me to opening night were Mr Bang, Phillippa, Noel and Neelie. Lucy Gilbert, Nancy and Arthur wanted to attend as well, but I was anxious how it would be received, so begged them to come another night. I didn't mention there were only to be three performances.

Whereas Mr Deane had intended to play the count, he'd ended up casting Edmund Blake in the role and taking on the part of Van Helsing. His reasoning was the doctor had more dialogue. Honestly, actors and their egos. Just like Henry Irving, it was all about being centre stage the longest.

The censor had demanded some changes: the vampire's death wasn't to be shown – too gruesome a spectacle – and Lucy's neck was not to appear penetrated. Even without those, the play was as grisly and frightening as the book (Phillippa had read it to me in the interim and I'd even used Bram's old magnifying glass to read sections for myself). The atmosphere was grim, dark. Though I knew what was to happen, I was on edge. A sense of doom pervaded, so much so, I began to have flashbacks to the drowned man. Not the dripping corpse on the dining table, but as he used to appear in corners and shadows, a demonic presence or a dark guardian. I could never be certain.

The play was not the novel. It wasn't accomplished enough for that. And yet, as abridged as it was, it managed to encapsulate the mood – the dreadful supernatural and the hopeful spiritual. What pleased me most of all was seeing how well the count played as a gentleman of refinement. No longer was he the brusque, crude and hideous undead monster. Dracula now moved among the ladies and gentlemen, entered their inner sanctums, posing a greater threat than ever because he was just like them.

Neelie gripped Noel's hand as the play progressed, and startled exclamations escaped Phillippa throughout. Gasps and even small screams erupted around the theatre. I took joy in others' discomfort. Did that make me a monster, too?

The audience clapped for a long time, the cast beaming as they were called back onto the stage to take their bows not once, nor twice, but thrice.

I hope you're watching, Bram, I silently prayed. *You too, Henry*.

Overall, I was delighted with the play's reception. Mr Deane had been a good choice. The audience loved it.

Sadly, reviewers weren't so generous. Not that this prevented Mr Deane from touring the country and playing to sold-out audiences for months. All the time, he awaited the longed-for call from London.



I, too, was waiting for London to call, more specifically the Society of Authors to tell me that my long battle with Prana Film was finally over.

When they did eventually contact me, the news was not what I wanted to hear.

'I'm afraid our victory in the German courts against Prana is short-lived, Mrs Stoker,' said Mr Thring. I should have known when he telephoned and exchanged pleasantries with more grace than usual that he was preparing to deliver a blow.

'What do you mean, short-lived?' I sat on the little stool in the hallway, unwilling to trust my legs as a wave of disbelief and fury washed over me. 'Last I heard was that despite declaring bankruptcy, they'd been ordered to pay me five thousand pounds. I distinctly remember you saying it was better late than never.' I'd always loathed platitudes, they struck me as lazy and somewhat judgemental, but in this instance, Mr Thring's had been warranted.

'Yes, I did, but —' he paused. 'I was hasty.'

I waited for him to continue. I could hear my breath echoing down the receiver, laboured and heavy.

'They're simply trying to grind me down,' I said. 'They're waiting for me to surrender. Well, I'm not going to, Mr Thring, even though I know you'd be glad if I did.'

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‘I don’t think that’s entirely fair, Mrs Stoker —’

It was my turn to scoff. ‘We’ll beg to differ then. Look,’ I said in a conciliatory tone, ‘if I don’t continue to pursue them for monies owed, Mr Thring, what’s to prevent some other unscrupulous producer swooping in and making a film from a book without buying the rights? Nothing. They’ll view what’s happened with Prana and *Dracula* as consent – unless we stop this right now.’

There was a beat. ‘Well, there’s always the solution we’ve discussed previously, Mrs Stoker …’

I shut my eyes briefly. ‘And, as I told you then, I’m not in favour of doing that. It’s so drastic … so final.’

‘Final may be the only language Prana understand.’ Mr Thring’s tone was conciliatory. ‘The Society, Mr Bang, even your friends have been telling you all along to go down this route …’

‘What do *you* think I should do?’

‘It’s not up to me to tell you what to do, Mrs Stoker.’

I resisted the urge to shout, *What good are you then?*

‘You’re the executor of Mr Stoker’s estate,’ wheedled Mr Thring. ‘The person who holds the rights. Only you can order this.’

I sighed. ‘I really thought Prana would pay me. I thought they’d want to make their film legitimate. I was wrong.’ I rubbed my forehead. A headache was building.

‘Maybe this will help you reach a decision,’ added Mr Thring. ‘While *Nosferatu* exists, and continues to be screened anywhere, I doubt anyone else would be interested in making a movie of *Dracula*, and there are good deals to be made in the burgeoning motion picture industry. Hollywood is growing in America. But if there’s any legal question hanging over a book, it’s unlikely to ever be picked up.’

There was a long silence, filled with static and crackles.

‘You’re saying this is my last option.’

‘In light of what’s gone before,’ said Mr Thring carefully, ‘I think it’s your only option.’

This was a decision I’d resisted making. But what else could I do if I wanted to protect the book? Assert my rights?

‘Why don’t I leave you to think about it?’ Mr Thring was always eager to end our conversations.

‘I don’t need to. Not anymore.’ I straightened my spine, Boudicca about to go into battle. ‘This film has bedevilled my life for three years. I ask that you waste not a moment more but contact the Society’s lawyers and tell them this: I want every single extant copy of *Nosferatu* – both the positive prints and the negatives – destroyed. Immediately.’

‘You’re sure.’

Was I?

‘I am.’

CHAPTER FIFTY-SIX

London, late 1924

‘Honestly, Lemon, I don’t understand why you’re making such a fuss.’

Ellen sat across from me in the drawing room. Though we wrote regularly, it had been two years since I’d seen her as she’d been living down in Kent. I confess, I was shocked at how much she’d changed. Older, she took up a great deal more space than she once had. I found it hard not to stare at her broadened face, the pouched eyes, the lines on her forehead, the ones that pulled at her mouth, the silver hair. Why, the woman Bram once described as a ray of sunshine was more akin to a heavy shower. But while there were only traces of her former comeliness, she was still the same Ellen, ready with a smile and eager to charm. It was hard not to fall under her spell again.

As she chattered away about her life abroad, the plays she’d seen, the places she’d visited, the people she’d dined with, throwing the occasional question in my direction, I couldn’t help but wonder, how did she see me? She’d scarce looked since she arrived in a flurry of scent and silk. Did she know why I’d asked her to call today, despite her crammed London schedule? Busy selecting one of the little cakes Vera had hastily bought from a nearby tearoom, I couldn’t help noting that even her hands, once elegant and white, were now plump and dotted with liver spots. I quickly checked my own. Though thin and veined, they’d thus far been spared the unsightly marks.

Was I also unrecognisable as the woman I’d once been? The friend she’d been proud to accompany anywhere, who turned heads and captured hearts, even when I’d no wish for them? Had my vanity persuaded me that, like Oscar’s Dorian, I remained unchanged, even when rising every day

with stiff limbs, an aching back and fading eyesight was a cruel reminder that I had?

Aware she was waiting for an answer, I gave an apologetic shrug. ‘As I explained to you on the phone and in my letter, it’s a great deal more than a fuss.’ I tried not to sound prim. I took a deep breath. ‘When you sent me the prospectus for this new Film Society and I saw you were a founding member, I was delighted – though I confess, I hadn’t realised cinema had already reached the stage of needing preserving, let alone a group dedicated to the task.’

Ellen flapped a hand. ‘It gives us credibility. Mind you, there’ll come a time when it will require maintaining. Everything does,’ she said, touching her face self-consciously.

‘But when I read the list of the films you intended to show at your very first screening,’ I continued, determined not to change the subject, ‘I was, to say the least, appalled to see *Nosferatu* was one of them.’

‘Really?’ said Ellen disingenuously. ‘If you object, dear, you need only talk to Ivor Montague – the Film Society’s organiser —’

‘I did,’ I said impatiently. ‘But he doesn’t appear to be taking the matter seriously. You do understand there’s a legal injunction telling the producers to destroy the film? Clearly, they’ve ignored the court’s order and what Mr Montagu intends to screen is an illicit copy. If he goes ahead and shows Murnau’s film, it will be in breach of copyright. I’ll be left with no choice but to seek legal recourse against you all.’

‘It’s a private screening, Lemon.’

I brushed aside her words. ‘Mr Montagu said that. Many times, to me, Mr Thring, and my agent, Mr Bang. But I’m afraid that doesn’t change the law, nor the fact that the only reason the film is in your possession is because some importer in Chancery Lane, who had the gall to bring it in illegally from Germany, couldn’t persuade any of the theatres in the city to show it and so *gave* it to your Society.’

‘It was an incredibly generous thing to do.’

‘*Generous?*’ I laughed dubiously. ‘He knew all along he was breaking the law. He gave it to your Society to avoid a fine and make the problem yours. You know he’s disappeared?’

‘Has he?’ Ellen gave an exaggerated shudder. ‘How delicious. The plot thickens.’ She gave a wry smile and dabbed her mouth with a serviette.

‘Lemon, seriously.’ She twisted on the settee to face me. Her eyes were unchanged. All sparkly and kind. ‘It wouldn’t be a problem if you didn’t make it one.’

I sighed. Was Ellen being deliberately obtuse? ‘Don’t you see how wrong this is? I thought you, my oldest friend, would understand, might act on my behalf. You cannot seriously consider presiding over this … this travesty. Once again, Dracula has risen. He’s managed to escape the confines of a bankrupt studio, the continent and, like the plague itself, spread to Britain, using you, of all people, to facilitate his entry. It’s like the plot of a penny dreadful.’

Ellen gave her throaty laugh. ‘You’ve such a flair for the dramatic when you choose. Look,’ she said, reaching for my hands. I reluctantly let her take them. ‘Stop worrying. Give our little showing your blessing, please, darling. You do know that George Shaw, Herbert Wells and Aldous Huxley are sponsors? Surely you don’t want to disappoint them?’

‘I don’t want to disappoint anyone, Ellen, least of all you. But if I allow this screening to go ahead, if word gets out that *Nosferatu* is being shown in London, not only does it make a mockery of the law, of copyright itself, but what chance have I of securing a film deal anywhere? I’ve already lost any prospect of being paid for the rights by these people, be damned if I’ll let them take anything else from me.’

‘Darling.’ Her hands were warm, almost clammy. ‘It’s not like a Lyceum opening night where half the city’s present. It’s for a few people keen to support and preserve cinema.’

I extracted my hands and slid away. ‘But I don’t want *Nosferatu* preserved, Ellen. I want it destroyed.’ I hesitated. ‘Frankly, the risks to my future, to other writers as well, are too great. I can’t afford to let it be shown.’

Ellen was about to help herself to another of the delicate cakes when she paused. ‘Surely, the stage version of Mr Deane’s compensates you nicely. I hear it’s very successful.’

‘It is. Only —’ How did I admit that while it helped, I only received a small percentage, and Mr Bang took a generous cut of that? ‘It will never compensate the way a Hollywood film would. What they’d pay, the reach it would have. Imagine, *Dracula* in cinemas *there*, shown around the world … Bram’s name in lights. His creation conquering countries.’

Ellen lifted another small sponge cake from the plate and took a bite, a dollop of cream dotting the end of her nose. She chewed thoughtfully. ‘I think it would be no less than Ma deserves. But —’ She held up a finger to stop me interrupting. I’d been trying to alert her to the cream on her face. ‘Have you considered that maybe you’re too late? That *Nosferatu* has already escaped your attempts to contain it?’ Her eyes gleamed.

‘I have. It has.’ I released a long, weary sigh. ‘It’s exhausting. It doesn’t matter what injunctions are made, what the court order or the lawyers do, I can’t stop it. They cannot. Who are these people so keen to see me denied? They remind me of Renfield, doing the bidding of a master whose nefarious purpose they don’t understand.’ I threw up my hands. ‘Why should they? I don’t. Just as I don’t understand the power of this film, how it can defy the law. How it can even suborn my friends to act on its behalf and literally at my expense.’ I wagged an admonishing finger at Ellen.

‘Oh, Lemon,’ she said, clasping my finger. ‘If I believed for a moment our little screening was genuinely going to hurt you, of course I’d ensure it was cancelled.’

‘You would?’

‘Of course. Mr Montagu agrees. But —’

Of course there was a but.

‘Before you act rashly, have you thought about seeing *Nosferatu* for yourself?’

I stared at her in disbelief, then gave a bitter laugh. ‘I can’t be seen to endorse the film in any way, Ellen. Seeing it would be the worst thing I could do.’

Aware something was on the tip of her nose, she swiped the cream away, sucking her finger. ‘You know what I think, Lemon?’

I waited.

‘I think you’re afraid you might like it.’

‘Well,’ I said, reaching for the teapot and refilling our cups. ‘It’s a moot point, isn’t it? As we speak, Mr Thring, Mr Bang and their men are scouring London warehouses looking for the film. If it’s there, they’ll find it.’

They were like my own version of the Crew of Light, seeking out the hiding place of the celluloid vampire to end his attempt to conquer once and for all.

Ellen took the cup I offered, shaking her head in disappointment. ‘I hope you don’t live to regret this, Lemon.’

‘Regret it? Why would I?’

‘Because instead of being known as a champion fighting for her rights, for those of *all* authors, you could well be remembered as the awful woman who destroyed a cinematic masterpiece and denied it to the world.’

At least, I thought, I’d be remembered for something.

CHAPTER FIFTY-SEVEN

I slid into the seat Ellen indicated, waiting with bated breath for the few present to turn around and note my arrival. Heads continued to face the front and the large screen upon which the film was to be projected. The room was already in darkness. The walls oozed anticipation and a sense of the forbidden. After all, this was an unlawful screening. A secret one. I recognised a couple of the silhouettes, even from behind. There was John Maynard Keynes, Mr Shaw, Mr Wells, Mr Montagu, and a couple of hatted women I assumed were wives. Did they know that the woman who sought to prevent this film ever being shown sat behind them?

Mrs Bram Stoker: Dracula's unwelcome guest.

When Ellen invited me to a clandestine viewing for sponsors of the Society, my attempts to stop it having failed, I initially refused. Why would I want to see something that had caused me nothing but torment and trouble for years? A film that, through the delusional fixation of others, had achieved a life of its own.

Not to be dissuaded, Ellen telephoned me and insisted.

'I can't, Ellen.' I tried, unsuccessfully, to keep the exasperation out of my tone. 'I told you; I can't be seen to sanction what I've fought so hard to destroy.'

Ellen gave her deep throated chuckle. 'Of course you can't. So, we're going to ensure you're *not* seen.'

'What do you mean?'

'I've thought it through. I'll sneak you in just before the film starts, when everything is in darkness. If you sit at the back, then leave before the lights come on, no-one will know you were there. What do you think? It's a grand idea, isn't it?'

I fell silent.

'Come on, Lemon, what have you got to lose?'

Everything, I thought. Except …

I gave a bitter laugh. ‘I don’t want to see it, Ellen. I want to kill it.’

‘Then deliver the death blow knowing thine enemy. Come on, Lemon, I know you want to …’

We’d argued back and forth a little longer, but it wasn’t until she assured me the Film Society was returning the film to Germany for destruction after the one screening that I reluctantly agreed.

‘I don’t understand why you would break the law for the sake of a film.’

Ellen sighed. ‘Firstly, it’s not breaking any *British* laws —’

‘Isn’t it? It’s breaking my heart.’

There was the crepitation of the phone line.

‘Secondly, this might be the only chance any of us get to view it. Think about it, Lemon. A cinematic version of Bram’s book. How can you *not* want to see it? There may never be another one.’

To the side of the screen, a piano played loud, discordant music, like a church organ in the process of dying. The sound plucked at my already heightened nerves. Flustered, my hands gripped my reticule tightly. What was I doing here? Why had I allowed Ellen to convince me? Beside me, she laced a reassuring hand through mine and nodded towards the screen. With a deep breath, I turned towards it.

Names appeared: the characters, cast and crew. Much to my surprise, the main female character was called Ellen. My Ellen and I exchanged a quick look of astonishment before the screen captured us once more.

An image, like a page in an old book, flickered. The word ‘Nosferatu’ appeared; below was a definition. I could make out the words ‘death bird’, ‘midnight’ and ‘blood’. A wave of cold struck me.

Once the film proper started, I found it hard to concentrate. How could I, when I was comparing every scene, every utterance, every character, to Bram’s novel? The names may have been altered, the size of the cast, the locations, too, but to me it was a poor and shameful copy of my husband’s work. It was also heavy-handed, with none of the subtleties of *Dracula*. The references to blood, the occult, werewolves, were so overblown. Jonathan Harker had become Hutter, and gormless in the process, his goofy grin and affability a weakness. Ellen, or Mina as she was so obviously meant to be, was a much more appealing character, only lacking British Mina’s skills or, it seemed, a mind. As for the Dracula figure – Count Orlock as he was

renamed – he was the stuff of nightmares. Not even the advertisement I'd been sent years ago prepared me for the emaciated hunchback hulking over every scene. The black-ringed eyes, peculiar mouth and those rat-teeth. The claw-like hands that reached and grasped. He was demonic, made worse because he was aligned with the plague.

As the film progressed, I forgot my earlier reservations and found myself drawn into the narrative. Perhaps it was the music, the fantastical, gloomy imagery, the ravenous, busy spiders, carnivorous plants, wooden crosses, all laden with significance transcending their original purpose. Light, shadows and buildings became characters in their own right; the actors' eyes, impossibly wide, filled with confusion, fear and dread, imbuing the tale with an unexpected malignancy.

The room contracted as the reel clicked and whirred, the small audience completely still. The jangling music filled my body and seized my heart, causing it to beat faster. Beside me, Ellen had inched forward. I glanced at her; the shadow cast by the screen count had swallowed her features. She too was a mere vessel for this dark tale.

When film-Ellen sacrificed herself, all I could think was: Why is it that women must always pay the price for men's sins? Even inhuman ones.

The first rays of dawn struck the count, and he dissolved. I gasped. That was an innovation I hadn't been prepared for. Bram's vampire was weakened by the sun, but a blade through the heart is what turned him to ash that drifted away like motes in God's new day.

When the film finished, I was exhausted and strangely elated. While I knew I could hardly be objective, there was no doubt in my mind that, destructive sunlight aside, this was a direct copy of Bram's book. Every plot point was lifted from the novel. The film might be unique in its staging, but it owed its very existence to *Dracula* and thus Bram Stoker. I'd been correct to pursue Prana. If a Stoker could give a vampire life, then a Stoker could bloody well take it.

That was my right. I would choose what, where and when a new version of *Dracula* would live.

Just as the lights were due to be turned on, I rose, bent towards Ellen, and whispered.

'I know my enemy. Time to defeat him.'

In a swirl of satin and fur, I departed. As if I was never there.

CHAPTER FIFTY-EIGHT

London, 1927

The harsh breathing swelled the darkness. The walls had come alive and were gulping for air. I was supine, paralysed with fear. The floorboards creaked. A weight lowered onto the bed and, unable to stop the momentum, I rolled towards it, my head exploding with a silent scream.

There was a tearing sound. I waited for the pain to strike.

'Mrs Stoker?'

I woke with a cry and sat up in bed, snatching the mess of blankets to my throat.

'Why, Mrs Stoker,' panted Vera, a fist against her breast. 'You scared the bejesus out of me.'

The curtains were drawn; silvery light filled the room. I pressed a hand to my pulsating heart and looked about. Apart from me and Vera, the room was empty.

'Are you alright, Mrs Stoker?'

I tried to smile, but it became a cough. Like a fever-dream, ever since I'd seen that damn film, the phantom that had haunted me for years had returned. This time, as a monster who attacked my sleep, a nightmarish amalgam of the dead and undead.

Vera remained by the bedside, her brow furrowed. 'Should I fetch the doctor?'

I waved her concerns away. 'I'm fine.' I managed a weak smile. 'Fine. It was just a … bad dream.'

'Bad? Since when were you made the Mistress of Understatement?' Vera clucked and, after poking the fire and applying the bellows to it, an action that sent spirals of smuts into the room, began to shake out the shawl

I'd carelessly draped across a chair, folding it. 'Honestly, missus, if yer not crying out in the small hours, you're waking so tangled in yer bedclothes yer like one of them wrestlers at the carnival.'

I watched her in bemusement. Always so busy, like a bee, flitting from flower to flower. She chattered the entire time, one eye on my face. Leaving the subject of my fraught awakening, she talked about the incessant rain and fog, the price of sausages, the train that had become derailed just outside Victoria Street Station, the omnibus that had overturned, thankfully killing no-one but blocking the road for most of the day. I half-listened, more concerned with ensuring the shadows in my room didn't detach themselves from the walls. Bram's count had the ability to shapeshift …

Vera stopped what she was doing. 'You've been having those night terrors an awful lot of late.'

Night terrors. That was an excellent description.

'My ma always said they're a sign something's troubling your conscience.'

'There's nothing troubling mine, thank you,' I said more brusquely than I intended. She meant well, but was too close to the mark.

I remained in bed as she refreshed my washing water and brought in a pot of tea, still talking. As the nightmare faded, her chitter became soothing background music. I drank in the sallow light, relished the everyday noises carrying from outside, the normality of her conversation. Moonbeam barked to be admitted to the room. Vera opened the door, and the dog scurried over, rising on her hind legs and scraping the bed. I scooped her up and burrowed my face in her fur. She smelled of dewdrops, grass and violets. Vera must have taken her for a walk.

Settling the dog on the mattress, I waited until Vera left to cook breakfast, then used the privy, splashed some water on my face and returned to bed. Moonbeam climbed over my legs and stomach like an explorer discovering new territory.

I lay back on the pillows, absent-mindedly stroking the dog, who was busy licking her little paws, and thought about what Vera said. *Something's troubling your conscience*. Mine *was* troubled, and it wasn't only because *Nosferatu* was now loose upon the world. Despite the injunction to destroy the film, copies had turned up in America and across the continent. If that wasn't bad enough, caught up in wanting to claim *Dracula* for myself and

any associated profit as well as credit as a producer, I'd acted rashly. Allowed others to convince me that we could do better than align Bram's work with Mr Deane's theatrical production alone, even though he'd finally got the London theatre run he'd been longing for.

The London critics may have been savage about Mr Deane's interpretation, but the audiences loved it. Was it that Mr Deane had so blatantly exploited audiences' fears – or rather, their longing to be frightened – that I objected to and made me distance myself from his play? When I heard he'd hired a nurse to remain in the foyer to attend to anyone whose nerves overcame them, I thought it a ridiculous bit of theatre itself. But use the nurse many patrons did, and word escaped. Audience numbers grew. The *Evening Standard* reported that while other glittering productions costing a fortune to mount wilted and died in the West End, *Dracula* 'has gone on drinking blood nightly'. All well and good until it became literal.

When a very disturbed young Russian boy threw himself in front of a train at Victoria Station, allegedly after seeing the play, I simply had to disassociate myself from it. Fortunately, Mr Deane managed to keep any connection out of the press, but I knew.

Mr Bang and a gentleman named Harry Warburton (Mr Deane's backer) began to pressure me to reconsider my relationship with Mr Deane. In the aftermath of the boy's death (he was only sixteen – sixteen!), I was amenable to their ideas – including bad ones.

Over a year ago, I'd commissioned a man called Charles Morrell to write a different theatrical version of *Dracula*. It had turned out to be a disaster, and not merely because it was dreadful. I'd insisted he stay close to Bram's original ideas, the dialogue in the book, the action too, but it simply hadn't translated to the stage. Mr Deane had been right all along. Shame raced through my body, the heat resting in my cheeks. What a misadventure that had been. Ill-conceived from the outset.

While I wanted to blame others for my poor judgement, Mr Warburton and Mr Bang first and foremost – I should never have listened to them – the fault was all my own. Caught up in the thrill of being so involved, of being listened to when I insisted scenes missing from Mr Deane's version be included, I failed to see what critics and audiences did. And I failed to consider Mr Deane's loyalty to me. The Morrell play closed faster than the lid on Dracula's coffin.

My vanity project, Phil had called it, and she'd been right. I was forced to eat humble pie. If *Dracula* was to succeed, I needed Mr Deane.

We needed each other.

Still, it was a difficult mistake to admit. I wished there was someone I could unburden myself to. Noel already thought me unhinged for pursuing *Nosferatu* the way I did, Ellen as well. Dear Phillippa was long gone, married and happily settled in Dublin. Could I speak to her? Maybe Lucy and Nancy? Gilbert would have laughed and then taken me for a long drive to 'blow away the cobwebs'. Only these cobwebs were woven afresh each night.

'Oh, Bram,' I sighed. 'Guide me, please.'

I'd done what I could to promote his work – every single book – but all anyone cared about was *Dracula*. Now it was a successful stage play in London and the provinces, boasting audiences in the hundreds, making headlines and attracting reviews that, if not critically sound, at least admitted to the thrills and pleasure the show imparted, all his other writing was forgotten.

It didn't help that around the city I was becoming known as Mrs Dracula. Anger lanced my breast. *Mrs Dracula*. I loathed the title and soundly berated anyone who dared even breathe it in my hearing. I refused to be a vampire's wife let alone a monster's widow. If I was to be likened to anyone, it was surely Mina Harker, using the skills and experience I'd acquired to aid and abet those serving the greater good. And what was maintaining Bram's legacy, fighting for an author's lawful rights, if not a greater good?

Vera had left the newspapers for me to peruse. Extracting my hand from under Moonbeam, I reached for one and my new spectacles. I hated the damn things. They were heavy on my nose and made me resemble an owl, or so Phil had told me when I was in Dublin last month.

As I drank the tea, I tut-tutted over the headlines: British troops had been sent to Shanghai to protect our settlement there. Well, that could only lead to trouble, couldn't it? Only last month, America shipped soldiers into Nicaragua where a civil war was raging. You'd think after the Great War, leaders would be reluctant to send young men off to their deaths in countries they knew nothing about. I thought of Noel and was so very glad he was safe in his office each day, poring over numbers. My thoughts went

to my granddaughter. I must have Ann over to stay again soon. I would telephone Neelie and organise that. There was nothing like an eleven-year-old to keep me on my toes.

With a smile, I continued reading. Then, I saw a piece about a new movie starring that American actress, the lovely Clara Bow. The film was being made by Paramount Studios and called *It*. Rather an unprepossessing title for a film. It was hard to conceive of that making any kind of lasting impact.

As it often did, my imagination began to fly as I cast the film of *Dracula*. Douglas Fairbanks – I could just see him starring as Arthur Holmwood or Quincy Morris. What a pity Rudolph Valentino was dead. I'd adored him in *Son of the Sheik*. What a fine count he would have made.

I put down the newspaper and sat up, disturbing Moonbeam. Was that why I was being haunted by ghastly phantasms night after night? Conquering London theatres wasn't enough? If only I could break into America, ensure *Dracula* found a home there, in film or on stage. Thus far, I hadn't managed to sell the film rights anywhere. Damn *Nosferatu* … As for theatre rights, well, there'd come a time when London audiences would grow weary of the count and his thirst for blood, no matter who produced the play or where. What would I do then? How would I survive?

The thought was still preoccupying me when I finally crawled out of bed. I'd a luncheon invitation at Violet's London residence. Lucy and Nancy would be there too. I rang the bell for Vera.

I sat before the mirror as she styled my hair, my pale blue dress with its slightly raised hemline a nod to the fashion. Had I been younger, I would have enjoyed the dresses the girls now wore, with skirts that danced about the knees. I did relish the feel of silk stockings, a gift from my friend Mrs Collins. I rested my hand against the pearls at my throat. Did they age me? Bram had bought them to mark the new century. I was wearing them more often of late. And a lovely dragonfly brooch I'd inherited from my mother. Then, again, I didn't need pearls to prove I was getting on. I'd be seventy next year. Seventy! Already, I'd been a widow for fifteen years.

Sometimes I wondered what life would have been like had Bram lived. How many more books would he have written? Would it have even mattered if all anyone cared about was *Dracula*? Or did he have better stories lodged away in that vivid imagination that would have delighted and tormented the masses?

As it was, I was doomed to try and eke out an existence from one, beholden to a bloodthirsty master who would wring every drop from me. Like it or not, I *was* Mrs Dracula.

I was still thinking about this when I returned home that afternoon to find a note awaiting. It was from a Mr Horace Liveright.

'And who might you be?' I pondered aloud.

I took my time reading it, first changing into something more comfortable, telling Vera to prepare a very light supper and asking her to walk Moonbeam again (I was far too tired). I fell into my favourite chair, a cup of tea by my side and opened the latest Agatha Christie, forgetting all about the note until I woke from a light doze.

At first, I wasn't sure where I was. The light was strange, filled with distorted shapes and hoary shadows. The traffic hum from the nearby thoroughfare, the distant clatter from the kitchen, soon reminded me I was home. I rubbed my eyes and searched for my glasses. My hand landed on the neglected note. I tried to remember who it was from. A Mr Liver … spots? No. Right. *Right*.

I yawned, stretched and then, using my letter opener, unsealed it.

'*Live right*,' I repeated as I spied the monogrammed stationery. 'Do you, sir?'

As I read, I sat up, the last vestiges of lethargy swept away. I re-read the letter, then read it again, hope blooming in my chest, my mind clamouring with possibilities. Why, this man was exactly who I'd been waiting for – the answer to my prayers. Had I somehow summoned him through the power of my fervent wishes? Or was it my nightly tormentor who made this happen?

Mr Liveright was an American publisher and stage producer. He'd seen the London production of *Dracula* no less than four times and wanted to discuss an opportunity. Would I be willing to meet with him?

My hand was shaking as I began pushing books and newspapers aside searching for paper and a pen. It was too late to meet with Mr Liveright today, but tomorrow, tomorrow was indeed another day.



'So, you see, Mrs Stoker, if I was to take *Dracula* to the world, it would have to be with a new version, a different writer.'

From the moment Mr Liveright entered the drawing room, punctually at eleven o'clock, I took an instant dislike to him. We shook hands and, after introducing him to Noel, who I'd asked to attend, as well as Mr Bang, I indicated for him to please take a seat. Tea was poured, which he never even bothered to taste, nor did he try the delicious scones still steaming from the oven. Noel and Mr Bang weren't so reticent; they appreciated Vera's baking.

A handsome man in his early forties with a high forehead and a Roman nose braced by broken capillaries that laced his cheeks as well, Mr Liveright was loud, arrogant and very forceful. At first, he addressed all his conversation to the men. He then provided a veritable roll call of his accomplishments as a businessman: a publisher who eschewed the general rules of censorship – 'I'm the man who brought Freud to America' – and a theatrical producer. I'd never heard of any of his ventures and only learned much later that all had failed in one way or another. When he noticed that both Noel and Mr Bang would defer to me for anything to do with *Dracula*, he finally deigned to include me. Accustomed to that kind of treatment (what woman isn't?), it gave me the opportunity to study him and conclude the reason for my instantaneous aversion: he reminded me of Henry Irving. Worse, he reminded me of how I envisaged Dracula after reading Bram's book. And after seeing *Nosferatu*. There was an air of scandal about him. He was … I searched for the right word … *unclean*. Apart from the fact he reeked of alcohol and had clearly imbibed before arrival, he was more like a character than a real person. As if he'd spent his entire life creating this hollow man, stuffed with boasts and others' ideas. He was as superficial as his words of praise, which, when it came to *Dracula* the novel, were cloying and hyperbolic. I wanted to rinse my face and hands, swill my mouth. Even fetch garlic and a rosary …

'As much as I adore it, the Hamilton Deane production,' he continued (he'd scarce drawn breath), 'I'm afraid, it simply wouldn't work with our audiences.'

'Our?' said Noel, managing to get a word in edgeways.

'American, of course.'

Of course. America had become the world. Nevertheless, a little frisson of excitement bolted through my chest. I rested a hand atop Moonbeam, who, sensing my discomfort in this man's presence, had taken up a position on my lap facing him.

‘Since the play has been staged,’ said Mr Liveright, crossing his legs, ‘sales of your late husband’s novel have been growing steadily each year. Twenty thousand copies annually are not to be sneezed at.’

Noel caught my eye. Mr Bang looked impressed. The man had done his homework. Still, twenty thousand sounded good until you factored in Mr Bang’s percentage.

‘But if I were to take it to America, I would only do it with *my* writer.’

‘Your writer?’ I asked. ‘And who might that be?’

Mr Liveright gave me a condescending smile. ‘I doubt you’d have heard of him,’ he said. ‘He’s a fellow American but based here in London. John Balderston.’

It was my turn to preen. ‘Ah, the man who adapted Henry James’s novel *The Sense of the Past* for the stage. What was the play called again, Noel?’ I smiled sweetly at my son.

Noel bit back a grin. ‘*Berkeley Square*, Mother.’

‘That’s it. A fine production.’ I turned a wide-eyed mien to Mr Liveright. He didn’t even have the grace to appear humbled.

‘His reputation has preceded him,’ said Mr Liveright. ‘I’ve already approached him and he’s keen.’ Mr Bang began to object; I cut him short with a gesture.

‘Anyway, Mr Stoker, Mr Bang, Mrs Stoker,’ said Mr Liveright. ‘I think I’ve said enough. Basically, I’d like to purchase the theatrical rights to *Dracula* and take a new version of it to American audiences.’ He sat back in the chair, hands interlaced in his lap. ‘What do you say?’

What I said (after he’d left) was that I’d only agree if I didn’t have to deal with Mr Liveright ever again. In his stead, the writer who’d adapted Henry James for the stage, Mr Balderston, carried out the negotiations, much to Mr Liveright’s consternation and, I imagine, fury at having been bested by an old woman.

Maybe there was another reason I was called Mrs Dracula: I still had bite.

CHAPTER FIFTY-NINE

London, 1928

It was a late afternoon in December. I'd spent the day with Lucy and Nancy at an exhibition of Henry Moore's works at the Warren Gallery. Afterwards, we'd had tea and cake at a delightful place in Oxford Street before I returned home exhausted. First warming my hands by the fire, I slumped into my chair, looking at the empty place on the settee where Moonbeam used to lie. It had been a few months since she died. Vera kept urging me to get another dog. I was tempted, but my heart was still too sore. Dogs brought such happiness, but their loss was more than I could bear. I reached for my handkerchief and dabbed my eyes, then pulled a blanket over my knees.

Sleet teased the window. Distant prattle, the grate of wheels, occasionally muffled as they passed through drifts, the rumble and smells of civilisation even as winter almost suffocated them, surrounded me. From the look of the lowering, steel-grey sky, heavy snow was on its way again. I would ask Vera to ensure the man who kept the paths clear also did the back steps. I'd almost fallen down them two weeks ago. If I hadn't grabbed a hold of the railing, I'd be like my neighbour, poor Mrs Adamson, and abandoned in a nursing home for Christmas.

I thought back to my first Christmas in London and how overwhelmed I'd been by its vastness, its network of streets, its squashed terraces and grand old houses separated by swathes of green. Back then, they'd been gowned in white – a filthy slate-speckled white, to be precise. The greenery was still there, but over the years, the city had risen around me, growing taller and casting long shadows over the older buildings, dwarfing the past. The lazy brown river that rose and fell with the tides, froze near its banks, and always, always smelled, was a constant, only now it was spanned many

times. If I listened hard enough, I was certain I could hear the growl and screech of trains crawling beneath the city like mechanical worms. I sighed. So much had changed. And not just in and around London.

I'd be spending Yuletide with Noel, Neelie and Ann. It would be a quiet gathering, so different to the raucous ones back in the day in Dublin, filled with blether and cartloads of children. Or those Bram and I enjoyed at the Lyceum, often in the Beefsteak Room, where Henry, in a lavish display of generosity, would provide golden roasted turkeys, glistening fattened geese, crunchy roasted potatoes, enormous Yorkshire puddings, tureens of unctuous gravy, plum puddings that oozed whisky and sherry, and all the other trappings for company members and invited guests. We'd drink, dance, laugh, reenact scenes from plays, relive missed cues and on-stage mishaps, imitate prominent members of the audience, and each other, falling about laughing and crying *Encore! Encore!*

Now I was the excess guest, the extra family member. The elder. Not really welcome but not unwelcome either. I was a responsibility. When had that happened? When had I gone from being on everyone's invitation list to 'we *should* invite her'?

I released a long, self-pitying sigh just as I spied a mother with three heavily coated children alighting from a cab and entering the shop opposite. I sat up and pulled back the curtain to see better. A man with a thick scarf snaked around his neck was walking his large dog, waiting patiently while it pissed against a lamppost. A pair of men in fine hats were busy watching two oblivious women in coats that swept their ankles eating hot chestnuts and licking their fingers.

Part of me envied young women today who could be so free with their choices. I'd see them striding to or from work in their neat skirts and buttoned jackets, crossing streets singly or in pairs, the cloche hats that were now so fashionable perched on cropped hair that, just a decade ago would have been deemed far too masculine a style for a real woman to wear. Only, these *were* real women: canny, clever, with ambitions and dreams they might even be able to fulfil – until they wed, that is. Marriage might be delayed for some, but it was still a woman's best hope for a legitimate place in society, no matter who or what her husband. Women might be able to vote now the *Equal Franchise Act* had been passed, providing they were over twenty-one, but snaring a husband was still a woman's supreme goal. I'd been raised to believe it was mine. To think,

there were those who declared a new age of equity had been reached. Equity was different to equality. I was less convinced, knowing any gains my sex achieved would not only come at a cost but be resisted by men who felt threatened by female autonomy. The proof was in the wedding. Men didn't have to be married to be taken seriously. But an unmarried woman of a certain age? As for older women, well, they were little more than a nuisance. Too old to breed, not attractive enough to be ornamental, they took up space and time.

I wondered what Bram would think about all this female emancipation. Clothing, hairstyles and habits reflected women's new freedoms. Noel was supportive of them, but then his wife was well beyond the age to dress like a flapper and smoke, seek employment or to assert any other rights her new political status gave her. He could safely align himself with women without being regarded a traitor to his own sex. A part of me was grateful other, younger minds and hearts were taking on the men's club that ruled us all.

While I might be too old to broadcast my liberty with short hair or modern dress, I *was* taking it up to the men. They might label me a 'battleaxe' or an 'old witch', and worse, but who else was going to care? That's one thing I learned from the new women of today: if you don't value your rights, no-one else will.

I continued to fight for Bram's works, but it had taken its toll. What was the point of agreements, contracts, lawyers, negotiations, agents and societies if legal documents weren't honoured, and in a timely fashion?

I drained the whisky and looked at the pile of letters awaiting my attention.

Turning the lamp to its brightest setting, I picked up the magnifying glass. Most were bills, though I was pleased to see a letter from Violet – an invitation by the looks of it – and a nice thick letter from Phil. But then another drew my attention. It wasn't sealed very well, and I could spy what appeared to be a press cutting jutting out. I quickly opened it.

I must have exclaimed loudly, because Vera materialised at the door. 'Is everything alright, missus?' she asked.

I fell back in the chair and waved a careless arm towards her. 'Read this newspaper clipping.' I passed it to her. 'It says not only has the Film Society here in London shown *Nosferatu* to all their members, but they

were given permission by Universal Studios in America to do so. According to this, Universal Studios own the bloody film.'

Ellen had promised me the Society would never show the film again unless the rights were sorted. With her gone now, there was no-one to hold Mr Montagu and the board to account. Sorrow welled in my chest. Dead at the ripe old age of eighty-one of a brain bleed. God, my heart still pained me. What would she say about all this? Laugh and remind me, 'Know thine enemy, Lemon!'

Vera quickly examined the cutting. She patted my shoulder reassuringly. 'You left out the best bit.'

'What bit?' I said, basking in loving memories of my friend.

'The bit that says you were paid fifty thousand pounds for the rights.'

'*What?*' I snatched it back, used the magnifier again. 'Well, that's a load of poppycock, isn't it? I haven't received a single penny. And did you see this? Some German at Universal Studios is telling all and sundry, including the Film Society, he's bought the rights to *Dracula*. Look!' I placed the cutting on the side table and skewered the relevant part with my finger. 'The studio is going to make a blasted film – with sound as well – based on my husband's book. The gall of these men. It's infuriating!'

Tears began to well. I couldn't cry. I wouldn't. Here was everything I'd dreamed of, for Bram, for myself, for *Dracula*, only it was happening without my knowledge, without my permission, without me having any say in it whatsoever, let alone being paid. It was as if I didn't exist. As if Bram, the man who wrote the damn story, didn't either.

Once again, my rights were being dismissed by the Germans, this time in league with the Americans. And let's not forget the British Film Society. Where was Mr Bang or Mr Thring when I needed them?

'They're not taking *Dracula* from me again, Vera,' I vowed, rising and beginning to pace the room.

'It'll be alright, Mrs Stoker. You'll sort 'em,' Vera said, stepping out of my way.

I halted and stared at her through eyes awash with watery fury. I sniffed and straightened. I was still tall, and Vera was so very tiny. For some reason, my stature gave me a feeling of power, especially if I ignored the ache in my hips and my diminishing vision.

'What can I do?' Vera asked, rubbing her hands together.

‘The first thing you can do is call Mr Thring.’ I glanced towards the window. Daylight was retreating. ‘Make an appointment for me to see him tomorrow. Tell him I won’t take no for an answer.’

‘Yes, missus,’ said Vera. She turned to go.

‘And tell him that *Nosferatu* has escaped once more.’

Vera’s eyes widened, then she grinned and scurried off. I heard her lift the receiver in the hall.

The streetlights cast a faint glow. The people outside were nothing more than fleeting shadows, dodging the snow that fell more heavily by the second. A chorus of birds rose from a nearby church, some winging their way south. They could almost be bats, the shape of their wings distorted by the growing dusk and flurries. I could imagine the howl of a wolf, the plaintive cry of a babe.

I picked up the cutting and stared at it balefully. ‘You think you’re safe making such outrageous claims over there in Hollywood, do you, gentlemen? Well, you haven’t accounted for Mrs Dracula.’



Instead of placating or even dismissing my concerns, Mr Thring was, much to my surprise and glee, outraged. I’d arrived for my appointment on time and clearly and concisely presented my case and the evidence. Mr Thring had taken a minute or so to read the offending article, consider the ramifications, then leapt into action.

He marched about the office, arms waving, voice raised. Work in the outer room momentarily ceased and I glanced around to see his secretary, mouth agog, and a couple of the young men half-standing, peering over their dividers to see what all the commotion was about.

Gratified by his reaction, I waited until he returned to his chair. Immediately, he ordered his secretary to get Mr Montagu of the Film Society on the phone and began making notes. After a while, when he didn’t lift his head or offer an explanation, I wondered if he’d forgotten I was there.

A good hour passed. A few more phone calls were made, one of which he took outside his office, leaving me with the cup of very nice tea Miss Chandler brought me.

‘Do you know what’s going on?’ I asked her.

She gave me a wistful smile. ‘Mr Thring doesn’t like me to talk about Society business, Mrs Stoker but —’ she said hastily, just as I was about to remind her I was a member, ‘I do know he’s spoken to Mr Montagu and a representative of Universal Studios who’s based here in England.’

‘Oh.’

At times, Mr Thring’s voice carried. ‘I don’t care whether the performance was public or private. Universal do not own the rights to *Nosferatu* or *Dracula*. Mrs Stoker does. No person, or society, can retain a film that’s in infringement of copyright … You, sir, are in breach of the law.’

For the first time in our fraught history, I felt Mr Thring and the British Society of Authors truly had my best interests at heart. We were finally on the same side in this eternal war.



An urgent meeting was held between me, Mr Montagu, Mr Thring and the Society’s London lawyer. The upshot was that after pressure from lawyers, the gentleman behind the claim I’d sold the rights to *Dracula* to an American film studio admitted that they’d never been granted. This meant that the copy of *Nosferatu* the Film Society had purchased for screening was obtained illegally. Mr Montagu, the Film Society’s president, handed over the positive print in their possession a month later. It was given to the Society’s lawyer to dispose of. What happened to that specific copy, I never discovered, but not long after, much to my dismay, *Nosferatu* was screened in Europe and America.

While I could have taken legal action against Universal Studios, not only did I not want to risk alienating them, but an expensive lawsuit was well beyond my means.

Then another matter was brought to my attention that forced everything else aside and required a speedy resolution.

I learned that Mr Bang, my agent and a man I’d trusted to have my best interests at heart, had been very liberally feathering his own nest. Taking over twenty-five per cent commission on all my earnings – far more than originally negotiated – he’d been at it for years.

So, without a tremor of remorse, I fired him.

Mrs Dracula bites again.

CHAPTER SIXTY

London, 1930

There was a time when I would have avoided the company of a woman like Dorothea Fassett. Even during those first few phone calls, she was abrasive to the point of rudeness. But she was frank and, more importantly, she listened; something the patronising, condescending men I'd been surrounded by had failed to do. In hindsight, I shudder to think where I'd be if I hadn't hired her to replace Mr Bang.

The first time I attended her offices in a squat caramel-coloured building in Piccadilly, she was engulfed by a veritable brume of cigarette smoke. A slender woman, considerably shorter than me, she shook hands like a Queensberry boxer, spoke sharply, and quickly, with a cut-glass accent – cut-glass and yet husky. In her forties, she was a partner in the London Play Company and, according to anyone in the business, a formidable agent. You wouldn't think so to look at her. She had russet hair laced with silver rolled into a careless chignon. Thick-lensed glasses perched on the bridge of a long, thin nose. When not moving, her lips either had a cigarette blunted between them or were like a hyphen, compressed, a statement in themselves. Her laugh, when it came, was explosive, a seal's bark. Her heavily lined eyes, constantly narrowed due to the smoke, nevertheless twinkled. Dressed in a skirt and a cardigan that looked like a cat had slept on it, there was an artless chic about her. Between taking calls, scribbling notes to herself, interruptions from her assistant, a tall young man named Laurence Fitch, she made no bones about telling me (and Noel, who came to my first meeting) that I was a fool for keeping Mr Bang for so long. Then, she outlined why, which mostly took the form of telling me what she'd accomplished in the months since she'd represented me.

I liked her enormously. Noel, who'd only heard about her, was intimidated into silence.

We'd been together eighteen months now and, while my coffers weren't growing at the rate I'd hoped, neither were they diminishing. So, when Miss Fassett summoned me late June in 1930, declaring she had some very significant news to impart that was best done in person (agents weren't above creating their own dramas), I made haste to her offices, Noel in tow.

'Since our last meeting, Mrs Stoker,' began Miss Fassett after tea was poured and pleasantries exchanged, 'much has happened. As you know, I wrote to Harold Freedman – Universal Studio's London man,' she explained rapid-fire for Noel's benefit, the cigarette between her lips waggling up and down, sprinkling ash over the papers in front of her. She swept it aside, leaving a grey smudge on the pages.

She paused as a volley of moist coughs beset her, clamping her lips around the cigarette, but failing to cover her mouth. 'I told him that once again this *Nosferatu* business has you losing sleep, and that as we were fielding inquiries about *Dracula* —' She removed the cigarette and aimed it at me. 'I wanted the Prana matter put to bed once and for all.'

My initial thought was how did she know about the nights I spent tossing and turning, waiting for my uninvited visitor to arrive? Then I understood she was being figurative. Our first communications had been all about blasted *Nosferatu*, the ongoing lawsuit, the role the Society of Authors played, Mr Thring (who she called as useful as a chocolate teapot), the wretched Film Society, and the inability of any court or lawyer to ensure the film was destroyed. I'd sent her copies of all the correspondence, now untidily stacked in a thick folder on her desk. When I told her a few months ago that *Nosferatu* had once again resurfaced in America, she swore to put an end to it.

'If we don't,' she'd said, the telephone turning her voice into something slightly tinny and wheezy, 'then your chances of selling *any* film rights to your husband's work are, to use American parlance, screwed. No studio will touch a project if the copyright isn't clear. I'm surprised Mr Bang didn't tell you this.'

Oh, but he had. The problem, I later learned from Miss Fassett, was that Mr Deane, Mr Balderston *and* Mr Liveright had been working behind my back to try and secure a film deal themselves – not all together, but in partnerships that were mutually beneficial or acting individually. Partly it

was retribution for daring to strike out on my own to secure a *Dracula* film deal that excluded them, partly it was because they recognised the money to be made, and partly because they were concerned about how a film would impact their theatrical ticket sales. They also claimed they had a right to produce a movie from their stage productions as they were so very different from Bram's book.

Didn't the ungrateful bastards understand they wouldn't even have a play if it wasn't for the book? Seemed everybody knew how to cash in on the success of *Dracula* except me. Without missing a beat, Miss Fassett had drawled that to these men I was simply an old lady to be taken advantage of.

Old lady! I would give them old lady.

It was utterly infuriating and put a tremendous strain on my relationship with them. Especially as Miss Fassett advised me to pretend ignorance of their machinations (I still had active agreements with all of them) until I knew exactly where I stood. Whether or not Mr Bang knew about their efforts was, according to Miss Fassett, irrelevant; the point was he should have.

At twenty-five per cent commission, darn right. Thank God I no longer had to tolerate, let alone pay, him.

Now Miss Fassett studied my face, as if determined to find evidence of those sleepless nights herself. She wouldn't have had to look hard. Not even her office fugue could hide the shadows beneath my eyes, my dry sallow skin and weary demeanour. I silently urged her to get on with it and reveal the 'significant news' that had brought me and Noel to her door this day. But if there's one thing I'd learned, Miss Fassett did things in her own time – always efficiently and with a ruthlessness I envied, but she got results. I just wanted to know what they were.

'I demanded Mr Freedman learn whether there was still any interest in *Nosferatu* – as you know it's called *Dracula* over there —' Miss Fassett waved a hand towards her office door, as if America was located outside it, 'or if arrangements were in place to kill the film once and for all. The last thing you need, Mrs Stoker, is *Nosferatu* haunting our efforts to sell rights to your husband's work. Well,' she paused to light another cigarette, 'be damned if Mr Freedman didn't take himself off to America to discover the lay of the land in relation to all things *Dracula*.'

‘And?’ I was grinding my teeth.

‘And,’ repeated Miss Fassett, her cigarette genuflecting as she lifted papers and books from her desk, searching for something. ‘He informed me that interest in the film we know as *Nosferatu* is waning and fast. Reviews have been terrible.’

‘So it’s been screened?’ Noel asked.

‘A few times. Across major cities. Ah, here we are.’ She pulled some newspaper clippings from under a ledger. ‘He sent these. Listen,’ she removed the cigarette and cleared her throat wetly, ‘this is from the *New York Herald Tribune*: “jumbled and confused”, they write, and that the story “flopped woefully due to inexpert cutting and bad continuity”.’ She chuckled and passed the piece to me.

I handed it straight to Noel. Even after my cataract surgery last year, I couldn’t read a street sign let alone the small print in the papers. Writing was now a task I delegated to my new companion, Miss Winsome Clover. (You couldn’t make up a name like that, could you?) A spinster of fifty who’d been a nurse in the Great War, she was a quiet, capable woman who nevertheless enjoyed a whisky, brisk walks and a good book. Able to assist in my recovery, she was attentive without being intrusive but also clearly fascinated by the letters I dictated and the correspondence I received, whether it was to do with *Dracula* and copyright, very occasionally Bram’s other books, or from Phil, my niece Phillippa, and friends. Above all, she was discreet. She was also a huge fan of Bram’s work and even remembered attending performances at the Lyceum. The day Arthur Conan Doyle came for a visit, Winsome was rendered mute with admiration. Later she said it was like a beloved character from a book stepping out of the pages. She was currently sitting outside the office, nursing my cane, which I refused to use indoors lest I appear an invalid, and ready to be summoned should I require my pills.

‘Oh,’ said Noel, reading the entire review. ‘This is harsh.’

‘Wait until you hear this one,’ continued Miss Fassett. ‘The *New York Times* critic wrote that it was “more a soporific than a thriller”, and that it was “like cardboard puppets doing all they could to be horrible on paper mâché settings”.’

Noel chortled.

Miss Fassett read out some more, but by then I wasn't listening. Only Ellen knew I'd seen the film, and she was dead two years now. Everyone, even Noel, assumed I hadn't seen it. My recollection wasn't nearly as savage. If anyone had a right to be critical, surely it was me. The film being renamed *Dracula* was what upset me the most. It was as if the film and book had merged – Count Orlock and Count Dracula had become one. Just like the spectre that haunted my nights.

'What I *can* say, Mrs Stoker,' said Miss Fassett, abruptly terminating my thoughts. She was smiling. Her teeth were long and stained. 'It's a very good thing the American critics reviled *it*.'

'How? Won't it simply cloud the issue if they think our *Dracula* and Murnau's *Nosferatu* are one and the same?'

'Because,' said Miss Fassett, taking her time, lighting yet another cigarette and drawing heavily, 'and this is why I wanted to meet with you today – because, with one or two exceptions, no-one is taking *that* film seriously. They understand it's just one problematic effort to interpret the source material. Which means it's not seen as a real threat. On the contrary, the studios are far more interested in purchasing the rights to the original, the rights *you* hold, and creating something entirely new from scratch. Something better.' She paused, waiting for me to say something.

My eyes narrowed as I churned her words over. Then, it clicked. '*Studios?* Are you telling me there's been an expression of interest, Miss Fassett? More than one?'

'There's always been interested parties, Mrs Stoker.' She flicked her ash. 'The trick, and what a good agent does, is choose the right party to go to.'

There *had* been inquiries over the last two years. Thank God I hadn't listened to Mr Bang and signed away my rights. Last year, Columbia Pictures tried to acquire them. On Miss Fassett's advice, I'd asked for thirty-five thousand pounds, but they said it was too much. Then the stock market crashed. Everyone was cautious after that, none more so than the Americans. There was talk of a worldwide recession, but in the immediate months after those ominous days in late October, that didn't happen. I began to wonder if a deal was even worth pursuing.

Miss Fassett had urged me to stay the course, advising me to decline another offer that came during all this for a fraction of what I'd first asked.

‘We can do better,’ she’d said. ‘Despite all the wrangling, the legal problems caused by *Nosferatu*. We can do better. Trust me, Mrs Stoker.’

Aware Miss Fassett was watching me closely as Noel shifted his gaze between the two of us, I swallowed my impatience.

‘It so happens that the son of the founder of Universal Pictures,’ said Miss Fassett slowly, ‘Mr Carl Laemmle Jr, has made you what I consider to be a very reasonable offer.’ She paused and I sensed that behind those grubby lenses, her eyes were sparkling.

‘How reasonable?’ I asked when she didn’t immediately answer. ‘I know you said we can never expect to get what I once asked – the thirty-five thousand – again. So, what are they offering?’ Figures danced in my head, teasing me. Four thousand? Five thousand?

‘You’re quite right. Times have changed. The initial figure we asked for is no longer feasible.’

My heart shrank just a little. ‘Miss Fassett,’ I inhaled, unable to hold my irritation in check any longer. ‘Dorothea, are you going to tell me or keep —’

‘It’s for forty thousand dollars.’

Noel let out an expletive.

There was a roaring in my ears, my heart became a mallet slamming against my ribs.

Forty thousand dollars.

‘Did you hear me, Mrs Stoker?’ asked Miss Fassett when I didn’t react. The figure was going around in my head. She was saying something about Mr Deane and Mr Balderston retaining a percentage since the film would be based on their various adaptations of the book. Even after splitting the money with them, even after Miss Fassett took her commission, there was a staggering sum remaining.

Forty thousand dollars. Never in my wildest, most fanciful dreams had I ever conceived of such an amount.

At the ripe old age of seventy-two, I’d never have to worry about money again.

Noel was squeezing my hand so tightly it began to throb. I tried to extract it. ‘Did you hear, Mother?’ he asked, eyes shining.

In answer, I freed myself from his grip, rose, walked around the desk and urged Miss Fassett to her feet. As smoke swirled around us, I folded her

into my arms.

‘Thank you,’ I whispered over the top of her head. Up close, she smelt of musk and roses, albeit with a heavy patina of tobacco.

She stood on tiptoes and kissed me soundly on the cheek. ‘You’re very welcome, Mrs Florence Anne Lemon Bram Stoker.’ She held me at arm’s length. ‘Didn’t I tell you we could do better?’

‘You did,’ I said as Noel joined me and shook Miss Fassett’s hand. As we resumed our seats, he nursed his fingers, which were very red.

‘There is one small matter we have to take care of first.’ Miss Fassett patted her hair into place and butted out her cigarette. ‘Two to be exact.’

My daydreams dissolved and I was brought back to earth. Of course, nothing was ever straightforward with *Dracula*.

‘Mr Liveright is demanding compensation for being shut out of negotiations. He feels that any film adaptation constitutes unfair competition to his stage version.’

I scoffed. ‘He’s made millions from it – literally. It’s hardly my fault if the man has squandered it.’

‘Indeed,’ said Miss Fassett. ‘But unless we rid ourselves of him, he will continue to be an annoyance. He will accept five thousand five hundred dollars. I’ve managed to negotiate a deal whereby you, Mr Balderston and Mr Deane pay him one thousand pounds between you. The remaining four thousand five hundred dollars will be met by Universal Studios. In return, he’ll waive all rights to the film.’

I absorbed this slowly. A few hundred dollars to be rid of Mr Liveright was a small price to pay.

‘What’s the second thing?’ asked Noel.

‘I’m delighted to be able to tell you that Universal have also purchased what they claim is the only remaining print of *Nosferatu*. After some tough negotiations, they bought it for four hundred dollars. It’s been handed over. My understanding is they intend to destroy it.’

I looked at Noel, who sat smiling benevolently at me, then at Miss Fassett, who smoked contentedly, inordinately pleased with herself, then towards the window and the stream of grey light beaming in.

‘*Destroy* it?’ I began to laugh. It came from some place deep inside me and once it escaped, I couldn’t control it.

‘What’s so funny?’ asked Miss Fassett, regarding me with an arch of a thinly plucked brow.

Noel gave a nervous chuckle. Miss Fassett put down her cigarette and put her hands on her desk, smiling at me cautiously.

Tears streamed down my face. ‘Destroy it?’ I repeated. I shook my head, bowing over slightly as laughter almost consumed me.

‘Mother,’ said Noel, his tone becoming stern.

I reached for him and rested a hand on his forearm. Slowly, the laughter eased. I wiped my eyes. ‘My apologies, Miss Fassett. But the hubris of Universal is as absurd as it is breathtaking. They can’t destroy it. No-one can. Not now, not ever.’ Their astonished faces were almost comical. ‘No-one knows better than a Stoker, you can’t kill Dracula.’

‘We don’t want them to kill *Dracula*,’ said Miss Fassett. ‘But *Nosferatu* is finished. Just as you wished.’

‘Don’t you understand?’ I looked from Noel’s disturbed face to Miss Fassett’s puzzled one. ‘Because of this deal *Nosferatu* will never die. Universal has ensured that not only will *Dracula* continue to live, travelling across continents and countries, infecting minds and hearts, terrorising and, I hope, delighting, but vampires will be given life too. The studio won’t destroy *Nosferatu*. They’ll seal him in a coffin to be resurrected again when the time is right. You’ll see.’

‘A canister. They’ll seal him in a canister.’ Miss Fassett huffed approvingly. ‘You might well be right, Mrs Stoker.’

‘I am,’ I said. ‘And one day, in the not-too-distant future, *Nosferatu* will rise unbidden and take its place in moving picture history. But not before *Dracula*, Bram’s vampire, conquers the world first.’

‘I think that calls for a celebration, don’t you?’ said Miss Fassett and, without waiting for an answer, signalled to Laurence, who had clearly been awaiting her order. He swooped into the office carrying a tray with a bottle of fine French champagne and glasses upon it.

The cork popped with all the aplomb of a costly fizzy drink and, once we all had a glass, we stood.

‘Wait, wait,’ I said, as Miss Fassett commenced a toast. Putting down my glass, I rummaged in my bag and drew out my old, now very tattered, copy of *Dracula*. The yellow cloth was quite worn, the red lettering faded. I held the book aloft in one hand and, in the other, raised my glass to it.

‘To you, Florence Stoker,’ began Miss Fassett. ‘The woman who fought for *Dracula* and won.’

‘And to Bram,’ I said, blinking back a sudden rush of tears. ‘May he live on through his writing as he always dreamed.’



Sometime later, after a second bottle had been opened, we were still discussing what Universal making a film would mean – not just for Bram’s legacy, for my finances and the family’s, but for the pirated film *Nosferatu* as well. I refused to let go of my conviction that this deal would ensure both versions of *Dracula* lived on.

‘Doesn’t that bother you, Mother?’ asked Noel, the champagne making his cheeks rosy and his eyes very bright. ‘That *Nosferatu* might not be destroyed after all but seen by even more people. After everything you’ve been through, all the years of letters, phone calls, lawyers, the meetings, the expense. The cost to your health, reputation, your peace.’

I dismissed his concerns with a flap of a hand. ‘I’ll give you forty thousand good reasons why it’s all been worth it.’

Miss Fassett chuckled. ‘It’s not just about the money. I don’t think you realise the significance of what your mother has done, Mr Stoker. She hasn’t only secured a fine deal with a major studio, it’s what this victory means for others.’

‘Others?’

‘Your mother,’ said Miss Fassett, pointing a long finger with a bright red nail in my direction, ‘fought hard to protect your father’s literary rights, for her damn rights as well. She refused to be fobbed off or ignored; she wouldn’t take no for an answer.’ She paused to draw heavily on her cigarette. ‘Because of your mother, any creative predators who would steal *Dracula* and try and profit from it, will think twice. But her marvellous victory has far wider ramifications.’ She gave one of her broad smiles.

‘It does?’ Noel frowned. ‘I don’t think I understand —’

‘Because of Florence Stoker, from this day forward, an author’s copyright will be enshrined in every single deal that’s made. Every contract will now include a clause protecting the creator’s rights, whether it be for film, theatre, and maybe even for that new-fangled invention.’

I looked at her blankly.

'The one the Scotsman, Logie Baird, created.'

'Television,' Noel supplied.

'That's it,' said Miss Fassett, snapping her fingers. 'As far as I'm concerned, every writer, every creator, ought to bow down and kiss your mother's feet, Mr Stoker. She's set a precedent, and if I've any say in the matter, it's one that will last beyond *Dracula* or *Nosferatu*. You see, in fighting for *her* rights, Florence Stoker has guaranteed everyone else's.'

Noel gave a goofy grin. 'I … I'd no idea.' He reached for my hand and squeezed. 'I'm proud of you, Mother.' My eyes began to fill again. 'Father would be too.'

I was about to protest, when Miss Fassett pounced. 'Before we become completely sozzled, Mrs Stoker, let's get this contract signed, shall we?' She opened a folder on her desk and removed a sheaf of neatly typed pages. At the top was the logo: Universal Pictures Corporation, Rockefeller Centre, New York.

Bram had always loved New York.

Mrs Fassett held out a pen.

In that moment, I felt their presence. The uninvited men who had entered my life and impacted it in ways I'd never foreseen brushed against me one last time. Henry Irving, the drowned man, and even Bram's count. I felt them hovering. Just as I blinked and tried to focus on the opaque, wavering shapes, they began to dissolve into the smoke that drifted towards the ceiling.

'I hope you're right, Miss Fassett,' I said, accepting the pen with a shaking hand. I couldn't wait to tell Mr Thring, Lucy, Nancy, Violet, all those who'd supported me. Phil and Phillippa too. I wished Ellen was still here, Genevieve. Dear Gilbert. And Poor O. I sent a prayer heavenward, thanking God Almighty but also Bram. I wondered if he was watching and, as the familiar scents of ambergris and whisky encompassed me, felt he was. After all, this was for him as much as me.

'The thought that my actions over the years, that ours —' I included Miss Fassett; after all, this wouldn't have been possible without her, 'might leave such a legacy is beyond my wildest dreams. But —' the pen was poised over the contract, 'but, I fear that if I'm to be remembered at all, it won't be for that.'

Noel clicked in exasperation.

‘Why on earth not?’ said Miss Fassett. She sounded affronted. Then, jabbed the place I still had to sign.

Watched over by my son, Miss Fassett and those spectral others, I scrawled my name.

Florence Anne Lemon Bram Stoker.

‘Bram may have given birth to a monster,’ I said. ‘But in this very moment, I’ve set it loose upon the world.’

‘Lucky world,’ said Miss Fassett dryly, and lit another cigarette.

EPILOGUE

Wilton Place, 1937

Was it worth it, fighting so hard for the rights I sought to protect? Whether or not Miss Fassett's rather bold assertion that I'd somehow be viewed as a trailblazer for a creator's ownership would be proven true was not something I considered. At the very least, my legal dues as Bram's widow and beneficiary of his estate had been upheld.

Over the following years, I would occasionally wonder if I'd done the best thing in signing away Bram's creature, especially when Universal Pictures bought the rights to all stage adaptations of Bram's book as well, and a man named David O Selznick, who oversaw a unit with the big Hollywood studio MGM, bought the story 'Dracula's Guest'. Then promptly sold those rights back to Universal for a tidy profit.

When I received my share of the money (twenty-five thousand dollars, a serious sum), I was content. When what was later called the Great Depression flung the entire globe into economic catastrophe, that money kept me and my loved ones in relative comfort. I was relieved and grateful. I refused to have regrets.

The Universal film, which was directed by Tod Browning and starred a Hungarian actor, Béla Lugosi (who'd also played Dracula in the stage adaptation in America), was one of the studio's first talking pictures. It was produced during the Depression, and though the original budget was dramatically reduced, forcing the writer to draw on Mr Deane and Mr Balderston's stage play far more than Bram's book (which did disappoint me), it was a remarkable success.

I only saw the film once. Mr Lugosi was exactly as I'd always imagined the count – a charming caped and dinner-suited gentleman with a heavy accent and mesmerising, almost glowing, eyes that often filled the screen and made my heart thud and my breath catch. He also wore a large medallion, which added dignity to his bearing. The sets were eerie shadowscapes, whether London drawing rooms or the count's formidable castle. Arches were draped with giant cobwebs, impenetrable fogs drifted through the streets; crumbling stone staircases, rough walls, lanterns and guttering candles abounded. Hands emerged from coffins, spiders skittered across flagstones. I was so captivated by the Carpathians, Whitby and London interiors, I sometimes forgot to absorb the dialogue and performances. When I did, I was underwhelmed. The film lacked the depth of Bram's book, relying on cheap shocks and somewhat overblown performances, meaning Mina and Renfield were caricatures rather than vulnerable victims – or, in Mina's case, a resilient woman.

The year it was released, Miss Fassett rang to inform me that *Dracula* was the studio's highest grossing film.

Maybe, I thought, I'd given away the rights too cheaply.



Funny how when you have no choice but to remain where others put you, even a large space can feel confined. So it was with my airy bedroom in Wilton Place. I was dependent on Winsome, Noel, Neelie, Ann and whoever else plucked up the courage to visit, to entertain me with gossip and news of the outside world.

I was ending my life as Bram began his – confined to bed. Sometimes, when the pain kept me awake or I had to rise and change my bloodied pads, I'd crawl back under the covers and think how coffin-like it had become. I was Count Dracula or one of his brides, returning to the place that kept me safe; where others couldn't harm me.

Others might not, but what was growing inside me, the monster that lurked within, was slowly, bit by bit, killing me.

Noel refused to talk about it, as if denial was a weapon he could wield. Neelie would burst into tears and run from the room if I raised the spectre of my demise. Ann was resolved in the way the young were, reminding me

to remain positive, weaponising smiles to keep death at bay. They didn't prevent my swift deterioration, but they did, I had to admit, help.

Only Winsome, of all those around me, was stoic about my impending end. Winsome and Miss Fassett, who still phoned me every other day with updates about foreign rights to *Dracula*, or entertaining snippets about other writers and film stars. I'd half-hoped that now Mr Logie Baird's television had captured the public imagination there'd be a deal with the BBC or some such organisation producing programs for the small screen.

From my bed, I kept abreast of the growing threat in Europe as fascism continued its brute march across the continent. There were rumours that war was inevitable. I prayed fervently that was not the case. The Chancellor of Germany, Herr Adolf Hitler, leader of the Nazi Party, was creating headlines every other day. There were dark whispers of dreadful mistreatment of Jewish people, of them being forcibly removed from their homes and sent to specially built camps. The monsters Bram created, whether Count Dracula, Arabella March or the mummy, Tera, were nothing compared to this Hitler. A part of me was grateful I wouldn't be here to see what fresh horror he'd unleash upon the world.

Of the money received from Universal for *Dracula*, some of it was used to update my little flat. A splash of paint here, some new curtains and armchairs there, and to modernise the bathroom. This included putting in a downstairs lavatory, so I didn't have to struggle upstairs to relieve myself. Not that it mattered anymore. Christened 'Room Dracula' or 'Drac' by Ann, I liked the idea that proceeds from a book that had caused me so much angst paid for a toilet. My greatest extravagance was a gallery I had built above my bedroom, a sort of mezzanine where I could store memorabilia. I glanced towards the steep wooden staircase. It was more than I could manage now. I'd also put a tidy sum in an account for Ann when she came of age, had travelled back to Dublin a few times before my health prevented it, and given money to Phillippa's children. Naturally, I'd donated to my local parish as well. Father O'Malley had been very grateful and shown his gratitude by visiting me once a week for prayers and confession. The rest I'd intended to spend in good time, but God had other ideas.

There were to be no more times, good or otherwise. My debt was being called in.

It wasn't entirely dreadful being constricted, first to my apartment, then bed. Though the flat was quite small compared to other places I'd lived, I

adored its high ceilings, the ornate fireplaces and large windows. From my bedroom, at the other end of the flat from Winsome's, I could catch a glimpse of Hyde Park. I took great consolation from the sounds that would float through the open window (I insisted on it being left that way, regardless of the weather) – the distant conversations of passersby, the squeals of excited children, the rumble of traffic and the cacophony of vehicle horns gave me solace. Sometimes, I'd hear my neighbours, great quarrels, laughter, song and music. Crying, too. The symphony of life. The fragrances of spring would waft in, oft tainted by exhaust fumes and other noisome odours. I didn't mind, not anymore. I was just happy to be reminded that life went on.

Around me were mementoes of my youth – Oscar's painting, which Winsome brought from the drawing room – or should I say 'living room', though hardly any of that was going on in there anymore, along with copies of all Bram's works, Oscar's plays, Gilbert's librettos, and the box in which I kept Oscar's letters, the cross I never did return, his poems, essays and other keepsakes. I couldn't read anything, my eyesight was but a memory now; everything was seen through a glass opaquely. But I'd touch each letter, fondle a ring here, a brooch from Ellen there, a feather, a sequin, a dried flower, and recollections would parade across my mind. I could remember every word written to me, every sentiment.

All the letters Bram had sent me during our marriage, I'd destroyed after his death, a futile attempt to excise him from my past. Did I regret it? I did. Over the years, I learned the past is not something you can put behind you after all. It's a part of you, whether you wish it or not. I made peace with the fact our marriage had been unconventional. How sad that my death, like Bram's, would be so damn ordinary. Still, I'd lived to a ripe old age. Seventy-eight. I told Lucy she'd long surpassed me (I'd tried to make a joke of it, but Lucy didn't laugh). Violet said she didn't appreciate my gallows humour. Henry Irving's disgruntled widow had made it to ninety-one, dying only two years ago. The rancorous woman had made a point of dressing in mourning on the anniversary of Henry's death every single year to remind everyone who she'd once been married to.

My eyes alighted on the sketch Oscar had done of me all those years ago, propped up on my dresser. Though I could scarce make it out, I knew every line, every smudge. I'd been beautiful once upon a time, hadn't I? My only currency back then, my looks had attracted admirers, earned me inches

in the newspapers, a couple of portraits; led to being twice courted, once married. It had given Bram cause to puff out his chest. Noel, bless him, would say I was still lovely; a beauty dressed in a gown of baggy flesh replete with a swollen belly and a chassis of aches and pains. I inwardly laughed. I remembered that young art student who'd paid me a visit a while back, when I still had my health. A tall, debonair young man, he'd been so excited to meet me, not because of who I was, but because of Bram. Vincent. Vincent Price. I later discovered he'd said I was still beautiful and with such a spark … for a woman of eighty. Offended then, I could laugh now.

Eighty was beyond my reach, spark or no.

A month ago, I'd finalised my will. While I was to be cremated at Golders Green Crematorium, I asked that, instead of my ashes sharing Bram's urn as we'd once agreed, they be scattered in the gardens there. I'd done my duty by Bram in life – in death, for reasons I didn't disclose, I chose my own company.

Noel would take charge of the Stoker estate when I was gone. It gratified me I was leaving behind more than I inherited. On top of a tidy sum of money, books and paintings, I was bequeathing the bronze of Henry Irving's hand that Bram had bought and which I'd accidentally left out of the auction, to the London Museum. Irrationally, I'd not got rid of it.

My hand fluttered above the bedclothes before resting on my chest. It was becoming more of an effort to fill my lungs. Painful too. My breath was loud, wet, as if the air was laden with dew. Or maybe it was thoughts of that man who made it difficult for me to breathe.

Henry Irving had dominated Bram's life, and thus mine, for too many years. I'd once thought that Count Dracula was based on him and for a long time I believed Bram had his revenge by turning Henry into a malignant literary creation that wouldn't die. I no longer thought that. Dead for thirty years now, Sir Henry Irving, the man who'd pack the theatres, had become a ghost, a mere shadow. It was a rich irony that few remembered who he was or what he'd done, and it was the name Bram Stoker that was repeated with respect. It was emblazoned on the reprints of his books, all of which were selling due to the success of Browning's film and the exotic sophistication of Mr Lugosi.

Like his creation, Bram was refusing to die, spreading across the world, infecting audiences with fear and wonder, exciting them to heights Henry

Irving's portrayals never attained. That his employee had eclipsed him would be a stake in Henry's heart.

In a very real sense, *Bram* was Dracula.

A shaft of pain lanced my side. I covered my stomach, hugely swollen and so very tender to touch. My own vanity, my own shame at what my body was doing, the incontinence, the blood, the agony of using the toilet, meant I left it too late. The doctor had been kind, avuncular really, though he was half my age.

'I'm afraid you have bowel cancer, Mrs Stoker,' he'd said, refusing to colour the condition with euphemism. I was grateful for that at least. He told me what to expect to happen to my body.

'Naturally, I'll do everything within my power to make sure you're comfortable, that the pain is minimal. In the meantime, I suggest you notify anyone you feel you need to and attend to your affairs.'

There was nothing natural about the medicines I was given, which Winsome administered with patient care. In the beginning they worked well, though I disliked the way they made me feel; how my head became clouded, my thoughts jumbled. Memories merged and floated about the room. Oscar would come and sit with me, and we'd laugh and share stories of our youth. Gilbert, too, quoting swathes from his plays, singing a ditty, dancing a reel. Ellen would lounge by my side, and moan about Henry and his inability to share the stage. Genevieve would hover, whispering snippets of gossip. And Bram would visit, telling me about his latest work in progress and how he was certain it would be a success.

Invisible fingers twisted my innards, wringing them into coils of agony. A moan escaped. There was a warm rush between my legs. Damn, the bleeding had started again. I glanced at the laden tray beside my bed. Worried I'd barely eaten for the last week, Winsome had made chicken soup on the recommendation of our lovely new Jewish neighbours. I could scarce stomach it.

Waiting for the eruption of pain to subside, I reached for the bottle of laudanum, then paused. Noel would arrive any moment. I didn't want to be befuddled. I wanted to be able to recall our conversation later, when night fell.

There was something I had to tell him … Oh, that's right. It was to do with copyright. Ever since Mr Selznick had sold the rights for Bram's short

story ‘Dracula’s Guest’ to Universal instead of keeping them himself, citing concerns over copyright, I’d been perturbed. I’d thought the matter well and truly resolved once the *Nosferatu* problem was laid to rest and Mr Liveright was paid. Further investigation revealed that someone was causing mischief by claiming that Bram never fulfilled his copyright obligations for *Dracula* in America. These required he lodge two copies of his published work with the American Copyright Office on or before the day of publication. According to this same someone, this was never done, which meant that despite all the fuss I’d made, the legal wrangling, the contracts, and the money I’d been paid, *Dracula* had always been in the public domain.

Therefore, within the borders of the United States, anyone – Hollywood studios, a theatre impresario – was entitled to produce whatever version of *Dracula* they wished, without gaining permission or paying me a damn cent.

Well, I called complete bollocks on that. The moment I learned what was being said from Miss Fassett, I was straight on to Mr Thring. I dictated copies of letters to all and sundry, even though, as I confessed to Miss Fassett, Winsome had turned over the gallery upstairs and couldn’t find a shred of proof that Bram *had* lodged copyright.

‘Look harder,’ I urged Miss Fassett. ‘It will be there.’

It had to be. How anyone could even consider that my husband, Bram Stoker, a man who’d been a barrister and used those skills to run a major theatre company as well as manage his literary works, would overlook protecting his American copyright, was laughable. Miss Fassett and, indeed, Mr Thring agreed, and both promised to keep a close eye on anyone who tried to subvert my rights – rights that would soon be Noel’s, then Ann’s – to exercise.

Ah! I remembered what it was I had to tell Noel. Someone must search the records of the Library of Congress, the Law Library, too, if need be. If Bram’s official lodgement would be anywhere, it would be there. I clearly recalled him telling me he’d sent copies himself. If it was the last thing I did, I’d ensure those rights were secure.

My jaw clenched and my body spasmed as those phantom digits cruelly tore at my insides. My world turned from pale grey to black as my ability to remain in the present wavered. My lungs were like deflated bellows and I’d not the strength to fill them. I wheezed and panted worse than Miss Fassett.

My heart was a timpani of explosions in my ears, building to a climax. The room grew dim.

'No, no,' I whimpered. It was not my time. Not yet. Please, God. Bluebells, peonies and violets had only just begun to appear; it would not be fair if I couldn't bid summer welcome one last time.

I lay fighting for breath as the tearing subsided, leaving me bathed in sweat. I should call Winsome, ask her to summon Noel. I glanced at the clock. It was afternoon. What was the date? Ah, that's right, Monday, the twenty-fifth of May. Father O'Malley had come, hadn't he? Or was that yesterday?

Finally able to lean over and grab the bottle of laudanum, I opened it and took a long swig. God, the taste was awful. I took another, then another, and screwed the lid back on and tucked it beside me for later.

As I waited for the swoon-like state to embrace me, for the pain to dissipate, I thought about Noel, the quiet considered man he'd become. Like his father in so many ways, but also not. He was a proper husband and father, wasn't he? Neelie doted on him. Ann did, too.

I'd once asked God if Bram died when he did as punishment for his sins. Was that what my cancer was? Punishment for accepting the kind of marriage no Christian person should? But I'd been a good woman, a good wife, hadn't I? Bram and I, we'd not hurt anyone through our choices, had we? Except Oscar … We'd deliberately denied him our help. May God forgive me.

I think, in the end, my fight for *Dracula*'s rights, for my dues as Bram's widow, was as much a fight for my right to be myself: a woman who would no longer be governed by men's choices – the dead and the living. For years after Oscar's death, I'd wondered if he'd never asked me to marry him because he loved me too much to cause me the pain that became Constance's. But no. He'd loved her too, in his own way. That was one thing I had in common with sweet Constance – we'd both wed men who couldn't return our love – not in the way society expected. She was punished far more harshly than me, living in exile for the rest of her short life. And Bram? His stubborn loyalty to Henry Irving reduced him in every way possible – as husband, writer, father, and as a man. As for the disease that ultimately killed him – and the choices that led to it – surely that was punishment enough, secular and divine. I sent a prayer to heaven for him, and for Poor O and Constance. Then there were the men who lived: Mr

Thring, Mr Deane, Liveright, Balderston, Bang, the many publishers and film producers – all had tried to force me into decisions that were in *their* best interests while pretending they were in mine.

But I'd resisted them.

The truth was, *Dracula* had transformed *me*, turned me into something different and, I liked to think, better, stronger. I had Bram to thank for that, and I did. With all my heart.

The laudanum had me in its grip now. I could hear the soft strains of a hymn, the faint rumble of thunder. A raven sat on the end of my bed, pecking at the bedcovers. A bat flew in the window and alighted on the mantel, folded its wings and hung upside down. More followed, draping themselves like bunting along the picture rail, their little furry heads twisted, their pebble eyes staring at me. A thick mist drifted in the window and began to fill the room, curling sinuously about the bed. From within its billows a bald man in a shabby suit, a cape swirling about his thighs, appeared. With brazen familiarity he glided across the room. His eyes glowed that cursed ruby shade, his teeth, sharp and crowded in his mouth, gleamed as he smiled.

'It's you,' I whispered. 'Here to crow over my demise, I suppose?' My chest was moving rapidly now, my heart ready to burst from my ribs.

Silently, he bent over me and as I gazed into those blooded orbs, I saw myself reflected in their depths. I gasped. My hair was lustrous and chestnut, my face unlined, my cheeks pink, my mouth a fragrant rosebud.

He gently pushed the tresses away from my forehead. The mattress shifted as he lowered his weight onto it. To my surprise, he smelled of the past, of long walks in Merrion Square, assignations in churches, opening nights at the theatre, crowded cinemas, electric lights, motor cars, cordite and terror; violets and roses, the briny sea. Of something chthonic and dangerous too. He drew closer.

A spindly finger caressed my cheek; a pointed nail scored the skin. 'I've come to take you, Florence Stoker.'

I started shaking, tears streaming down my cheeks. I wasn't ready to go. Not with him, please … No …

'Take you to him …' he finished.

Another, beloved voice, entered my head; one with touches of Ireland, of promises made and dashed, of dreams defeated. One replete with

possibilities, too.

‘We’re bound together for all eternity,’ it pledged. ‘My love, my champion.’

My demon swooped and his jagged teeth met the soft flesh of my neck. My mouth opened in a soundless scream as hot blood pulsed against his tongue. The cold that had gripped me melted as heat coursed from my jugular to every other part of my body.

Bright light exploded. The raven cawed and the bats chirruped, their funny leather wings flapping. I could no longer hear the hymn.

The mist languorously enveloped me, spectral caresses causing my body to thrum, relax. Tranquil now, I ceased to resist and closed my eyes in surrender.

Champion. Was that how I’d be remembered? Not as the Wife, or Mrs Dracula, but as a champion.

‘Take me, then,’ I sighed, and his savage kiss deepened. I began to dissolve into a dreamy nothingness, where pain had no place, becoming weightless. Memories jostled against my newfound peace, before fading … fading.

I opened my eyes. My dark guide had vanished. The birds and bats too. Only the mist remained and, when it parted, two men emerged.

Both were tall, distinguished. One was possessed of lovely twinkling grey eyes and the most genial smile. He nodded in joyous welcome and beckoned me lovingly. The other, a cape draped across his broad shoulders, gazed at me with an expression of such longing and opened his arms.

I rose from the bed hesitantly and stood. I’d a choice to make. The last and most important I’d ever make. One for all eternity.

But there’d really only ever been one man for me.

With swimming eyes and a full heart, I walked towards him.

LIST OF CHARACTERS

Those denoted by an * are invented for the purposes of the book. All the rest are actual historical figures.

The Balcombes
Lieutenant Colonel James Balcombe (Florence's father)
Phillippa Anne (his wife)
Phillippa (eldest daughter, Phil – marries John Knott)
Mary (daughter)
Maude Bertha (daughter, later Pattison)
Florence Anne Lemon (daughter, later, Stoker)
Catherine Mary (daughter, later, Adams)
Alice Grace (daughter)
James (son)
Another unnamed brother, who I called Billy
Maggie (daughter, deceased)

The Stokers
Abraham Stoker (father of Bram)
Charlotte (his wife)
Thornley Stoker (Sir, Bram's brother, doctor; wife, Emily)
Matilda (Bram's sister)
Bram (Abraham) Stoker (married to Florence)
Tom (Bram's brother, married Enid)

Richard (Bram's brother, doctor)
Margaret (Bram's sister)
George (Bram's brother, doctor, married Agnes McGillycuddy)
Irving Noel Stoker (Florence and Bram's son)
Neelie Stoker (nee Sweetman – Noel's wife)
Ann Stoker (granddaughter of Florence and Bram, daughter of Noel and Neelie)
Ellen Crone (Stoker children's nursemaid)

Florence and Bram's household staff
Mrs Daw (cook)
Emma Barton (maid)
Mary Dunhunter (cook)
Maria Mitchell (maid)
Louisa Maiden (maid)
Ada (parlour maid)
Elizabeth Jarrald (nursemaid to Noel)
Nounou Yvette Beaufort (nanny to Noel)
Mrs Cassan Simpson (nanny to Noel)

The Wildes
Sir William Wilde
Lady Jane Wilde (pen name, Speranza)
Oscar
William (Willie)
Constance Lloyd (Oscar's wife, later Holland)
Cyril Holland (Constance and Oscar's son)
Vyvyan Holland (Constance and Oscar's son)

The Lyceum Company
Henry Irving (later Sir)
Florence Irving (his estranged wife)

Ellen Terry
Edward Godwin
Charles Wardell
Edith Craig (Ellen Terry's daughter)
Gordon Craig (Ellen Terry's son)
William Terris (actor)
Harry Loveday (stage manager)
Walter Collinson (Henry Irving's valet)
Jonathan Hurst (box office)
Hawes Craven (scene painter)
Joseph Hatton
Baroness Burdett-Coutts (patron of Henry Irving and the Lyceum)
Laurence Irving (son of Henry)
Louis Fredrick Austin
Austin Brereton
*Judith Brown (Ellen's maid)
Charles Howson (accountant)

Significant Characters
William Schwenk Gilbert (librettist)
Lucy Gilbert (his wife)
Nancy (Gilberts' adopted American adult daughter)
Arthur Sullivan (composer)
Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (writer)
Hall Caine (writer)
George Bernard Shaw (playwright and theatre critic)
Genevieve Ward (actress)
Violet Hunt (author and socialite)
Alfred, Lord Tennyson (poet Laureate)
Samuel Clemens (Mark Twain – American writer)
James Whistler (artist)
Walt Whitman (poet)

William Thackery (poet and novelist)
Winston Churchill (politician)
Benjamin Disraeli (politician)
Sergeant Anthony Roberts (policeman)
Constable John Jenkins (policeman)
John Harper (publisher)
Mr Courtier-Dutton (publisher)
Edward Marston (publisher)
Archibald Constable (publisher)
Hamilton Deane (owner of theatrical troupe and actor)
Rudyard Kipling (writer)
George Herbert Thring (secretary of the Incorporated Society of Authors, Playwrights and Composers)
*Miss Chandler (Mr Thring's secretary)
Bela Lugosi (Hungarian actor – the first to play Dracula on film)
Lady Ritchie (daughter of William Thackeray)
Miss Ruby Preece (houseguest of the Gilberts)
Dorothea Fassett (Florence's agent)
Dr Francis Tumblety (friend of Hall Caine; suspected of being Jack the Ripper)
President Chester Arthur
John Balderston (playwright and screenwriter)
CA Bang (Florence's first agent)
Henrik Galeen (screenwriter, *Nosferatu*)
FW Murnau (director, *Nosferatu*)
Max Schrek (actor, Count Orlock, *Nosferatu*)
Walter Osbourne (artist, painted portrait of Florence)
Edgar Allen Poe
Henry James (author)
George Meredith (author)
Dante Gabriel Rossetti (artist and poet)
Prince of Wales, later King Edward VII ('call me Bertie')

Queen Victoria
Robert Sherard (Oscar's biographer)
Sarah Bernhardt (actress)
Arminius Vàmbèry (explorer and writer)
Sir Richard Burton (explorer, translated *1001 Arabian Nights*)
Ivor Montagu (president, British Film Society)
Harry Warburton (Mr Deane's backer and associate of Mr Bang)
Charles Morrell (playwright)
David Bispham (American opera singer)
Max Beerbohm Tree (theatre manager)
Richard Prince (actor – murdered William Terris)
Edmund Kean (actor)
Jack the Ripper
Lord Alfred Douglas (Bosie – lover of Oscar Wilde)
Marquess of Queensberry (Bosie's father)
Robert Ross (faithful friend of Oscar's)
Willam Heinemann (publisher)
Margaret Raine Hunt (Violet's mother and translator of Grimm's fairytales)
Miss Holt (passenger aboard the *Victoria*)
The Jess Family (aboard the *Victoria*)
Mrs Warlett (passenger aboard the *Victoria*)
Sister Euphemia (aboard the *Victoria*)
Laurence Fitch (Dorothea's assistant)
*Vera (Florence's maid)
*Winsome Clover (Florence's companion)
Phillippa (Florence's niece and companion)
Moonbeam (Florence's Pekingese)
Dr James Browne (Bram's physician)
The Pankhursts (suffragettes)
Marion Wallace-Dunlop (suffragette and hunger-striker)
Madame Blavatsky (famous fortune teller and psychic)
Sigmund Freud

Minna (governess to George and Agnes's children)

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This is one of my favourite parts of writing historical fiction – revealing who and what was real and where I've taken liberties. More than any of my previous historical novels (*The Darkest Shore* might be the only exception) does the adage 'truth is stranger than fiction' apply here. For while Bram Stoker's name is enshrined in literary and popular culture, as you now know, throughout his lifetime, he wasn't recognised as a writer but as Henry Irving's factotum.

Most, if not all, of Bram Stoker's biographers describe his life as one of 'mediocrity'. Barbara Belford in her excellent work, *Bram Stoker: A biography of the author of Dracula*, claimed that his life embodied 'an eternal theme: failure in the pursuit of dreams'. That broke my heart. It's also hard for contemporary readers to conceive of the famous Bram Stoker as failing. Why, even his death was overshadowed by the sinking of the *Titanic*. He simply couldn't cut a break in life or death – not until much, much later and arguably this was only due to Florence and her tenacity, resourcefulness, and refusal to roll over and go away. Yet, for all the many books, videos, documentaries, academic articles, fan sites, memes, societies, memorial days, celebrations, awards, streets, monuments, films, TV series and more dedicated to the man and his books, and one book in particular, very little is said about the woman he married – Florence Anne Lemon Balcombe. Florence, the mother of his only child, who was (mostly) beside him for over thirty-three years.

Four or five years ago, a dear friend of mine, knowing that in a former life I used to lecture at university on literature and pop culture, including Gothic literature and vampires, asked if I could help her son with an assignment he had for English on *Dracula*. Her son, Thomas, is a bona fide

genius and I did wonder what kind of help I could offer, but of course said yes. I'd studied the book as an undergraduate and later taught it to second and third year students, studied *Nosferatu* as well, and just about every iteration of celluloid and literary *Dracula* since (from Hammer Horror to *Twilight*, from *Interview with a Vampire* to the *True Blood* novels and the TV series *Buffy*, *Blade*, *Sinners* and beyond, including the remake of *Nosferatu*) and thought I knew the fundamentals of Bram's life, including that he was married. However, as I read through my lecture notes and sought out readings that might be helpful for Thomas, I realised with growing shame that I knew next to nothing about Florence Stoker. It simply wasn't good enough. I sought to remedy this and promptly went down a rabbit hole – a long, dark one – that I didn't emerge from until about six months later (poor Thomas was fortunate to get any assistance from me at all). By the end of it, I knew I had to tell Florence's story.

I discovered that not only was Florence an incredibly beautiful, highly intelligent woman of poor means, but a fabulously flawed human who tolerated and thrived in the less than ideal circumstances of the period and of her marriage. While there are no biographies dedicated to Florence (yet), she did pop up in just about all of Bram's – sometimes as an afterthought, but usually to say how terrible she was – if incredibly attractive. Bram's various (and mostly male) biographers noted she was vain, frigid, aloof, a spendthrift, an indifferent mother and wife, highly critical, unsupportive, and more concerned with elevating herself socially, her appearance, hosting expensive parties, taking extravagant shopping trips, and refusing to accompany Bram on his overseas tours. The inference was that she made Bram's life miserable and her son's as well.

David Skal's fascinating biography of Bram, *Something in the Blood: The untold story of Bram Stoker, the man who wrote Dracula*, makes many negative observations about Florence including that there are 'no warm remembrances of Florence by Noel Stoker' (a claim Noel's daughter Ann largely contradicts) and that the Stoker marriage was 'passionless'. Skal also claims she felt 'she had been cheated' because of having a 'dull marriage', and a 'dull motherhood'! In another book, *Hollywood Gothic*, Skal calls Florence 'notoriously difficult'. Bram and Florence's nephew, Daniel Farson, in his provocative biography of his uncle, *The Man Who Wrote Dracula*, describes his aunt and uncle as being in a loveless, glacial marriage, with 'Florence Balcombe enamoured only of her own beauty'. If

she is mentioned in biographies of Bram, it's usually in relation to the men who loved her – mostly to cast *them* in a positive light, highlighting *their* good taste and forbearance.

Based on everything I learned throughout my almost three years of research for this book, there's little concrete evidence to support such damning assessments of Florence's character by either Skal or Farson, let alone anyone else; but nor does anyone seek to offer a different interpretation of her actions, particularly post Bram's death and in regards to the then illicit film, *Nosferatu*.

On the contrary, the more I read about Bram, the more I kept encountering contradictions about Florence – gaps and omissions in her life and the various relationships she had that some biographers (rather unhelpfully) saw fit either to fill with assumptions or ignore altogether. The only exceptions were Eleanor Fitzsimmons's fascinating book, *Wilde's Women*, which dedicates an excellent chapter to Florence in relation to Oscar Wilde; Paul Murray, in his biography of Bram, *The Shadow of Dracula*; and Brian Cleary's essay 'Bram Before Dracula: The Early London Years' in the book *Gibbet Hill*, which contains essays and Bram's recently discovered short story 'Gibbet Hill'.

There's also a very helpful website, Irish Biographies, on famous Irish people that puts a much more positive spin on Florence. But it was when I read between the lines of the available material, read some of Bram's correspondence, biographies of other famous people who knew the Stokers (there were many, especially Oscar Wilde and Ellen Terry), taking into consideration the people Florence attracted and *kept* in her life, the devotion of Oscar Wilde, his evident feelings, the fact she was considered clever, popular, a terrific hostess and a fabulous and entertaining letter writer (some of her letters to Ellen Terry are available in libraries), how hard she fought for her rights after Bram died, I felt there had to be so much more to this woman. If you take into account Bram's own words about his wife, letters to friends declaring how much he missed her when he was on tour in America, and at the lowest point in his life – his letter to Thornley when he was dying – never mind Hall's Caine's obituary, along with the other scraps of evidence I found, another picture of Florence begins to emerge: a much kinder and, frankly, more interesting woman than most allowed.

So, I dived into yet another, deeper and darker rabbit hole and, re-reading the material by and about Bram Stoker (i.e. everything he ever

wrote that's available), as well as anything I could find on Florence (including her own account of the shipwreck she and Noel survived – which was genuine), contemporary newspaper reports, snippets from people of the period, and then examining the way in which she refused to surrender in the long drawn-out fight over the rights to *Dracula* with Prana Film, the Society of Authors, theatrical impresarios, Hollywood, and the various men who sought to take advantage or simply dismiss her, I swiftly realised there was far more to Florence Stoker than her beauty or simply as The Wife (Henry Irving did refer to her that way on their first encounter – he was shocked Bram had either married or brought her with him to England, or both). This was a woman who found herself in what could have been a very unhappy marriage, removed from the support of her close-knit family in Dublin, thrust into a life and city she knew little about, with a man she really didn't know who gave his blind loyalty, if not adoration, to an actor who set himself up in competition with her.

I became fascinated by her, her emotional resilience; how hard it must have been for her to keep her head above water and create a life largely on her own that was nonetheless dependent on her husband. I began to look past the unflattering judgements for explanations as to why she'd been described in such negative ways, to peer into the gaps and the shadows, and cast fresh eyes on the evidence (for example, census records that revealed how long family servants remained with the Stoker household; her long-lasting friendships with various men and women of the period such as Ellen Terry, William and Lucy Gilbert, Arthur Conan Doyle, Oscar Wilde, Violet Hunt, Genevieve Ward – and many others), and search for *Florence*, rather than simply accept the opinions of Bram's biographers.

One has only to look at how Florence's contemporaries regarded her to get a completely different picture. The writing and artistic communities, the intelligentsia, politicians and scientists flocked to enjoy her company. Her Sunday salons were extremely popular and invitations were much sought-after. She was also described as witty, intelligent, sparkling and with many other positive traits. I couldn't conceive that George or Matilda Stoker would have come to live with Bram and Florence if they didn't like her.

And while there's no doubt that Florence and Bram spent as much as he earned, claims that Florence was profligate, that she 'forced' Bram to move house each time or undertook unaffordable shopping trips to Paris and wasted away his earnings didn't add up. There was nothing to suggest Bram

was coerced. While he may have been trying to 'keep the wife happy' by complying with her wishes, it's evident he also benefited personally and possibly professionally (which I have played with, having her introduce him to publishers and other writers). The compliments his wife attracted all reflected well upon him.

I also began to think about the relationship Florence would have had to Bram's writing. One cannot live with a writer – aspiring or published – and not be aware of what they're working on, listen to their ideas, discuss them, their dreams and ambitions, and even contribute. I have many writer friends (and, stating the obvious, being one myself) and that's been their (and their partners') experience. Florence was bilingual (French and English), well-read, and associated with many literary luminaries of the day. I began to imagine the kind of sounding board she would have been for Bram and, as he was the kind of writer who drew heavily from what went on around him, why he wouldn't have also drawn directly from his wife and her ideas. He did indeed read drafts to her, so it wasn't a stretch to think he shared more and earlier in the creative process. I saw their relationship, while failing in the bedroom and in other ways, as evolving into a partnership or at least a sympathetic relationship between like minds. Did she offer all the suggestions I propose in the novel? I don't know, but I like to think she may have planted seeds that blossomed. She was certainly with Bram when he first saw Cruden Bay (where *Dracula* was mainly written), staying with him there many times over the years. She was with him for those three weeks in Whitby. Did the man Bram rescued from the river who died on their dining room table (all true) and haunted Florence (I used creative licence there) inspire anything? I find it hard to believe (especially considering Bram had such a macabre imagination and was fascinated by corpses and death – he used to visit morgues in Paris) that he wouldn't have drawn on him – if not in *Dracula*, then in his other tales.

I read everything Bram wrote – from his short stories to his final pieces, including the *Personal Reminiscences of Henry Irving* and the strange and spooky 'Gibbet Hill'. To be frank, while I enjoyed *The Primrose Path* and saw merit in all his books and tales (though 'The Dualitists' must be one of the most violent and God-awful stories I've ever read), *Dracula* is the absolute stand-out. Up until *Dracula*, and apart from *The Primrose Path*, most of his books were what we'd probably classify as 'romances', some with adventure – *Miss Betty*, *Lady Athlyne*, *The Snake's Pass*, *The Mystery*

of the Sea, *The Man*. *The Lady of the Shroud* and *The Lair of the White Worm* saw a return to the supernatural (as was *The Jewel of Seven Stars*, which relied on Egyptology and a mummy, Tera – often regarded as the forerunner of the mummy genre), but even so, they all lacked the finesse of *Dracula*, the tight organisation, marvellous plotting, and character development.

The parts of the novel where Florence laments Bram's lack of success and, later, when Tom tells her how ordinary Bram's books are, while invented by me, also reflect public opinion at the time – his other books did sell poorly and receive bad reviews (including in a Tasmanian newspaper!). It was so hard writing about Bram's literary failures and thinking how difficult this must have been for him, and for Florence. Bram never gave up. Florence must have understood the burning ambition that drove him. It's so easy now to think of Bram Stoker as being a great success, but as his only female biographer, Barbara Belford, points out, he was a failure.

What must it have been like to be married to someone like that? Someone who neglected his family and sacrificed his time so others shone. It's interesting that so many biographers call Florence frigid, but what if there was another reason for the lack of passion in the marriage? What if it wasn't her? Naturally, I used this as a jumping-off point from which to examine a complex and fraught relationship.

Just about every biographer either accepts it's likely Bram was homosexual or strongly alludes to it; some even suggest maybe he was bisexual or asexual – though the syphilis diagnosis undermines the latter. The evidence lies not only in his unwavering devotion to Henry Irving, but the passionate letters he wrote to the American poet Walt Whitman – a man who shocked the establishment by writing openly and joyously about homosexual love. Reading Whitman's poems, and Bram's letters to him, it's easy to see how such an assumption might be reached. Bram is open in his adoration. Not only does he describe himself in unusual terms to Whitman, telling him: 'I am equal in temper and cool in disposition and have a large amount of self-control and am *naturally secretive to the world* …' (my emphasis). He also describes himself physically in a manner not unlike an internet dating site. Later in the same letter he adds,

> How sweet a thing it is for a strong healthy man with a woman's eyes and a child's wishes to feel that he can speak to a man who can

be if he wishes father, and brother, and wife to his soul.

He uses a similar expression with Henry Irving, ‘soul looked into soul.’ As I mention in the novel, when Irving, as his party trick, recited the poem ‘Eugene Aram’ to a small group including Bram, Bram collapsed in what was described as ‘a violent fit of hysterics’. Unusual behaviour for a man in that time.

Yet others claim Bram had a reputation as a ‘womaniser’ and, certainly, he had access to and was beloved by many beautiful women throughout his long career in the theatre. So, which was he? A lothario? Or a closet homosexual? I don’t know. In the book, Florence thinks she knows, but it’s not until she sees the cause of death on his death certificate (also true), that I have her start to reexamine their entire relationship in a different light. I decided she must have felt terribly betrayed. Did he contract syphilis, which he would have had for decades and likely caught not long after they were married, from men or women? Does it matter? I think it’s a very interesting question, especially considering the lack of sexual congress (note I didn’t say desire) in Florence and Bram’s relationship. Importantly, *she* didn’t have syphilis when she died. Furthermore, the highly sensual and, indeed, sexual nature of *Dracula* (‘This man belongs to me!’) and the capacity for passion in many of Bram’s literary characters, indicates he did feel – deeply. Some biographers suggest this was how Bram masked himself, pouring his passion into his fictive creations. He wouldn’t be the first writer to do that.

It was his great-nephew, Daniel Farson, who first revealed what was written on the death certificate, causing further speculation about Bram’s sexuality. The entry for Florence Stoker on the Irish Biography website states that Farson ‘insinuated’ Bram died from syphilis. There was no insinuation; it was presented as fact. The website also states that it’s ‘now widely refuted’. This isn’t the case, as more recent biographers have had medical experts confirm that what was written on the death certificate – ‘Locomotor Ataxy’ – was the correct term for tertiary syphilis.

Did Bram repress his sexuality and release it in his books? Reserve it for people other than his wife? We’ll never know, but it certainly provided fodder in developing these two amazing characters and helped me to creatively interpret their public and private actions (for example, Florence selling off Bram’s possessions after he died, and enjoying life as a widow after being such a caring nurse while he was ill – all facts).

As for their son, it's true he was given the name Irving after Henry Irving, and that he later changed it to Noel. I couldn't conceive of Florence agreeing to name their son after Henry Irving. To me, it was another explanation for what was, by all accounts, a distant relationship between mother and son. Some of this is explained by the Victorian period in which Noel was born, when children were to be seen and not heard. Some of Bram's biographers try and make Florence out to be a bad mother, unloving and uncaring when, in many ways, she was simply undemonstrative, which accords with Victorian approaches to parenting. Certainly, she loved Noel and surviving the wreck of the *Victoria* would likely have bonded them. Ironically, Bram isn't criticised for his absent fathering – long stretches away from home at work and overseas; even on holidays he left Noel to his nanny or Florence alone. It's hardly fair to throw the parenting book at Florence any more than it's fair to judge her mothering by our standards – not that it's stopped many biographers, mostly based on George Du Maurier's *Punch* cartoon of the Stoker family – which is also a fact – and Farson's biography.

I knew when I started writing this novel that the truth of the Stokers' life was far better than anything I could have invented. One of the most incredible things is that Florence Stoker had relationships with three men who produced some of the greatest literary villains of all time: Dracula, Dorian Gray and Svengali. What does it say about her that she inspired these men – Bram, Oscar and George Du Maurier – to such magnificent creations? And so I wove how she might have inspired these tales into the novel.

As for the rest of the factual events, Oscar Wilde did court Florence, gave her gifts, did the sketch and painting, sent flowers to her and Ellen and wrote that note on the opening night of *The Cup*. Up until her death, Florence kept all their correspondence and keepsakes of their time together. She loved talking about him and displaying evidence of his devotion.

No correspondence (or very little) between her and Bram has survived, despite them both being prolific letter writers. Was it destroyed in a fit of anger as I suggest? Or is it yet to be found in an attic somewhere?

Bram was bed-ridden for the first seven years of his life yet grew up to be a big burly man and a renowned athlete who won medals at university. He was also a great debater, president of various societies and an unpaid theatre critic for a Dublin newspaper run by Sheridan Le Fanu.

The descriptions of the demands Henry Irving makes upon Bram in the novel are, if anything, underplayed. He sent endless notes ordering Bram to attend to tasks that could easily have been done by an underling, inserting himself into Bram's life in ways that were manipulative and controlling. The holiday at Southsea, the underwater ordinance exploding while the men were in a boat, all happened. Henry did indeed make Noel up in the guise of Mephistopheles. David Skal in *Something in the Blood* notes that 'there's something profoundly ambivalent in the act of literally demonising a child, especially a child whose parents already gave him so many mixed messages about their affections'. Skal makes the point that Bram published 'The Dualitists', a 'ferocious' short story about 'demonical children' not long after this episode, inferring stimulus. I agreed and used this example to portray how real life might inspire fiction.

Did Henry Irving deliberately seek to undermine Florence's relationship with Bram? I'll leave that for you to decide, but he really did walk away from his pregnant wife (leapt out of a coach) after bitter words, never to see her again, though he did eventually form relationships with his sons (and often made Bram replace him as a father-figure when required – yet another duty Bram acquiesced to). Henry and Ellen Terry were lovers for years and he was also alternately horribly cruel and then affectionate to Bram – the definition of coercive control and emotional abuse. Bram also did say to Florence that he could make another son, but not another Henry Irving. I know. Awful. A number of sources mention it.

Actresses did call Bram 'Uncle Bram' or, as Ellen Terry did, 'Ma'. I explain this as the result of him using the initials MA after his name – that was my invention.

Florence did have a role as a vestal virgin in Tennyson's *The Cup* and while some biographers note her as 'actress' or mention she played other roles (in the 1881 census, she's listed as an 'artiste'), it's said as something likely rather than factual and I could find no hard evidence that she ever did more than the one role, or desired to.

The shipwreck Florence and Noel survive is true, as are the names of the passengers with them (though not the captain's cousin), and what happened subsequently. They were rescued and Bram did take two days or more to come to them.

All the information about Jack the Ripper and his victims is taken from contemporary newspapers, cartoons (there was a police illustrated news!)

and some fabulous modern books about the murders. It's also fact that Hall Caine's friend, the American doctor Frances J Tumblety, was a suspect and that the Ripper murders ceased once he fled.

Thornley Stoker was married to Emily who suffered from mental illness. While in the end he was forced to keep her in a wing of Ely House with two carers (she apparently escaped one evening and appeared naked at a dinner he was holding), the bit about her eating insects is my inclusion as a possible inspiration for Bram for the character of Renfield. Like Henry Irving, Thornley was knighted on the same day Oscar Wilde was convicted.

All the information about Oscar Wilde, his eccentric family (his father, Dr William Wilde, was accused of rape by one of his patients), his mother, Lady Jane, and her penchant for filtered light and Spanish headdresses, is true. A highly regarded poet (Speranza) and early feminist who held marvellous salons, Lady Jane stood by her son when most abandoned him.

Whether or not Florence attended Oscar's trial, I don't know, but a veiled lady clutching violets did. Some believe it was Ellen Terry. I gave that action to Florence. Some biographers also believe that Bram went to Paris and gave Oscar money after he was released from prison. I could find nothing concrete to support this, though I wouldn't be surprised if he did. Oscar was a beloved friend and some believe that he and Bram had more in common than simply a love for Florence.

The progression of Bram's illness after Henry Irving died, his social and financial decline, is all sadly true, as is his application for a grant from the literary society. I have slightly altered the order of events around Bram's stroke and the publication of *Personal Reminiscences of Henry Irving* for dramatic purposes. However, all the trips taken to the USA, Scotland, and within England and over to Ireland happened. All dates mentioned, and the Stokers' home addresses, are as accurate as I could make them.

The details about life in the Victorian and Edwardian periods, all the people (there are very few fictive characters – please see list), including the members of the Balcombe and Stoker families, the nobles, royals, actors, actresses, authors, playwrights, artists, poets, scientists, presidents, politicians and maids are real – but they also don't do justice to the Stokers' huge social circle of luminaries. I was selective.

There's no doubt that Bram Stoker was a contradiction: sickly child, renowned athlete, a clever, organised man who dived into the Thames to save a man from drowning and received a medal of bravery. Yet this same

man sacrificed his own ambitions, his family and so much more to another who appeared not to value him at all.

After Bram's death, Florence was given a second life. She travelled, enjoyed the company of her friends, and was regarded slightly askance by those who felt she disrespected Bram's memory. I've sought to explain why this may be the case. This is all supposition on my part (just like the reasoning I present for her apparent distance from Noel).

It's true that Florence joined the Society of Authors once she learned about *Nosferatu*, the program and poster being sent anonymously to her. What followed, as she fought for her rights as literary executor of Bram's estate, was long and drawn out and very convoluted (David Skal gives an outstanding and detailed recounting of what was involved in his book *Hollywood Gothic*). I have reduced it to the main players and actions mostly – all of which are true and they're real people. There was no doubt, until the copyright issue of *Nosferatu* was sorted out, Florence's chances of securing a film deal with Hollywood were nil. Though she was able to license theatrical rights (and that was a complicated process too), the biggest coup, and what became the goal for many aspiring writers (and arguably still is) was an American film deal.

Without understanding how hard she tried to get another result, there are those today who still demonise Florence Stoker as the woman who 'sought to destroy a cinematic masterpiece', without realising that Prana Film had stolen Bram's work, and she'd sought and fought hard for another outcome (i.e. appropriate financial compensation). It's generally believed Florence didn't see *Nosferatu*. I wasn't convinced – how could she not? So, I have her attend a secretive screening with Ellen Terry. This is my own invention so she would 'know thine enemy'.

I should add here too that there was quite the fuss made several years back about *Dracula* being in the public domain and therefore the entire rights imbroglio need never have occurred. Subsequently, this has been refuted. I had to dig deep to find this, but it appears copies of *Dracula* were indeed lodged in the Library of Congress. Florence's fight was completely legitimate.

In asserting her rights, Florence Stoker ensured that every single writer had their right to fair compensation for the use of their creative work honoured. As the wonderful Irish writer Joseph O'Connor said in his Author's Note to the incredible novel *Shadowplay* (a fictional telling of the

relationship between Henry Irving, Bram Stoker and Ellen Terry): 'All authors owe her a debt of gratitude.' In many ways, this book is my way of doing exactly that. It's both a tribute to a misunderstood woman and an expression of gratitude.

Today, writers and artists everywhere face another threat to fair compensation for their imaginative work: AI. Suddenly, Florence's fight of almost one hundred years ago is more relevant than ever. As Jay Kristoff, author of the sensational *Empire of the Vampire* series (and other terrific speculative fiction books), wrote:

> I'm not being hyperbolic when I say that LLM (aka AI) technology represents a clear and present danger to the human artistic endeavour. Despite claims to the contrary, it is not a tool through which people can unlock their hidden artistic gifts. It is a plagiarism machine, trained on the stolen works of hundreds of thousands of human artists, developed solely to supplant the very artists from which it has stolen.

It's more important now than ever before to embrace our inner Florence and fight for our rights and the rights of artists everywhere to be properly compensated for their work and to support human artistry and imagination in all its forms. Without it, what's culture? What's humanity? What's the future?

And let's not forget, for all the brouhaha around Florence's fight with Prana, *Nosferatu* wasn't destroyed. Florence didn't drive a stake through its heart, but she did make the film wait its turn to steal the limelight. Now, it's had another iteration, one that still owes its debt to *Dracula* and its creator Bram Stoker, but also, and I say this with deep affection and admiration, to Mrs Dracula: Mrs Florence Anne Lemon Stoker.



Florence was cremated after death but, instead of her ashes being placed in an urn beside Bram's at Golders Green Crematorium in London (as was originally intended), her remains were scattered across the Gardens of Rest at the same cemetery – presumably at her behest. Noel took the place

reserved for her, beside his father, when he died in 1961. Make of that what you will.

Just as an aside, to demonstrate how little is officially recorded or even known about Florence, on the Irish biography website is the following:

> Amongst the Stoker family papers held at TCD is a short newspaper clipping of an agency piece on the death of 'Mrs Bram Stoker'. Of its 129 words, seventeen are about Florence (giving her name, her father's name and the year of her marriage), the rest are divided between Henry Irving and her husband.

Seventeen words for this remarkable seventy-eight-year-old; the woman who lived with a wordsmith and fought for his rights. Ironic in so many ways.



I read so many books – fact and fiction – academic articles and journalistic pieces to write this novel. I listened to erudite lectures, watched YouTube videos and documentaries – literally hundreds and far too many to list here. I'm happy to put my sources on my website should the demand arise. I also read census lists from the relevant years, newspapers (particularly those covering the Ripper months and the sinking of the *Titanic*), listened to the music of the era and pored over contemporary maps of London, Whitby, Cruden Bay, Dublin, etc. With my husband, I walked in Florence and Bram's footsteps through London, Scotland, Whitby and other places and visited each of their homes in London – at least, those that were still standing. Sadly, two no longer exist and one is falling down!

I love doing the research and sometimes it's hard to wrench myself away. It's also true that a great deal of what I learn does not make it into the book, but I do hope it informs it and gives it authenticity. If there are any failings, it's not due to the work of these remarkable historians, nor the contemporary journalists of the day, but mine and mine alone. For that, I beg forgiveness and cry creative licence!

On the website of the Women's Museum of Ireland, Florence Balcombe is described as 'Dracula's Champion'. I think this is a far more fitting

epitaph for her, and it's how I'm going to remember her. I hope, having read this book, you will as well.

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This book is also for you: you are my life, my love, my champion. I choose you for all eternity.

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