

## CHAPTER 1



Delilah walked down the wide street in St John's Wood through pouring rain. There were blisters on her feet and the wet had soaked through her threadbare coat, sticking her gown to her skin.

The letter which Doctor Rawson had written was tucked inside her coat's inner pocket. She hugged the coat close; if the letter were to be ruined, she would have no hope of assistance from the lady to whom it was addressed.

He had also given her a delicate gold ring. He'd pressed it into her hands, despite her protestations.

"Guard it well," he'd said. "Show her the letter and then show her the ring. She will know it—I can attest to that."

Delilah had packed up her meagre belongings while Doctor Rawson had arranged a coach to take her to the railway station. He'd given her money for a ticket and for a carriage from the station to her destination. She had hurriedly bought a ticket and boarded the last train for the evening just before the whistle blew.

But when she alighted at Euston station, everything was in such a bustle. The noise was cacophonous, the crowds rough and fast-moving. Soot was in her nostrils, and the gas lights gave the station

an eerie yellow gleam. Before she could follow Doctor Rawson's instructions and go outside to find a hackney, a hand had snatched out and pulled her into one of the station's dark alcoves.

There were two men, one in front of her and one behind, standing so close she could smell their sweat and the beer on their breath. She became aware of a sharp pressure at the back of her ribs.

"That's George," the man in front said, indicating his friend with a tilt of his chin. "Give me what I want, and George won't use that knife he's holding. Scream and he will."

The large man had prodded her with his weapon to emphasize the point.

Delilah, tears rolling down her face, had handed over everything of value—the earrings that had been her mother's, her simple silver pendant, the little purse of money Doctor Rawson had given her. And the ring.

"What—that's it?" the small man had said. He clucked his tongue in disappointment. He then looked at Delilah closely, as though considering what else he might take from her. But there was a sharp whistle from one of the trains and he seemed to change his mind. The men slipped off into the crowd, leaving Delilah in the freezing cold train station with nothing except Doctor Rawson's letter and the hope she would be able to remember the way on foot.

The rain began soon after she set out walking. A woman had called to her from the doorway of a busy, cheerful looking public house and Delilah walked over, managing a wobbly smile, hoping to ask for directions.

"Could you help me, ma'am?" she began. "I'm—"

"A pretty thing? Yes, I can see that," the woman said, reaching out to touch Delilah's pale blonde hair. Delilah looked again into the public house and saw that it was full of men and laughing, shrieking women sitting on their laps or leaning over them in scandalously low-cut dresses.

"Oh!" she had cried. "I didn't see—you must excuse me."

She had stumbled away as the woman called, "A nice clean place! Good rates! You won't do better!"

She had hurried as fast as she could down that street, then the next street, then the next. She looked out for the street names Doctor Rawson had told her to remember. But she was so frightened and cold, and it was dark; the rain was still driving down and she didn't dare ask anyone for help.

But Delilah had continued, hoping she would find the place.

She looped around and around the nice neighbourhood, seeing that its buildings were much grander than the low cottages of her home village. The houses were on large blocks. Each had its own private expanse of drive and garden and was surrounded by a tall iron fence. She couldn't see numbers on the plates; it was too dark, and she was blinded by the rain.

Another blast of wind drove through her. A wave of dizziness overcame Delilah and she grabbed an iron paling on the fence she was passing. She closed her eyes until the world stopped spinning and the street righted itself. She gritted her teeth.

"Nearly there," she whispered, hoping it was true.

Another house, and then another, each one happy and warm and secure with lights burning in the windows.

The next time the dizziness struck her, there was nothing to grab onto. She cried out and fell to her hands and knees.

A man in a top hat and monocle stopped to prod her with the toe of his shoe. "Drunken trollop!" he hissed and spat next to her hand.

It was not so easy to rise the second time. Her bones felt frozen—her knees protested, her hips protested, and her vision was still blurred. Delilah crawled to the fence and used the palings to haul herself up. She didn't trust herself to walk quickly or take long strides, so she settled for edging along the fence, feeling her way as she went.

She recalled Doctor Rawson's words as he pressed the letter

into her hand, 'there is no mistaking the place. It is a white, four story building, and the knob on the gate is the head of a girl'.

Delilah crept towards the next house, holding onto one fence post and then another as she moved. Spots danced in front of her eyes. She felt her way towards the gate, and when her hand grasped the knob, she wasn't sure whether it truly was the head of a young girl, or whether her desperation to find her destination made it seem that way.

She didn't feel herself fall. It seemed as though the ground was rising up to meet her, and when it connected with her shoulder and the side of her head, she felt nothing.

She felt her muscles loosen, and her eyes begin to close.

*I mustn't go to sleep, she thought.*

But the world was already receding. The last thing Delilah did before losing consciousness was to put her hand around the letter in her pocket, hoping to protect it from the rain.



DOCTOR EDWARD HENDRICKS had experienced a particularly trying evening. He rarely went to the club, and when he did, the men—many of whom had been his fellow students while he was training at St Bartholomew's—would simply not cease with their taunting. Tonight had been no exception.

"Go on, Eddy, tell us—are they really maidens?"

"You had any of 'em? Eh?"

"Best job in the world if you ask me, what with that parade of young cunnies falling into your lap!"

They could not understand his silence on the subject. All he had told them, when he accepted the post, was that he would be the resident physician at Miss Robin's, an academy for the training of girls who would be the wives of military officers. He'd said that the job involved ensuring that Miss Robin's pupils were prepared for the rigours of marriage to a man who was exacting and expected an

extraordinary amount of discipline and fortitude. He had told them nothing about the intimate details of his work.

He had also refrained from saying that his discretion, his lack of interest in the girls as anything other than his patients, was precisely why Miss Robin had chosen him, rather than any of the dozens of other men who applied to work in her employ. He had not, in fact, applied at all; rather, she had approached him.

He still remembered that interview. His plan, having returned from field duties, had been to establish a private practice, but before he had the opportunity, this handsome, self-contained lady in a deep crimson dress had requested to meet with him. He had invited her to tea and immediately been taken with her attitude, her soft-spoken authority, her mission to train girls out of their bad habits and into lives of usefulness and service to society.

"What I don't understand, Miss Robin, is why you've sought me out. There are many eminently qualified physicians who no doubt would find it a pleasure to take on this commission. I am neither the most qualified nor the most well-connected. And I am not an expert in..." he searched for the right words "...ladies' matters."

"You are highly recommended, by someone whose opinion I hold in extremely high regard," Miss Robin said. "I am acquainted with Lieutenant-General Bulley—I understand he was your former commanding officer?"

"That's quite correct."

"I need no further recommendation. Your demurral does you credit. You've simply no idea how many men come to my door, hoping to receive the appointment of caring for my girls."

"If I understand the workings of your academy, Miss Robin, the job is—well, it certainly requires that some liberties be taken."

"Very true."

"One might even say it is intimate. I'm sure some find it scandalous."

"Do you find it scandalous, Doctor Hendricks?" Miss Robin's eyes twinkled.

Doctor Hendricks let out a chuckle and smoothed the legs of his trousers. "To own the truth, Miss Robin, no. I see much value in what you do. So many girls end up miserable in unsuitable marriages."

"Then you will join me in eschewing the views of those who simply do not understand me, my academy or my mission. Or at least, that is my hope."

"You are persuasive, Miss Robin. I find myself intrigued."

"Then call on me, when you have an afternoon free. See my establishment for yourself."

That had been two years ago. He had found Miss Robin to be an excellent employer—she was exacting, true, but also generous and wise. He had often been impressed by her ability to judge exactly what her charges needed and by how substantially they changed for the better under her care.

But his medical fellows refused to take him or his role seriously. It was irksome. Hendricks felt more and more that he had more in common with the military officers he encountered in his work than with his old fellows.

His bad mood was the reason he decided to walk home, despite the inclement weather. He was wrapped in a warm woollen coat and a broad umbrella protected him against the worst of the rain. It was good to be outside. It was refreshing. He remembered that one of the officers he'd met through Miss Robin, a Lieutenant Price, had given him the name of a club where military men spent their evenings. He'd said that, given his service in the army, Hendricks would be able to apply for membership. *I should take him up on it*, Edward thought. It would be nice to be among men who understand the importance of my work.

Doctor Hendricks was so caught up in his thoughts that he almost stumbled over on the soaked-through parcel that had been left—or perhaps dumped—at the school's gate.

He bent to examine the object, and when he did, gasped. The first thing he saw emerging from the drenched fabric was a long,

sodden tendril of white hair. He saw it was extending out from beneath a hood and held his breath as he flicked the hood back.

His heart constricted. Here was a young girl, freezing, unconscious, undeniably beautiful.

He dropped his umbrella and knelt, pressing two fingers to the girl's throat. His own heart started beating again once he found the girl's pulse. Immediately, he threw himself into action. He picked up her frigid, tiny body and held her to his broad chest. He found the latch and lifted it, before pushing the gate open with his shoulder.

Hendricks supported the slight girl's weight with one arm and used his free hand to pound on the door as hard as he could. He knew he might wake some of the girls, but so be it—this was no time for niceties.

Miss Robin answered the door holding a single candle, her hair hanging in a dark braid down her back.

"An urgent case," Hendricks said, but Miss Robin was already holding the door open and ushering him inside.