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The Winter Rose

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Extract

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Prologue

Frankie Betts could smell a copper a mile away.

Cops reeked of beer and bay rum. They walked as though their shoes pinched. In poor neighbourhoods filled with hungry people, they looked as plump and glossy as veal calves, fattened up from all the free meals they cadged.

Cops drove Frankie wild. They made him want to smash everything – and everyone – in sight. And now there was one sitting right next to him. Inside the Barkentine. Inside the Firm's own stronghold. Pretending to be a regular bloke. Drinking. Talking. Ordering food.

The fucking *cheek*.

Frankie stubbed his cigarette out. He pushed his sleeves back and stood, ready to beat the man lifeless. But before he could, a fresh pint appeared on the bar in front of him. Desi, the publican, had put it there.

'Not leaving yet, are you, mate? You only just got here.' Desi's voice was cheerful, but his eyes flashed a warning.

Frankie nodded. 'Ta,' he said tightly, sitting back down.

Desi was right to have stopped him. Sid would be angry. He'd say he was disappointed. Frankie knew better than to disappoint Sid. They all did.

He took a swig of his porter and lit another cigarette, blaming the mistake he'd nearly made on nerves. It was a tense time for the Firm. A dangerous time. The rozzers were all over them.They'd robbed a wages van last week and had made off with over a thousand quid, prompting Freddie Lytton, the local Member of Parliament, to declare war. He'd had Sid arrested. Ronnie and Desi, too. But the beak had let them go. Turned out there were no witnesses. Two men and a woman had seen the robbery, but when they'd learnt it was Sid Malone they'd be testifying against, they'd suddenly been unable to recall what the robbers looked like.

'A mistake's been made. The police arrested the wrong man,' Sid had said to the press on the steps of the Old Bailey after he'd been released. 'I'm no

villain, me. Just a businessman trying to make an honest living.' It was a phrase he'd used many times – whenever the police raided his boatyard or one of his pubs. He said it so often, in fact, that Alvin Donaldson, a detective inspector, had christened him the Chairman and his gang the Firm.

Lytton had been furious. He vowed he'd have Sid's head on a platter. He swore he'd find someone, some honest man, who wasn't afraid to speak the truth, who wasn't afraid of Malone and his pack of thugs, and when he did, he'd lock them away for life.

'He's just blowing smoke,' Sid said. 'Wants his picture in the papers. It's almost election time.'

Frankie had believed him, but now this cop was sitting here, as bold as brass, and he was no longer sure Sid was right. Frankie looked at the man – not directly, in the mirror hanging over the bar. Was he Lytton's man? Or someone else's? Why had he been sent?

Where there was one cop, there were usually a dozen more. Frankie scanned the room. *If ever a pub deserved to be called a den of thieves*, he thought, *it's the Bark*. Dark and low-ceilinged, it sat squeezed between two wharves in Limehouse, on the north bank of the Thames. Its front touched Narrow Street and its back sagged brokenly over the river. At high tide you could hear the Thames lapping at the rear wall. Frankie recognized almost every face. Three local blokes were standing by the fire, passing bits of jewellery back and forth. In a corner, four more played cards while a fifth threw shark's teeth at a dartboard. Others sat clustered around rickety tables or at the bar itself. Smoking and drinking. Talking too loudly. Laughing too hard. Bragging and swaggering. Minor villains, all.

The man this cop was after, well . . . he didn't brag and he didn't swagger and there was nothing minor about him. He was one of the most powerful, most feared criminal bosses in London and Frankie thought that if this barmy rozzer knew what was good for him, he'd get up and leave now. While his legs still worked.

While Frankie continued to watch him, Lily the barmaid came bustling out of the kitchen and banged a bowl down in front of him, sloshing broth on the newspaper he'd been reading.

'One Limehouse hotpot,' she said.

The man stared at the steaming horror. 'It's fish,' he said flatly.

'Proper Sherlock Holmes, you. What were you expecting? Rack of lamb?'

'Pork, I guess.'

'This is Limehouse, innit? Not the bloody home counties. That'll be tuppence.'

The man slid a coin across the bar, then stirred the grey broth with a dirty spoon. Bits of bone and skin whirled through it. A scrap of potato, some celery. A chunk of white flesh bobbed up, slick with decay.

Carp, Frankie thought. He often saw them at low tide. Huge, black, milky-eyed things flopping helplessly in the stinking river mud. One bite of that, mate, and you'll shit for a week, he said silently.

Desi walked over. 'Something wrong with your supper?' he asked. 'You ain't touched it.'

The stranger put his spoon down. He hesitated.

This ought to be good, Frankie thought.

'Can't eat a bloody thing no matter how hard I try,' he finally said. 'Been livin' on porter. Anything else and me stomach just heaves at it.'

'What? Nothing at all?'

'Porridge. Milk. Sometimes an egg. Screws did it. Kicked me guts in. Haven't been right since.'

Frankie nearly laughed out loud.

Not Desi, though. He kept his face straight. 'Sent down, was you?' he asked.

'Aye. Smash-and-grab. Jewellery shop up Camden way. Had a clasp knife in me pocket so the coppers said I was armed. Beak gave me five.'

'You just come out?'

The stranger nodded. He pulled his cap off, revealing a prison-issue haircut.

Desi grinned. 'You poor sod,' he said. 'Think your stomach's bad, you should see your head. What nick was you in, lad? Reading?'

'Pentonville.'

'Did a bit of bird there meself. Warden's a right hard case. Willocks, his name was. He still breaking everyone's balls?'

'Oh, aye.'

Drummond, you git, Frankie thought. *Should have asked round.*

There was no Willocks at Pentonville. There never had been.

Desi Shaw poured a fresh pint of porter. 'Here you are, lad. On the house.'

As he moved off to wait upon another customer, his eyes caught Frankie's again. *Take care of this*, they said.

Frankie waited for a minute or so, sipping from his pint glass, smoking his cigarette, then he jostled the man's arm, spilling beer on his newspaper.

'Sorry, mate,' he said, pretending it was an accident. 'Between me and the barmaid, we've soaked your paper.'

'No harm done,' the cop said, smiling. 'Mopping spills is about the only thing this bloody rag's good for.'

Frankie laughed and the man took his false good humour for an opening. Just as he'd known he would.

'Michael Bennett,' he said. 'Pleased to meet you.'

'Roger Evans,' Frankie said. 'Likewise.'

'You hear about this?' Bennett asked, pointing to a story on the paper's front page. 'It's about that wages robbery. They say Sid Malone done it. That he got away with ten thousand quid.'

Don't I wish, Frankie thought. Flipping papers always exaggerated.

Bennett batted Frankie's arm with the back of his hand. 'I heard Malone stashes some of his dosh on a barge in the Thames,' he said. 'And some in a sugar warehouse.'

'Is that so?'

Bennett nodded. 'I also heard he keeps some here in the Bark. Why, we might be sitting on it right now,' he said, tapping his foot on the floorboards. 'Don't happen to have a crowbar in your pocket, do you?'

Frankie forced another laugh.

'Wherever he stores it, it must be a big place. The Firm don't go in for any tuppenny-ha'penny Fagin rubbish. One bloke told me their bullion thefts alone have brought them thousands. Thousands! Cor, can you imagine having all that money?'

Frankie felt his anger flash again. His fingers twitched. How he ached to break this bastard's nose. It would teach him to keep it out of other blokes' business.

'*Use your head, Frankie, not your hands. Your head*,' he heard Sid telling him.

Bennett touched Frankie's arm again. 'I've also heard Malone frequents this pub,' he said. 'Heard it's his headquarters.'

'Wouldn't know anything about that,' Frankie replied.

Bennett leaned in close. 'I need a word with him. Just a word, is all. Know how I can find him?'

Frankie shook his head. 'Sorry, mate.'

Bennett reached into his pocket. He placed a ten pound note on the bar. To most men in Limehouse, ten quid was a fortune. Frankie acted like it was to him as well, quickly pocketing it.

'Meet me round back of the pub,' he said. 'Give me fifteen minutes.'

He walked out of the Bark's main door, only to re-enter the pub from its basement door. He swiftly climbed a flight of narrow wooden stairs that led from the basement to the kitchen, then another flight that led to the upper floor. He walked down a dingy hallway and knocked twice on a locked door.

It was opened by a rangy man in shirtsleeves and a waistcoat who made no effort to hide the cosh he was holding. Behind him, in the middle of the room, another man sat at a table, quietly counting twenty pound notes. He raised his emerald green eyes to Frankie's.

'Trouble,' Frankie said. 'One of Lytton's. Must be. Says his name is Bennett. He'll be out back in fifteen minutes.'

The emerald-eyed man nodded. 'Keep him there,' he said, then resumed his counting.

Frankie shot back downstairs and let himself out the basement door. In

the tap room, Michael Bennett looked at the clock by the till. It was nearly 2 a.m. He drained his glass and left a few coins on top of the bar.

'Good night, mate,' he said, nodding to the publican.

Desi raised a hand in acknowledgement.

'Which way's the bog?' Bennett asked.

'Where d'you think you are? Buckingham Palace?' Desi asked. 'Use the river like the rest of us.'

Bennett made his way to the door. He rounded the corner of the pub and trotted down a set of stone steps that led from the street to the water.

Frankie, standing behind a cluster of pilings, watched him as he unbuttoned his trousers and took a long piss. It was low tide. Frankie could barely see the river in the darkness, but he could hear it – lapping at the hulls of barges moored midstream, hissing about the lines and buoys, gurgling in tiny, whirling eddies. When Bennett finished, Frankie stepped out from the pilings.

'Christ!' Bennett yelped. 'Gave me a start, you did. It ain't half dark down here. Where's Malone?'

'On his way.'

'You sure?'

'I said so, didn't I?'

'I'll have my money back off you if he don't show,' Bennett threatened.

Frankie shook his head, thinking he'd played the part of a regular bloke far too well. 'Don't worry. He'll show,' he said.

The two men waited for another ten minutes or so, making small talk. Then Bennett became impatient. Just as he was starting to get shirty, a match flared from behind him. He spun around.

Frankie looked past him and saw Sid and Desi. They were standing at the bottom of the stone steps. Desi was lighting a lantern.

'Michael Bennett, is it?' Sid asked.

Bennett stared, but made no reply.

'My guv asked you a question,' Frankie said.

Bennett turned back to him. 'Your *guv*? But I thought . . . you said . . .' he stammered.

'What do you want?' Frankie growled, the playacting over. 'Who sent you?'

Bennett took a step backwards, away from Sid. 'I'm not looking for any trouble,' he said. 'I only came to pass on a message, that's all. A woman I know wants to see Sid Malone. She'll meet him any time, anywhere, but she's got to see him.'

'You a cop?' Frankie asked, not believing him. 'Did Lytton send you?'

Bennett shook his head. 'I told you the truth. I'm a private detective.'

Malone cocked his head, appraising Bennett.

'You've got to give me an answer,' Bennett said to him. 'You don't know this woman. She won't stop. She'll come herself.'

Malone still hadn't said anything, but he was listening. Bennett seemed to take encouragement from this. He grew bolder.

'Never takes no for an answer, that one. Can't tell you her name. She don't want it known. She's a right pushy bitch, though, that's something I *can* tell you,' he added, venturing a laugh.

Later, Frankie would remember that Sid's mouth had twitched at the word *bitch*. And how he'd thought it was the beginning of a smile. He would remember how Sid had walked up to Bennett, slowly, easily, as if he was going to shake his hand, grateful for the information. Instead he grabbed the man's forearm, and in one quick, fluid motion, snapped it in two. The pain dropped Bennett to his knees, but it was the sight of his bones protruding from his skin that made him shriek.

Sid grabbed a handful of his hair and yanked his head back, choking off his noise. 'That's me answer. Loud and clear,' he said. 'You tell Fiona Finnegan the man she's after is dead. Dead as you'll be if I ever see you again.'

Sid released him and he crumpled into the mud. He turned and walked away. Frankie followed. Desi doused the lantern.

'Who is this girl, guv?' Frankie asked him, puzzled by Bennett's request and Sid's reaction. 'She up the duff?'

Sid made no response.

'She a relation, then?'

In the darkness, Frankie could only hear Sid's voice; he couldn't see his face. If he had, he'd have seen the pain there, deep and abiding, as he said, 'She's nobody, Frankie. No relation. She's nothing to me at all.'

PART ONE

May 1900

1

'Jones!'

India Selwyn Jones turned at the sound of her name. She had to squint to see who'd shouted it. Maud had taken her eyeglasses.

'Professor Fenwick!' she finally shouted back, beaming at the bald and bearded man hurtling towards her through a sea of bobbing mortarboards.

'Jones, you clever little cat! A Walker grant, a Lister *and* the Dennis Prize! Is there anything you *didn't* win?'

'Hatcher got the Beaton.'

'The Beaton's a humbug. Any fool can memorize anatomy. A doctor needs more than knowledge, she needs to be able to apply it. Hatcher can barely apply a tourniquet.'

'Shh, Professor! She's right behind you!' India whispered, scandalized. The graduation ceremony was over. The students had exited the auditorium's small stage to the strains of an inspiring march and were now posing for photographs or chatting with well-wishers.

Fenwick flapped a hand at her. Nothing scandalized him. He was a man who spoke freely, pointedly, and usually at the top of his lungs. India had first-hand experience of his scorching invectives. They'd been directed at her often enough. She remembered her first week in his classroom. She'd been assigned to question a patient with pleurisy. Afterwards Fenwick had called on her to open her case book and describe her findings. She could still hear him roaring at her for starting with the words 'I feel . . .'

'You *what*? You *feel*? You are not in my classroom to *feel*, Jones. This is not Early Romantic Poets. This is *diagnosis*, the taking of cases. You are here only to *observe*, for you are far too ignorant to do anything else. Feelings cloud judgement. What do they do, Jones?'

'They cloud judgement, sir,' India had replied, her cheeks blazing.

'Very good. *Feel* for your patient and you harm him with foolish preconceptions. *See* him, Jones . . . see the oedematosis of heart disease and know

it from kidney failure . . . see the colic of gallstones and know it from lead poisoning . . . only *see* him, Jones, with clarity and with dispassion, and you will cure him.'

'Well, come on, come on, let's have a look,' Fenwick said now, motioning impatiently to the leather folder tucked under India's arm.

India opened it, eager herself to look again at what it contained – a buff-coloured document with her name written in copperplate, the date – 26 May 1900, the seal of the London School of Medicine for Women, and the proclamation – there for all the world to see – that she had earned her degree in medicine. That she was now a doctor.

'*Doctor* India Selwyn Jones. Has a nice ring, doesn't it?' Fenwick said.

'It does, and if I hear it a few more times I might actually start to believe it.'

'Nonsense. There are some here who need a piece of paper to tell them that they're doctors but you're not one of them.'

'Professor Fenwick! Professor, over here . . .' a woman's voice shrilled.

'Ye gads,' Fenwick said. 'The Dean. Looks like she's got the head of Broadmoor with her, the poor devil. Wants me to convince him to hire some of you lot. You're damned lucky you got Gifford's job, you know.'

'I do, sir. I'm very eager to start.'

Fenwick snorted. 'Really? Do you know Whitechapel?'

'I did a bit of clinical work at London Hospital.'

'Any house calls?'

'No, sir.'

'Hmm, I take it back then. Gifford's the lucky one.'

India smiled. 'How bad can it be? I've done house calls in other poor areas. Camden, Paddington, Southwark . . .'

'Whitechapel's like nowhere else in London, Jones. Be prepared for that. You'll learn a lot there, that's for certain, but with your mind, your skills, you should have a nice research fellowship at a teaching hospital. And your own surgery. Like Hatcher. Private practice. That's where you belong.'

'I can't afford to open my own surgery, sir.'

Fenwick gave her a long look. 'Even if you could, I doubt you would. One could hand you the keys to a fully furnished Harley Street office and you'd hand them right back and scuttle off to the slums.'

India laughed. 'I'd like to think I'd *walk*, sir.'

'Still dreaming your pipe-dreams, eh?'

'I prefer to think of them as goals, sir.'

'A clinic, is it?'

'Yes.'

'For women and children.'

'That's right.'

Fenwick sighed. 'I remember you and Hatcher talking about it, but I never thought you were serious.'

'Harriet isn't. I am.'

'Jones, have you *any* idea what's involved in that sort of thing?'

'Some.'

'The raising of monies . . . the hunt for a suitable location . . . why, the administration alone simply boggles the mind. You need time to get a clinic off the ground, oceans of it, and you won't have a spare minute. You'll be worked off your feet at Gifford's. How will you manage it all?'

'I'll find a way, sir. One must try to make a difference,' India said resolutely.

Fenwick cocked his head. 'Do you know you said the same thing to me six years ago? When you first came here. What I've never understood is why.'

'Why?'

'Why an aristocratic young woman from one of Britain's wealthiest families feels she needs to make a difference.'

India coloured. 'Sir, I'm not . . . I don't . . .'

'Professor! Professor Fenwick!' It was the Dean again.

'I must go,' Fenwick said. He was quiet for a few seconds, seeming to study his shoes, then added, 'I don't mind telling you that I'll miss you, Jones. You're the best student I've ever had. Rational, logical, unemotional. A shining example to my current crop of ninnies. I also wish I could tell you that the hard part is over, but it's only beginning. You want to make a difference, to change the world, but the world might have other ideas. You know that, don't you?'

'I do, sir.'

'Good. Then know this – no matter what happens out there, remember that you are a *doctor*. A very good one. No one can take that from you. And not because it's in here,' he tapped on the diploma, 'but because it's in here.' He tapped India's forehead. 'Never forget that.'

It was India's turn to study her shoes. 'I won't, sir,' she whispered.

She wanted to thank him for all that he'd done, for taking a know-nothing girl of eighteen and making her into a doctor, but she didn't know how. Six years it had taken. Six long years of hardship, struggle and doubt. She'd only made it because of him. How could she thank him for that? Where would she even begin?

'Professor Fenwick . . .' she said, but when she looked up he was gone.

Feelings of loss and loneliness swept over her. Around her, fellow graduates laughed and chattered, surrounded by friends and family, but she was alone. Except for Maud. Freddie was away on government business. Wish was in America. Her parents were at Blackwood, hundreds of miles away, but even if they'd lived next door to the school they wouldn't have come. She knew that.

For an instant, she thought of the one person who would have come if he could – a boy who would have walked all the way from Wales to be with her today. *Hugh*. She saw him in her mind's eye. He was running up Owen's Hill, laughing. Standing on Dyffyd's Rock, head thrown back, arms outstretched to the wild Welsh skies. She tried to push the images away, but failed. Tears burned behind her eyes. She hastily rubbed them away, knowing Maud would be looking for her, to take her to tea. Knowing, too, that Maud had little patience for tangled emotions.

'Stop it, Jones. Right now,' she hissed at herself. 'Feelings cloud judgement.'

'So does champagne, old girl, but that's why we like it!' a male voice boomed, startling her.

India whirled around, astonished. '*Wish?*' she exclaimed, as her cousin kissed her cheek. 'What are you doing here? I thought you were in the States!'

'Just got back. Ship docked yesterday. Got the car off it and drove hell for leather all night. Wouldn't have missed this for all the world, Indy. Didn't you see me in the back? I was clapping like a lunatic. Bingham, too.'

'Bing, is that really you?' India asked, peering around her cousin.

George Lytton, the twelfth Earl of Bingham, was standing behind Wish. He shyly raised a hand in greeting. 'Hullo, Indy,' he said. 'Congrats.'

'This is such a lovely surprise! I didn't see either of you. Maud swiped my specs. Oh, look at you, Wish! So sun-tanned and handsome. Was your trip a success? Are you a billionaire?'

'Not quite yet, old mole, but soon,' Wish said, laughing.

'Oh, for God's sake, darling, don't encourage him. His head's fat enough.' The voice, her sister's, was heavy with boredom.

'Maud! Give me back my glasses,' India said.

'Certainly not. They're beastly. They'll ruin the photographs.'

'But I can't *see*.'

Maud sighed. 'If you insist,' she said. 'Really, though, India, if your specs get any thicker you'll be wearing binoculars.' She wrinkled her nose. 'Can we leave now? This place has the stinks.'

'Listen to your *much* older sister and get your things, Windy Indy,' Wish said.

'Very funny, Wish!' Maud said.

'Don't call me that horrible name, Wish!' India scolded.

Wish grinned. 'It *is* horrible, isn't it? I gave it to you, remember? When you were ten and holding forth on the nesting habits of wrens. A proper boffin even then. And such a wordy old thing.'

'That nickname doesn't make her sound *wordy*, it makes her sound flatulent,' Bing said, blinking owlishly.

Wish and Maud roared. Bing cracked a smile and India tried not to.

They'd all grown up together and tended to revert to old ways the minute they were reunited. She watched them – all three were nearly breathless with laughter now – half expecting Wish to thump Bingham with a serving spoon or Maud to pour ink in the teapot. Finally, unable to help herself, she dissolved into giggles, too. Their sudden appearance had made her forget her earlier sadness and she was very happy they'd come. As children they'd all been inseparable, but now they were rarely in the same place at the same time. Maud tended to swan off to exotic destinations on a whim. Wish was forever starting up new ventures. A banker turned speculator, he was known to make a fortune in a matter of days – and lose it again just as quickly. Bingham hardly ever left Longmarsh, preferring its quiet woods and meadows to the noisy streets of London. And Freddie – India's fiancé and Bingham's brother – practically lived at the House of Commons.

'Look, we've got to shake a leg,' Wish said impatiently, 'so get your things, *Lady* Indy.'

'Don't call me *that*, either,' India warned.

'How about we call you late for lunch, then? We've a reservation for half-one at the Connaught – a little party for you – but we'll never make it unless we get started.'

'Wish, you mustn't . . .' India started to say.

'No worries. I didn't. It's on Lytton.'

'Bing, you shouldn't . . .'

'Not me, Indy,' he said. 'My brother.'

'Freddie's here?' India asked. 'How? When? He said he'd been summoned to C-B's for the weekend.'

Wish shrugged. 'Dunno. S'pose he got himself unsummoned. He was just trotting down the steps when I called at his flat so I gave him a ride.'

'Where is he now?'

'Outside. Bringing the car round.'

'No, I'm not. I'm right here,' a young blond man said. He was tall and slender, beautifully dressed in a cutaway coat and cheviot trousers. A dozen female heads turned to admire him. A few – a doddery aunt, a younger sister – might have asked who he was, but most recognized him. He was a Member of Parliament, a rising star whose bold defection from the Conservatives to the Liberals had his name constantly in the papers. He was Bingham's younger brother – only a second son – yet Bing, shy and retiring, faded beside him.

'Freddie, what took you?' Wish asked. 'You had me worried.'

'I'm touched, old man. Truly.'

'Not about *you*. About the car.' Wish's motor car, a Daimler, was brand new.

'Mmmm. Yes. Had a spot of trouble with the car,' Freddie said. 'Couldn't get the damned thing in reverse. Or neutral. Couldn't shut it off, either.'

'Freddie . . .' Wish began, but Freddie didn't hear him. He was kissing India's cheek. 'Well done, my darling,' he said. 'Congratulations.'

'Freddie, you ass!' Wish shouted. 'What do you mean you can't shut it off? What's it doing? Driving itself?'

'Of course not. I told the porter to drive it. Last I saw, he was headed for King's Cross.'

Wish swore, then dashed out of the auditorium. Bing followed.

Freddie grinned. 'Car's perfectly safe. Parked it out front. Did you see Wish's face?'

'Freddie, that was awful! Poor Wish!' India said.

'Poor Wish, my foot,' Maud said. 'Serves him right. He's gone absolutely car mad. Now, can we please go, too? I can't bear the smell of this place. Really, Indy, it's awful. What *is* it?' she asked.

India sniffed. 'I don't smell a thing.'

'Have you got a cold? How can you not?'

She sniffed again. 'Oh, *that*. Ca—' She was about to say *cabbages*. A nearby church ran a soup kitchen for the poor and cooking smells were always drifting over, but Freddie cut her off.

'Ca*davers*,' he said. 'Indy told me about them. The best go to Guy's and Bart's. The women's school gets all the ripe ones.'

Maud paled. She pressed a jewelled hand to her chest. '*Dead* people?' she whispered. 'You're joking, Freddie, surely. Say you are.'

'I'm not this time. I'm being most grave. I swear it.'

'Good God. I feel quite ill. I'll be outside.'

Maud left, her hand over her mouth. India turned to her fiancé. 'Most *grave*?' she said. 'Must we *always* become twelve years old again when we're all together?'

'Yes, we must,' Freddie said. He gave her a golden smile and India thought then, as she had a million times before, that he was the most gloriously handsome man she had ever seen.

'You are awful, Freddie,' she said. 'Truly.'

'I am. I admit it. But it was the only way I could get five minutes alone with you,' he said, squeezing her hand. 'Now get your things, old stick. We're off to the Connaught.'

'Wish said. But really, Freddie, you mustn't.'

'I want to. It's not every day of the week one becomes a doctor, you know.'

'This is so lovely. So unexpected. I thought you'd be at C-B's all weekend.'

C-B was short for Henry Campbell-Bannerman, leader of the Opposition. There was talk that Lord Salisbury, Britain's Prime Minister and head of the incumbent Conservative Party, would call a general election in the autumn. Campbell-Bannerman had called his Shadow Cabinet together to prepare the

Liberal Party's platform. A handful of prominent backbenchers, including Freddie, had also been summoned.

'The old boy cancelled,' Freddie said. 'Felt a bit punky.'

'When did you find out?'

'Two days ago.'

'Why didn't you tell me?' India asked, hurt. She'd been so disappointed when he'd said he couldn't be here today.

'I was going to, darling,' Freddie said contritely. 'And perhaps I should have. But as soon as I knew I was off the hook, I decided to surprise you with a party. Now stop looking daggers at me, will you, and get your things.'

India felt ashamed. How could she have scolded him? He was always so thoughtful. She led the way out of the auditorium down a narrow hallway to a lecture theatre where she and her fellow graduates had stowed their belongings. It was quiet in the room when she and Freddie entered it, quieter than she'd ever heard it. Freddie sat down in one of the wooden seats and busied himself with a bottle of champagne he'd swiped from the drinks table. India looked around – not for her things, but at the room itself. She looked at the raked benches and the dissection table, at the bookcases crammed with heavy texts, at Ponsonby the skeleton dangling from his stand – and realized that it was the last time she would do so. The sadness she'd felt earlier overwhelmed her again. She walked over to Ponsonby and took his lifeless hands in hers.

'I can't believe it's over. I can't believe I'll never sit here again,' she said.

'Hmm?' Freddie was frowning at the cork.

'This place . . . this school . . . all the years I spent here . . . it's all behind me now . . .'

Her voice trailed off as images came back to her. Bright fragments of time. She saw herself and Harriet Hatcher in anatomy lab bent over a cadaver. They were peeling back the derma, naming and drawing muscles and bones as fast as they could, trying to stay ahead of the rot. Trying not to vomit. Sketch and retch, they'd called it. Professor Fenwick had been there, calling them ham-fisted bumblers one minute, bringing them bicarb and a bucket the next.

He'd been there again, materializing out of thin air like a guardian angel, when a group of drunken first years from Guy's had surrounded herself and Harriet outside the school's entrance. The men had exposed themselves, demanding to have their members examined. 'Unfortunately, gentlemen, my students cannot comply with your request,' he'd said, 'as they are not permitted to take their microscopes out of the building.'

And Dr. Garrett Anderson, the Dean. She was a legend, the first woman in England to earn a medical degree and one of the school's founders. Brisk, brilliant, stronger than Sheffield steel, she had been a constant inspiration to

India, a living, breathing rebuttal to those who said women were too weak and too stupid to be doctors.

'This foil is a bugger,' Freddie muttered, pulling India out of her thoughts. 'Ah! There we are.'

She looked at him, wanting so much to tell him what this place meant to her, wanting him to understand. 'Freddie . . .' she began. 'Never mind the champagne . . .'

It was too late. He aimed the bottle at Ponsonby and popped the cork. It glanced off the skeleton's head.

'Poor Ponsonby,' India said. 'You've hurt his feelings.'

'Stuff Ponsonby. He's dead. He has no feelings. Come and have a drink.' Freddie patted the chair next to him. When India was seated, he handed her a glass. 'To Doctor India Selwyn Jones,' he said. 'The cleverest little brick in London. I'm so proud of you, darling.' He clinked her glass, then emptied his. 'Here,' he added, handing her a small leather box.

'What is it?'

'Open it and see.'

India eased the lid up, then gasped at what was inside – a beautifully worked gold pocketwatch with diamond markers. Freddie took it out and turned it over. *Think of me* was engraved on the back.

India shook her head. 'Freddie, it's so beautiful. I don't even know what to say.'

'Say you'll marry me.'

She smiled at him. 'I've already said that.'

'Then do it. Marry me tomorrow.'

'But I start with Dr. Gifford next week.'

'Bugger Dr. Gifford!'

'Freddie! Shh!'

'Run away with me. Tonight.' He leaned towards her and nuzzled her neck.

'I can't, you silly man. You know I can't. I've work to do. Important work. You know how hard I fought for that job. And then there's the clinic . . .'

Freddie raised his face to hers. His beautiful amber eyes had darkened. 'I can't wait forever, India. I won't. We've been engaged for two bloody years.'

'Freddie, please . . . don't spoil the day.'

'Is that what I'm doing? Spoiling the day?' he asked, visibly hurt. 'Is my telling you that I want you for my wife such a dreadful thing to hear?'

'Of course not, it's just that . . .'

'Your studies have come first for a long time, but you're finished now and a man can only be so patient.' He put his glass down. There was a seriousness to him now. 'It's just that we could do so much good together. You've

always said that you want to make a difference – how can you do that working for Gifford? Or in some ill-funded clinic? Do something bigger, India. Something huge and important. Work with me on health reform. Counsel me. Advise me. And together we'll make that difference. A *real* difference. Not just for Whitechapel or London, but for England.' He took her hands in his and continued talking, giving her no opening to reply. Or to object. 'You're a remarkable woman and I need you. At my side.' He pulled her close and kissed her. 'And in my bed,' he whispered.

India closed her eyes and tried to like it. She always tried to like it. He was so good and so kind and he loved her. He was everything any woman could want, and so she tried to warm to his kisses, but his lips were so hard and insistent. He knocked her spectacles askew with his fumblings and when he slid his hand from her waist to her breast, she broke away.

'We ought to go,' she said. 'The others will be wondering what's become of us.'

'Don't be cold to me. I want you so.'

'Freddie, darling, this is hardly the place . . .'

'I want us to set a date, India. I want us to be man and wife.'

'We will be. Soon. I promise,' she said, adjusting her glasses.

'All right, then. Coming?'

'I've got to find my things,' she said. 'You go. I'll only be a minute.'

He told her to hurry, then went to join the others. India watched him go. He's right, of course, she thought.

It had been two years since he'd got down on bended knee at Longmarsh and proposed to her. She would have to decide on a wedding date soon and she knew what would happen when she did – they'd be required to attend an endless round of dinners and parties and listen to incessant chatter about dresses, rings and trousseau. And he would press her again to give up her hopes of a clinic and work with him on health reform. It was a noble cause, she knew it was, but healing was her calling, not committee work, and she could no more give it up than she could give up breathing.

India frowned, upset at herself. Freddie was so good to her and she was being unkind to him; she knew she was. She should have decided on a date by now. It should have been so easy for her to simply pick a day. Some lovely summer Saturday.

Should have been. *Would* have been.

If only she loved him.

She sat for a bit longer, simply staring at the empty doorway, then shrugged out of her robe. The others were waiting; she mustn't keep them any longer. She folded the robe and placed it on the chair beside her, then ran her hands over her hair. It was a disaster. Her blonde curls, brushed into a neat twist only a few hours ago, were already corkscrewing loose. Try as she might,

she could never keep them under control. She started to smooth them, then stopped. Her fingers found the jewelled comb she always wore and pulled it free. She turned it over in her palm. It was a Tiffany dragonfly, one of a pair, and worth a small fortune. Worked in platinum and embellished with dozens of flawless gems, it was completely at odds with her plain, sober clothing: the grey skirt and waistcoat, the crisp white blouse.

She had taken the comb the day she'd left Blackwood – the day she'd turned her back on her home, her parents, and their godforsaken money.

'If you leave, India, I shall cut you off,' her mother had said, her beautiful face white with anger.

'I don't want your money,' India had said. 'I don't want anything from you.'

There were three swirling initials engraved on the underside of the comb. She traced them with her finger – *I S J*, not hers, but her mother's – Isabelle Selwyn Jones, Countess of Burnleigh. India knew that if it were not for this comb she would not be here today. If her mother hadn't left it in her carriage. If Hugh hadn't picked it up. If, if, if.

She closed her hand around it, pressing the teeth into her palm, trying to stop herself from remembering. Don't, she told herself, don't think about him. Don't remember him. Don't feel him. Don't feel anything. But she did. Because Hugh had made her feel. More than anyone in her entire life.

She could see him again in her mind's eye, only this time he wasn't laughing. He was running up the riverbank with his sister Bea in his arms. Bea's face was white. Her skirts were crimson with blood. He'd bundled her into the trap and crooned to her all the way to Cardiff. Never stopping, not once. Never even faltering. She could still hear his beautiful voice, soft and low, *Paid ag ofni, dim ond deilen, Gura, gura ar y ddor; Paid ag ofni, ton fach unig, Sua, sua ar lan y mor.* She'd known enough Welsh to know what he was singing. *Fret you not, 'tis but an oak leaf, Beating, beating at the door. Fret you not, a lonely wavelet's Murmuring, murmuring on the shore. 'Suo Gan',* a lullaby.

India looked at the comb still, but didn't see it. She only saw Hugh, his face riven with grief as the police came to take him away.

'You're thinking of him, aren't you?' said a voice from the doorway now, startling her. She turned. It was Maud. 'Poor Indy,' she said. 'Couldn't save Hugh. So you've decided to save the world instead. Poor world. It doesn't know what it has coming.'

India didn't answer. She wished that for once Maud could talk about sad things without mocking them.

'I've been sent back into this charnel house to fetch you, so stop holding seances and get your things,' Maud continued. 'I can't control the pack any longer. Wish is trying to talk the poor Dean into investing in some mad land

scheme. Freddie's arguing with a creaky old Tory . . . and, oh, India . . . have you been blubbing?'

'Of course not.'

'Your nose is all red. And look at your hair. It's an absolute tangle. Give me that comb.' Maud raked her fingers through India's blonde mane, twisted it and secured it. Then she stepped back to assess her work. 'Very nice,' she said.

India smiled and tried to accept the gesture gracefully. It was the sort of thing that passed for love between them.

Maud's eyes travelled over India's clothing; she frowned. 'Is that what you're wearing to the Connaught?'

India smoothed her skirt. 'What's wrong with it?'

'I thought you might have brought a change of clothes. These are so . . . *dreary*. You look like you're going to a funeral.'

'You sound exactly like Mother.'

'I do not!'

'You do.'

As Maud continued to deny any similarities with their mother, India put her jacket on and then her hat. She gathered her black robe and her doctor's bag, then followed her sister up the steps. When she reached the doorway, she turned around for one last look at her classroom, at all the books and charts and specimens, at Ponsonby, and then she whispered a soft goodbye. Her eyes were clear now, her expression calm. She'd boxed the pain away. She was herself again. Cool and unflappable. Brisk and sensible. Feelings firmly in check.

'Keep them that way, Jones,' Ponsonby seemed to whisper. 'Never forget: Feelings cloud judgement.'

And so much more, old chap, India thought, *and so much more*.