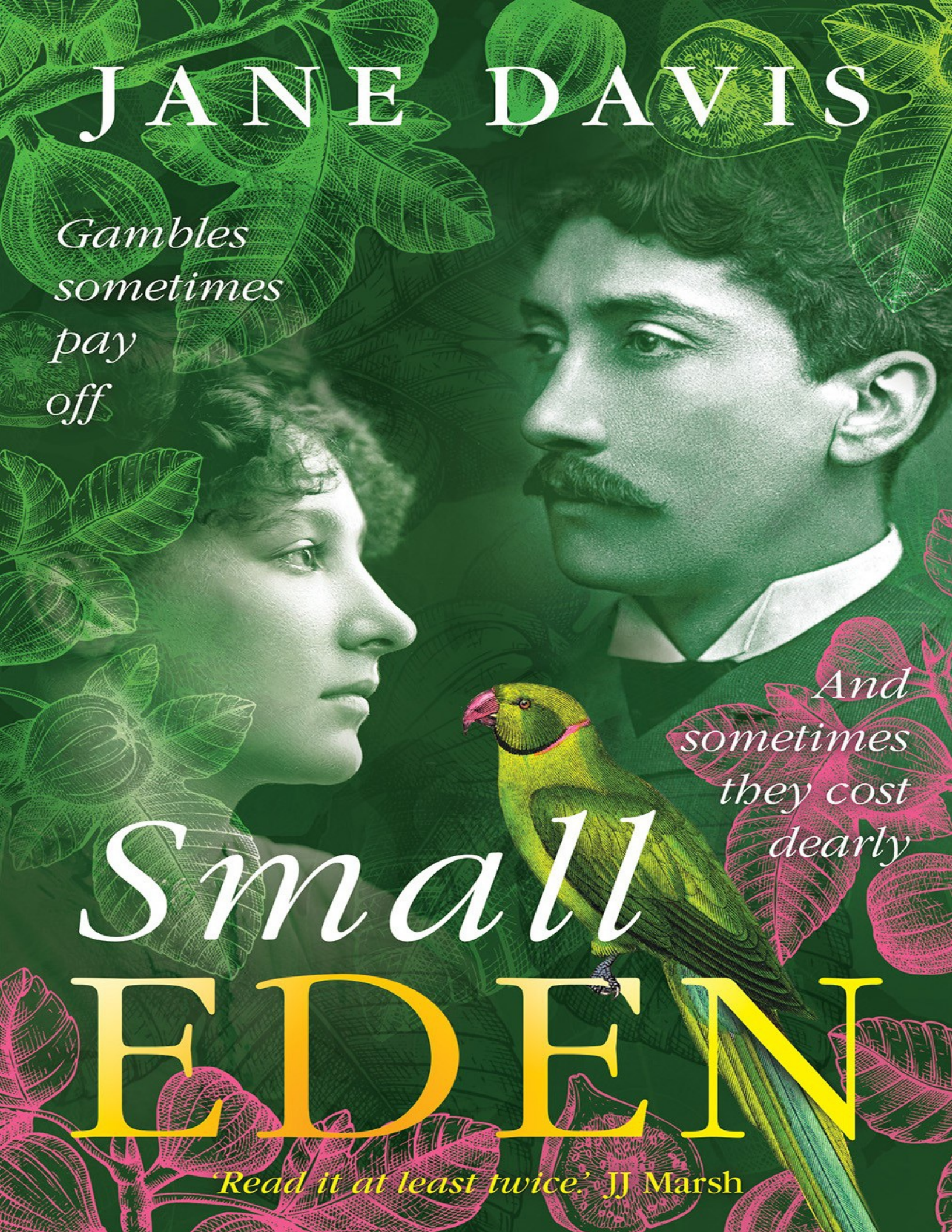
JANE DAVIS
Gambles sometimes pay off
And sometimes they cost dearly
Small EDEN
'Read it at least twice.' JJ Marsh

# Small Eden

JANE DAVIS

First Edition



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In memory of my father
THOMAS MORE DAVIS
14 April 1935 ~ 4 April 2020

Also in memory of
LIZ CARR
Author, beta reader and valued friend

## PRAISE FOR SMALL EDEN

‘Like Thomas Hardy, Jane Davis shows the fatal consequences of chance and choices for her characters, people I cared deeply about.’

*Jean Gill, author of Historical Fiction series, The Troubadours Quartet*

‘With an eye for precise detail balanced by a sweeping imagination, this beautifully constructed book is built on deep foundations.’

*J.J. Marsh, author of the Beatrice Stubbs Series*

# PROLOGUE

## 1884

When Robert passes the open door of the children's nursery, he sees his wife's face captured in a small halo of candlelight. The flame flickers and the halo shifts, revealing that she is bent over the boys' cot-bed, a hand laid over Thomas's brow. "I know," she's saying. "I know."

He stands in the doorway, unseen, and watches her. Freya is a natural in the role of mother while, as head of the house, Robert often feels like an actor miscast, knowing that his understudy would be more suited to the part. But as natural a mother as his wife is, Robert worries that the children will grow accustomed to her sitting with them until they fall asleep, and will not remember how to do it without her soft lowing and her lullabies. "Come down to supper," he says in a low voice.

Freya looks up. He sees now that she is anxious. "Thomas has a fever. I think we ought to send for Dr Stanbury."

The doctor won't thank them for disturbing his evening for the sake of milk teeth. Besides, they've been here before. When their daughter Estelle was teething she would get herself all hot and bothered. "Let's take a look at you, little man." (Here is a line Robert can say with authority.) He collects the second candlestick from the mantel. The flame dances as he crosses the room to inspect his son. Thomas is grizzling, his skin pale with red blotches on his cheeks. His thumb is anchored in his mouth, splayed fingers glistening with drool. Robert crouches down to better see, and the shadow of his wife's head and shoulders rises up the wall, a dark guardian angel.

"Are your teeth troubling you?" At two years old, the boy already has his incisors. Robert prises Thomas's wet thumb from his mouth and feels along his gum – Freya's right, the boy's cheeks are livid. The moment Robert feels the sharp point of a tooth poking through, Thomas pulls away and whimpers. "There it is, right at the back. A molar."

He moves aside to let Freya feel. "Poor lamb," she coos. "There, now."

Lying beside Thomas, Gerrard is kicking the bedclothes just to watch the shadows he can make. He's the baby of the family, but with Freya in her sixth month and expecting their fourth, he won't occupy that position much longer. Four children under the age of four! If you could plan for such a thing, a gap of three years between each child would be ideal. But they agreed, they wanted a large family; Freya, because she came from one and misses it, Robert because he was an only child.

"Remember the sleepless nights we had when Estelle's back teeth were coming through?" Robert whispers. There is no sound from their daughter, whose bed is in the dark corner behind them. She's developed a miraculous capacity to sleep through most disturbances. "I'll fetch the Godfrey's Cordial. That ought to do the trick."

Joan glances up as Robert enters the kitchen. "Shall I serve supper, Mr Cooke?"

"Keep it warm for now." He goes to the scullery sink. "Thomas is having a bad time teething. Can you fetch me the Godfrey's?" He washes his hands in the way his father taught him, methodically and up to his wrists. Hand-washing was one of the things Walter was fastidious about. A doctor, he was a firm believer in germ theory – the idea that poison could pass from hand to mouth – while his colleagues held fast to the view that bad air causes disease, and so flung the windows wide in all weathers. Robert's thoughts are fixed not only on the night ahead,

but on Freya's coming confinement, the nine weeks during which she'll separate herself from the rest of the household to prepare for their baby's arrival. With three children under the age of three on their hands, Thomas particularly fractious, they'll need a nurse when the fourth arrives. It won't be difficult to find one, there are always women in need of extra income, but they have left it rather late.

Upstairs, Robert doses Thomas with a spoonful of cordial, and while Freya straightens Estelle's blankets he doses the baby. They'll be better able to deal with Thomas if Gerrard sleeps through. Robert makes a game of pretending to catch Gerrard's kicking feet, the boy giggling at his clumsiness. Their youngest is a sweet child. The most extraordinary eyes. They call them hazel, though by candlelight the colour Robert sees most clearly is gold.

Freya comes to his side, rests her head against his shoulder. "I'm so exhausted I could sleep on my feet. I think I'll have to turn in."

"What about supper?"

She looks down at her swollen belly. Her body has performed its miracle three times already. The fourth is no less wondrous to Robert. "Honestly, I have nowhere to put it. I need sleep far more than I need food."

Freya knows herself by now, knows the ordeal that lies ahead. He kisses her forehead. "Go and rest. I'll sit up with Thomas."

"You?" By candlelight his wife's skin glows golden, a match for her corn-coloured hair.

"Don't look so shocked."

"I'd thought to ask one of the girls."

Has she seen through him? "I'm perfectly capable."

"You'll fetch me if he gets any worse?"

"Of course I will." Robert says, though he has no intention of doing such a thing.

"Perhaps I should take Gerrard with me. To be on the safe side."

"Absolutely not. He'll keep you awake. Go!" He points to the door. "We'll be fine."

At eleven o'clock, the candle reduced to a molten stub, Robert measures out a second dose of Godfrey's. Exhausted and miserable, Thomas resists the spoon, turning his head this way and that. Seeing that Gerrard is still wide awake, Robert picks him up. With the boy's head over his shoulder, he pats out a gentle rhythm on his back. *I'm twenty-two years old, responsible for my mother and wife, and with a fourth child on the way. We need a bigger house.*

For Robert, it will be a restless night, constantly shifting about in the wooden rocking chair, trying to find the least uncomfortable position. His impression is that he's awake the entire time, but several times he hears a slight snore and knows it to be his own, or is brought to when his head snaps up from his chest. At an hour when darkness is absolute, Robert becomes aware of a noise he struggles to place. He fumbles blindly for safety matches and lights a fresh candle. Thomas is swallowing repeatedly, as if he's trying to rid himself of something. Robert wets a flannel with cold water from the wash bowl, lays it across his son's forehead. Three o'clock by his watch. *Stop feeling sorry for yourself. You've managed a day's work on three hours' sleep before.* Gently, gently he blows on the candle's flame so that it dances a reluctant jig, the shadows following the flame's lead. "You try," he whispers. Thomas keeps his glassy eyes on the flame, but hasn't the energy to blow.

Robert determines to stay awake. At any moment Thomas might start crying and he won't have Freya disturbed. He covers his top half in a child-size blanket, pulling it up to his chin. At the first signs of light, heavy-lidded and stiff-limbed, he draws the curtains to better see. A tic

springs to life above his right eye. Every blink is a chore. But he has steered them through the night and Freya will have had her sleep. He turns from the window to his son and sees – he *thinks* he sees…

*He* is *teething*, Robert insists to himself, and Thomas *is*, no doubt about it, but that is not all. Robert stands there gaping, appalled. *Dear God, please not that!* Then his fingers are struggling with the fastenings of Thomas's damp nightshirt, fumbling with buttons – dammit! – forcing them through too-small buttonholes – *What have I done?* – but finally Robert has the top three undone. Raised bumps, a red rash, no longer mottled, but angry. He lays a trembling hand flat. His son's chest is burning up, skin the texture of crushed shell. He feels a dredging kind of horror.

His wife arrives at the other side of the boys' cot-bed. In her nightdress, with her robe hanging open, Freya's shape is pronounced. "Gerrard," she says, not in greeting but in trepidation. Sure enough, Gerrard's cheeks bear the beginnings of a red rash. *There is produced a poisonous matter, which, passing from the diseased body, is capable of producing in another body a similar disease.* Robert's father had him recite this, yet when Freya proposed they sent for the doctor, when perhaps there was still time, he vetoed the idea. When she suggested they separate the boys, he said it was unnecessary. All because he didn't want to be like his mother, constantly assuming the worst, seeing danger where there was none.

And now Freya is reaching for Gerrard, about to scoop him up in her arms.

Robert's heart hammers at the bars of its cage. His arms shoot out in front of him. *"Stay back!"*

Startled by his voice, by his evident panic, his wife cowers. Her hands go to her belly, to reassure the child within who must be protected. Behind Robert, in her bed in the corner, Estelle begins to sob, the great hiccupping tears that come when she wakes to discover she's outside her mother's womb.

"I'll send for the doctor." Robert steers Freya away from the boys' bedside then goes back for Estelle. "Up you come, little lady." Her bed-warmed body is a weight in his arms. "It's all right. Here's your mother." He turns so that the girl can see Freya, but his wife cannot take her eyes from the boys in the cot-bed.

"Do you think it's…?"

"Hopefully not. But to be on the safe side, you ought to have Estelle in with you."

Freya would have stood in the doorway and kept vigil while Robert is elsewhere, but the boys will call out to her and she'll go to them – she won't be able to help herself – and so the door must be shut. And as Freya's view of her sons narrows, she cranes her neck, whimpering a small protest.

# PART ONE

1870 ~ 1872

## CHAPTER ONE

1870

If ever there was a day to take a risk, to dare himself, it is today. The boy – Robert is his name – wakes to the competing calls of blackbirds. Knowing only too well the feeling of being interrupted mid-sentence, he flings off his bedclothes and goes to the window. There on the branch of the apple tree sits one of the culprits (the bird is black, a male), eyes bright and hopeful, cocking his head to listen before opening his yellow beak in response: a burst followed by a chirrup. Sometimes all the bird does is open and close his beak, and then with a gulp in his throat. He isn't the attention-seeker the boy had him pegged to be, simply a herald of the new day. And what a day it is, the sky a shade frequently dubbed sky blue, but not seen for weeks, despite the season. His father promised: *The next time we're up early enough and the weather's fine, we'll go.* What's more, today is Robert's birthday, a day when he surely stands more of a chance than any other. He will risk his father's bark. He will even risk his mother's objections.

Outside his parents' bedroom door, knock ready, Robert pauses. He is too old, he's been reminded, to bound into the adults' room. He is a boy, not a puppy dog, and limits must be observed.

'These modern ideas, sharing,' Mrs Dwyer has said. 'It's bad enough that they…' She shook off the end of her sentence, perhaps something not intended for a child's ears. But occasionally, their housekeeper forgets herself.

Robert has learned a good many things from Mrs Dwyer, things he wouldn't otherwise know. He has learned, for instance, that as a doctor, living where they live, his father could be a rich man if only he'd stop giving away his time and his medicines. 'That they what?' he prompted.

'Never you mind. Just remember, you're old enough to entertain yourself.' With a flick of her dishcloth she batted him away. 'Your parents will make an appearance in their own good time.'

But time is wasting. Mrs Dwyer has already been up for a couple of hours, pattering from room to room, lighting fires, opening the front door to shake out the rugs. He could ask her for hot water, but all he intends is a quick scrub of his face, and for that he makes do with cold, standing at the washstand in his vest and drawers.

Dressed and as respectable as he's going to be, Robert presses his ear to the door of his parents' bedroom, hooking the shell of it with the curve of his hand to form a kind of receptacle – a receiver, if you prefer. The forefinger of his other hand makes a useful stopper for his other ear. Birdsong muted, he stills his breath, concentrates. No snore to suggest his father is asleep, but then again, no low murmur to suggest his mother is awake. There *must* be a way to hurry them along.

The blackbirds! They might be recruited as co-conspirators. Robert returns to his bedroom, hoists up the sash window, then tackles the window on the landing. The house fills with the chatter of birds: the do-re-mi, the cheep-cheep-cheep, the sequence of notes he thinks sounds like *pretty birdy*. Dare he open his parents' door? He must. Robert's fingers tighten around the brass oval. He squeezes his eyes shut, bites his bottom lip and twists to the right. A small click, nothing that would wake a sleeper. The boy pushes the door open a crack, willing the symphony to intrude where he cannot.

*"Who's there?"*

A single heavy thud then thunderous footsteps. Robert leaps back just as the door is pulled

inwards. His father – Walter is his name, but it is not a name the boy ever uses – is tented in a white nightshirt. The version of his father he's accustomed to is the black-trousered, frock-coated, stiff-collared one. This is someone entirely different. "Am I needed in my surgery?"

The boy's heart pounds. "No, sir."

"Then why the devil would you wake me?"

"Sir, you said…" Behind his back, Robert's hands clasp and unclasp in an agony of their own.

"Well? Speak up!"

He raises his chin, prays he won't stutter. "You said that the next time it was a fine day and we were awake early, you'd take me hot air ballooning at Cremorne."

"Walter, you –" Two words and his mother's displeasure is all too apparent. She hardly needs add, *I hoped we'd heard the last of that.*

His father closes his eyes as if to shut out competing demands and objections and gives a low growl. When he opens them again, it is Robert he addresses. "What kind of a man do you think I am that you can –?"

"A man of your word, sir." The boy is shocked by his own impudence but it's too late to take it back. "I think you are a man of your word."

*"Ha!"* Walter turns his face towards Robert's mother (Hettie, another name the boy never uses), who is hidden beneath her own white cotton tent. "The young pup has me in checkmate!" The angle of his father's moustache often makes it appear that his mouth is downturned, so his mood is rarely immediately apparent, but his voice tells Robert his gruffness was a pantomime. "What day is it, son?"

"The twenty-fourth of July, sir."

"Wait a moment." Walter aims the question over his shoulder: "Does that date mean anything to you, my dear?"

"Let me think now. The twenty-fourth…"

"It's my birthday." Robert pulls himself up to his full proud height. "I'm eight years old."

"In that case, you'd better have Mrs Dwyer put a pot of coffee on the stove – and tell her not to skimp on the beans."

The London his mother would have Robert know is one of palaces and parks, grand statues and stately monuments. Instead, the London of the boy's imagination takes its lead from his father's stories. When in a good mood, Walter makes an excellent tour guide. Places are accessible to him because of his profession. Places like the Royal College of Surgeons with its collection of human skulls. But he also knows a backstreet market which offers a selection of trousers whose previous occupants were hanged at Newgate. He has pointed out a discreet gabled frontage on Bishopsgate that conceals a magnificent banqueting hall, all that remains of the palace where Richard of Gloucester, later Richard III, lived at the time of the princes' disappearance from the Tower. 'Some say it was murder. Some even say,' Walter leaned closer, 'that he did the deed himself.' Robert's father knows of an ancient inn where Shakespeare's players performed while spectators heckled from the galleries, now earmarked for destruction, because London *must* have its railway. 'Change has only just begun, no doubt about it.'

Today, Mrs Dwyer's miraculous strong coffee has worked wonders. His father is particularly vocal as they approach Cremorne from his mother's preferred direction – via Cheyne Walk. (Less traffic. Fewer careering carriage wheels.) To their left are evenly spaced trees and wooden railings. Rowing boats for hire point their noses towards the Thames, and beyond, gulls pick their way across the mudflats. To their right are red-brick houses, among them the handsome

town house that makes his mother sigh at its elegant proportions. Walter has, on several occasions, pressed her gloved hand to his lips and said, 'If you like it, my dear, I shall buy it for you.'

And on several occasions she has narrowed her eyes and demanded, 'When?'

For the most part, there is room enough on the footway for Robert and his mother's rustling skirts, but the boy frequently hops down to join his father in the road. As he strolls, Walter offers up a slice of Cremorne's history, from what Robert assumes to be the distant past, given that it happened before he was born. "When Tyrell Smith took charge, he wanted to mark the beginning of his tenure with something few had ever seen. He billed the act he chose as *The Female Blondin*. You've heard of Blondin, of course."

Robert pipes up, "Yes, sir. He's the greatest ropedancer of all time!"

"Born on the same day as me. The twenty-eighth of February, eighteen twenty-four."

Robert's mother raises an eyebrow. "Is that so?"

"You thought him younger than me?"

Hettie protests: "I thought him older."

"You are the most terrible liar!" All the same, he seems pleased. "Blondin had recently outshone his competitors by attempting something no one else had dared."

"Crossing Niagara Falls!" Arms out, Robert walks the very edge of the footpath. *Imagine the deafening roar as the Niagara River ploughs over rocks, plunging vertically into the gorge below.*

"So you *do* know. A crossing eleven hundred feet wide, high above the rapids. As if that wasn't spectacular enough, he stopped midway to lie down on the rope. Then, to the crowd's amazement, he stood on his head."

His mother shudders. "I couldn't have watched."

"People are attracted to danger. What's more, they want it to be real."

"Not *this* person!" His mother's list of fears includes dark alleys, unpredictable horses, machinery, speed and above all, heights.

"Oh, they came for the sensation, no doubt about it. As Blondin walked blindfold, spectators happily wagered that he'd would plunge to a watery death."

"But he didn't fall," says Robert.

"No, he didn't. And Tyrell Smith would have booked Blondin for Cremorne, if the great man hadn't been embroiled in," his father winces, "*something* of a controversy."

"What kind of controversy?" the boy asks greedily.

"The kind that's probably unsuitable for an eight-year-old's ears."

Their walk has brought them to Cremorne Pier, where a steamer is pulling away, stirring and churning the water. Its cargo of high-spirited pleasure seekers traipse past in the direction of the gardens, but Robert is too distracted to pay them any attention. That *cannot* be the end of it. "Please tell, sir!"

His father defers to Hettie. "What do you think, my dear?"

Robert feels as if he may burst with the effort of trying to contain himself.

"Since I have no idea how the story ends, you'll have to be the judge."

"I suppose I must." His father strides towards the far end of the pier, then turns decisively. "Blondin was performing at Dublin's Royal Portobello Gardens when his tightrope snapped. Blondin was unharmed, but two of his assistants weren't so lucky. Sadly," Walter leans on the railings and peers down into the murk of the Thames, "there was no water to break their fall."

"Goodness!" Hettie reaches for Robert's shoulder; pulls him towards her. He trips over his

own feet in an effort not to tread on her skirts. “Was there no safety net?”

“Blondin refuses to work with one.”

“That’s arrogance!”

His father angles his head, as if considering her viewpoint. “He believes that if he plans for disaster, he’ll attract it.” Then he addresses Robert and Robert alone. “The tightrope was faulty, but that sort of thing leaves a bad taste. Tyrell Smith booked the next best thing, a woman who went by the name of Madame Genevieve – because, as everyone knows, France produces the world’s best ropedancers. Madame Genevieve was to attempt to cross the Thames by tightrope, starting from the Battersea side.”

Robert turns to the toll-bridge and counts: seven, eight, *nine* arches before the central point under which sailing barges pass, eight beyond. Quite an expanse, by anyone’s standards.

“It was obvious, the best view was going to be had from the river. I was in a small boat.” His father points in the direction of the turpentine works. “About there.”

The boy fixes on the point, imagines himself in a rowing boat.

“I doubt Madame Genevieve’s tightrope was as high as Blondin’s, but you wouldn’t have got me up there for all the tea in China.”

“What about all the tea in India?”

“All right, clever clogs.” His father pulls Robert’s cap down over his eyes. “Madame Genevieve’s tightrope was shaped like Brunel’s famous suspension bridge.” Robert rights his cap in time to see Walter demonstrate how the tightrope curved up and down. “At each high point was a narrow ledge where Madame Genevieve could pause and rest, while evenly-spaced tethers pulled the rope taut.”

*Tight rope.* Robert’s mind makes new sense of the word. *Of course!* So delighted is he with his discovery, it’s as if he’s invented the word anew.

“Our first inkling that something was wrong was when Madame Genevieve stopped about two-thirds of the way across for what seemed a little too long. Our boat began to rock as people took to their feet in protest – they thought her reluctance was an act. But the danger was real.”

Boggle-eyed, Robert demands, “What happened?”

“A whisper passed down the length of our boat: *‘A tether’s been cut.’*”

His mother flattens her hand just below the base of her throat. “Deliberately?”

“So it seemed. What looked like a tug-of-war team gathered on the bank and *pulled* the rope tight. With dusk fast approaching Madame Genevieve *had* to continue, but the second she stepped onto the rope it began to sway. Nobody dared breathe. Then came the terrible moment when Madame Genevieve dropped her balance-pole. As it crashed into the Thames an unholy hullabaloo broke out. Fortunately, Madame Genevieve’s training served her well. She caught the tightrope in both hands. It swung wildly as she dangled there, but somehow she managed to lower herself into a boat. And the relief,” his father pats his chest, “was enormous.”

The boy can believe it. He finds he too has been holding his breath. But Walter claps three times, breaking whatever spell he had them under.

“Well, Signor Jacopo.” He is teasing, referring to a boyhood memory. A small monkey who used to parachute from a hot air balloon dressed in a scarlet hat and coat. “Enough excitement for one day?”

Good though it was, his father’s story is hardly a substitute for a balloon ride. Robert is undeterred. “No, sir.”

Walter turns to Hettie, as if to say, *I tried*, but Hettie grips the handle of her parasol and tightens her mouth.

## CHAPTER TWO

1870

If Robert's father feels a connection with ropedancing because he shares Blondin's birthday, something similar is true of Robert and his fascination with ballooning. The boy was born in 1862, the year James Glaisher of the Greenwich Royal Observatory and the aeronaut Henry Coxwell made their ascent to thirty-seven thousand feet, the highest any human had ever flown. In the atmosphere's upper reaches, a man can freeze to death in ten minutes, but what is that possibility to a boy who, in winter, wakes to iced window panes, has experienced the itch of chilblains and believes he knows a thing or two about chattering teeth?

The party of three walk on – father, mother and boy. Outwardly, they look like any family on a day's outing, but Robert is acutely aware that a bad feeling is building between them, invisible, but powerful nonetheless. At any other time, his inclination would be to put a stop to it. He imagines his mother's face losing its tension as he announces, 'I've changed my mind.' How she'll suggest a diversion before he changes it back. A magic lantern display. The maze, perhaps. The talking mynah birds. *You like them, don't you?* But why should he? Why should he, when it is his birthday and his father made a promise?

As they pass between the pagoda and the New Hall, the boy feels a lift in his chest, a combination of excitement, wonder and nerves. *There it is!* It takes all his effort not to break into a run. There is something otherworldly about the balloon, as if it's visiting from a distant star. Though he'd never say this out loud, it seems almost to be alive. He senses its restlessness, how, in its tethered state, the balloon feels the pull of the sky. Robert cannot help himself. Despite knowing how terribly it upsets his mother, despite his father's anxiety at the thought of her distress, Robert wants this. More than he's ever wanted anything before.

On a previous visit – three years ago to the day – a tall-hatted, red-jacketed assistant had misguidedly offered Hettie a handbill. 'An exquisite new sensation.'

*'The Angels' View,'* she read aloud. 'How apt!'

'Can I tempt you, madam?' His moustache was of the luxurious type Robert particularly admired, his chin clean-shaven and deeply clefted.

'Isn't it terribly dangerous?' Robert recognised his mother's tone, the one that told him that her mind was already made up. Clearly, the man relished a challenge.

'Every possible measure has been taken to tame the danger. Our balloon is held captive.' He tugged on a thick guy rope. 'See for yourself.'

Invited to examine the tethers, Hettie checked each knot diligently. And although she couldn't fault them, she persisted, 'But what if one should work its way loose?'

'That's highly unlikely, madam.' His mother gave the man one of her looks. Robert crumples when she looks at him that way, but not this fellow. With great patience he softened his voice. 'But you're right to ask. Our aeronauts are prepared for every eventuality. The balloon has a hole at the bottom, which you can see quite easily.' Though they both followed the line of the man's scarlet-clad arm, only Robert's jaw dropped. Past the burners, he could see *inside* the mouth of the balloon, where stripes mimicked the sun's rays. 'That's where the hot air goes in. What you *can't* see is the vent at the top, which we open by pulling the cord, *here.* Heat the air inside the balloon and *voila!* it ascends. Let the hot air out and the balloon gently comes back to earth. It's as simple as that.'

*Surely that must satisfy even his mother.* Robert waited for her to reach for the clasp of her chatelaine bag – 'my indispensable', she called it; inside it, her calling cards, the lace-edged handkerchief embroidered with her initials, a Chinese fan and a small velvet purse. Instead she said, 'What about the heat source? Do you *really* use hydrogen?'

'Nature's miracle gas.' There was extravagance in the assistant's voice. 'The finest and most pure!'

'I've heard it's extremely flammable.'

The boy gaped. His mother had been reading again, arming herself with objections.

'If it were to come into contact with a naked flame, then certainly. But' – he winked at Robert to reassure him that everything was under control – 'no one will be smoking a cigar while I'm in charge.'

'If ballooning's so safe, why do I read about so many accidents?'

'You must bear in mind, aeronauts are constantly trying to outdo one another. They want to go the highest, to be credited with the latest scientific discoveries. In other words, they take risks I would never dream of taking. Today we rise with the ease of an ascending vapour, then we remain at the highest point for perhaps twenty minutes to take in the view. The whole of London laid out like a patchwork quilt!' Robert already knew London. It was the heavens that interested him. 'Then we bring you, ever so gently, back to earth.'

Up on tiptoes, the boy could hold his tongue no longer. 'Can we, Mother? Can we?'

But the man laughed, a great rumble of sound. *'You?* You're too short to see over the basket. Go on, lad, up on the platform and see for yourself.'

Robert didn't wait to be asked twice. He charged at the steps. Apparently, the man had forgotten the compromises that being waist-high to adults entail. Robert hadn't for a minute imagined that he would look *down.* What was on offer was the Angels' View. He'd anticipated that he would look *up,* and it was up that he looked then. Up to the riggings, the hoop and the striped swell of the sphere. Up to the narrowest part of the balloon – the vent. Up to the bluest of blues, the clouds and the heavens beyond.

'I'll tell you what.' Down at ground level, the man beckoned. 'If air travel interests you, make your way to the pavilion. In ten minutes, Mr Delamarne's aerial vessel is due to take to the sky.' He offered Robert's mother another handbill. 'He claims it's the future, and if he *really* can fly from point to point in a straight line, he may well be right!'

*'The most celebrated dirigible manufacturer in the hemisphere,'* she read. 'Wouldn't you like to see that, Robert?' How urgently she willed him to agree, and the boy wanted the reward of one of her smiles, so he said, reluctantly, yes, he *would* like to see Mr Delamarne's flying machine.

The man seemed to sense his disappointment. 'How old are you, lad?'

To prove himself worthy, he jumped down the two final steps. 'Five, sir.'

'Come back and see me when you're eight.'

For three long years the thought of the Angels' View has been Robert's obsession. Though he knows there are words for a boy who thinks the way he does – stubborn, ungrateful, defiant – he will not give up his prize. Not when it's finally within reach.

"Tickets for the next flight! The air, like the earth and the ocean, has been subdued by science."

It is not the same scarlet-jacketed assistant, nor is it the same balloon, but at last Robert has a ticket in his hand. *For one ascent only. Le Géant. Not transferable.*

With a flourish, the assistant offers the second to his mother. "For you, madam?"

Hettie shuns the ticket as if repelled by it. "I shall keep both feet firmly on the ground, thank

you.”

Something inside the boy plummets, as if he has an anchor and it’s dragging him down. Robert hadn’t for one moment imagined that his mother would go up with them, but he’d pictured her waving her handkerchief, her face framed by auburn hair, by her bonnet and then by the halo of her parasol, growing smaller and smaller until he struggled to pick her out from the crowd. “Won’t you watch, Mother?” he asks.

She shakes her head sorrowfully. Begins to walk away.

Walter bends towards Robert, pinning his arms to his sides. “Your mother’s a little anxious.” This is as close as he’ll ever come to criticising her. Mrs Dwyer, on the other hand, has been more forthcoming. ‘Keep your head down,’ she’s cautioned the scullery maid within Robert’s hearing. ‘Madam’s up to her theatricals again.’ Apparently his mother’s flame-coloured hair colour is responsible for her temperament. Now Robert’s father looks him in the eye. “I’ve promised I’ll keep you safe, so you must do exactly as I say. Do you understand?”

The boy understands perfectly. He will be allowed to go up in the balloon, but he will not be allowed to enjoy it, not in the way he wanted. Already the swell of disappointment has found its focus in his bottom lip. He doesn’t trust himself to say, ‘Yes, sir.’ All he can do is nod.

Ticket in hand, he hears Walter implore, “We’ll be perfectly safe. The balloon’s anchored fast.” His father’s voice is pleading, but pleading for what? Forgiveness isn’t something you can ask for in advance. If it were, it would be spelled *foreg*iveness.

“Yes.” Her chin lifted, resolute, his mother gives a tight little smile. “Like Madam Genevieve’s tightrope.”

## CHAPTER THREE

1870

The boy doesn't know the cause of his mother's anxiety. He has no idea she has struggled her whole life to mould it into something slightly more manageable. Constantly, she challenges her fears with logic, only to have them whisper: *The world isn't a safe or a kind place. Danger lurks; not only for you, but for your family.* Walter, her husband, has some idea. A scattering of facts, the few words that haven't snagged like barbs in her throat, a sense of something vast and bottomless lurking beneath them. Hettie, he might be surprised to learn, isn't much better informed than he is. What she has that her husband does not is the certainty that tragedy flows freely through her veins. Such is her family's curse, it may infect anyone she comes into contact with.

Life is already so fragile and precarious, Hettie has no desire to seek out new sensations to make her feel *more alive* or to watch people risk their lives in the name of entertainment. When others rhapsodise about skill and daring, what she senses is their barely-concealed desire to witness a dreadful catastrophe. Let us be clear. No relative of Hettie's has ever died while attempting to fly higher in the name of scientific endeavour or to go faster in the name of sport. When Hettie was conceived, what was described by her mother as 'the itch' skipped a generation, just as her grandmother's auburn hair passed her mother by.

Hettie's father was a man called Ernest Winstanley. Like Hettie's son Robert, Ernest had his head in the clouds from boyhood. Before he learned to talk, he would raise both hands above his head and his mother, Hettie's grandmother, would say, 'What is it you want, Ernest? You'll have to ask.' And so his first word was not 'mother' or 'father' but 'up'. Take the boy to the foot of a hill and he would scarper up it and proclaim himself king of the castle. But the boy became a teenager and the hills became fells, and as he inched closer to manhood the fells became mountains. When he'd climbed the highest peaks England had to offer, he packed his ropes and his ice axe and headed north to Scotland. His mother had no patience with these 'jaunts', as she called them, saying, 'Why can't you be content to stand in a valley and look upwards?'

'How can you be content to stand in the valley?' was his reply. The itch was in him and he couldn't help but scratch. The more difficult the challenge, the greater the victory.

'Don't mind your mother.' Ernest's father would slip into the shake of a hand whatever money he could spare. To his wife, he'd say, not without affection, 'You'll see, he'll give it up when he finds himself a wife.'

But Ernest found a wife who was sympathetic to what others thought was folly, because she too had been born with an itch. In the version of the story Hettie was told, Ernest claimed to have discovered her mother, Decima, on a Scottish mountainside.

'Discovered me!' she'd scoff. 'Why should you get the credit?'

'Had it been up to *you*, my mountain goat, you'd have walked straight past.'

Ernest had heard the walking party before he caught sight of them. Decima's was the first human voice to invade his thoughts for some hours. So far, cud-chewing sheep and the odd lapwing had been his only company. There she was – *a woman mountaineer!* – complete with wide-brimmed hat, a high-necked blouse fastened with a brooch, a buckled belt cinching her waist, a plain skirt muddied about the hem and scuffed boots that might have been a man's, making her way down the rocky gully towards him. (This was the part of the story Hettie loved;

the romantic part.) Ernest stepped off the trail to allow her to pass, the execution of this etiquette providing the perfect excuse to watch her descent. He thought Decima magnificent as she planted her walking staff. Such confidence! Two men he was soon to learn were her father and brother followed in her wake. To Ernest the men were incidental, though when, conscious of gawping like a halfwit, he said, 'Good day to you!', it was the brother who replied.

'A fine day for it.' There are no strangers at three thousand feet.

'You took the ridge route?' Ernest nodded towards a jutting rock.

The brother's feet were firmly placed. 'We did.' He occupied ground higher than his sister. His father, the king of this particular castle, had found handholds either side of the gully, his perch only affording room for the heel of a boot.

'Is it as narrow as they say?'

The voice came from the right. 'We lived to tell the tale.' The first words Decima said to Ernest.

'Your first time up here?' asked the brother.

Forced to look away from her – she must be a mirage, surely – he confessed, 'It is.'

'And you're alone.' The older man, the father, raised his voice to be heard from his high perch, like a preacher in a pulpit.

'I always walk alone.' Ernest wished he could communicate to the woman near him that this wasn't because he was friendless, but because he relished the way his thoughts flowed freely. 'I enjoy the solitude.'

'I envy you that.' She regarded him fearlessly and he felt a connection, or the beginnings of one.

Ernest didn't for one moment mistake Decima for a woman whose life was governed by the need to darn and sew, launder and iron, fetch coal and lay fires, but though she struck him as entirely free, the restrictions placed on that freedom told him she was unmarried – cause for hope.

'We're at the Clachaig,' said the preacher, 'if you'd care to compare notes.'

Ernest inclined his head. He was also at the Clachaig, for the simple reason that it was Glencoe's only inn. 'I'd like that.'

Ernest and Decima named their daughter *Aonach* after Aonach Eagach, the ridge linking Meall Dearg and Sgorr nam Fiannaidh. It was a place of jagged edges, tufts of dry grass its only punctuation, but it was the place that had brought them together. Before Aonach was teething, Ernest could resist the itch no longer. He resumed his solitary jaunts, heading first to Snowdonia and then back to Glencoe. Decima, proving herself as rare a person as he had first imagined, didn't say, 'Must you go?' or claim that she'd struggle to cope. Instead she said, 'This time next year, I'll join you.' Her eyes held a devilish glint. '*If* you won't object to my company.'

'Not one bit.' Decima wasn't a person who enjoyed the sound of her own voice. When they went walking together, an hour might pass without the exchange of a single word. Both enjoyed the unpolluted trickle of a mountain stream; the song of small birds that coasted on drifts of air. But Ernest also wondered if, by next year, Aonach might have a brother or sister, and Decima's trip might need to be deferred.

Because he was alone, nothing is known of Ernest's final hours. Whether his feet faltered on the awkward, sloping cliff-face or he lost his bearings in low cloud and succumbed to the drop from the ridge below Am Bodach. Decima didn't think her husband would have attempted to make his way down along the rim of Clachaig Gully. He knew better than that.

At first, the word 'death' wasn't mentioned. Ernest had 'disappeared'. But with a child to care

for, Decima needed to deal in certainties. The reality was that her husband wasn't coming home. She had no choice but to square up to it.

Ernest's remains were never found, and that was perhaps as it ought to be. 'Better a mountainside than a coffin,' Decima said.

That Ernest's daughter was named after the very route that took his life was too much for the Winstanleys, so the child became known by her middle name, Henrietta (or Hettie, as she preferred when old enough to be allowed an opinion), but to Decima the ridge would always be the place where she met Ernest. This was the story Decima told Hettie each night after tucking her into bed, and when the story ended she'd say, 'When you're old enough, I'll take you to see the place you were named after.'

Even to a child, it was obvious that this promise was supposed to be a gift, something that shouldn't be shunned, but it opened up two terrifying prospects. The first was that Hettie would fall to her death, just as her father had. In her dreams Hettie often found herself lost in low cloud, and when it cleared – which it did with remarkable speed – she realised she was teetering at the edge of an abyss. She would wake, arms flailing, with a sense of impending catastrophe that lingered until, by night, the story came for her again, disguised as her mother's love.

The second prospect was that, while undertaking this arduous and holy pilgrimage, Hettie would stumble across her father's remains. Her mother had explained that there were people who practised 'sky burials'. They carried the bodies of their loved ones to the tops of mountains and laid them out where, in time, their bones would be picked clean. It was really rather beautiful, if you thought about it. The impression Hettie absorbed was that mountaintops were rocky wastelands littered with bodies in varying states of decay.

Ominous and ever-present, the threat cast a shadow over her childhood. Since her mother seemed incapable of detecting it, Hettie believed it was invisible, until one Easter when her grandmother came to stay. (This was Grandmother Winstanley, not Decima's mother, with whom they lived, because where else can a young widow go but home to her parents?) On this occasion, Hettie hadn't woken when she lost her footing; she'd landed at the bottom of a deep crevasse, to be cradled by her father's skeleton, his hollow ribcage stripped bare by buzzards, bones bleached white by the elements. And so she struggled against his embrace.

'Shhh.' It was not a man's voice but her grandmother's. 'You're having a nightmare.' To Hettie it would always be the other way around. She didn't have nightmares. They had her. 'What was it about, hmm?' the old woman coaxed. 'You can tell me.'

By then she'd recognised her grandmother's lavender scent and knew she was safe, but, 'I don't want to climb the mountain,' was all she could bring herself to say.

'And you shan't have to.' Her grandmother's voice was fierce: 'Not if I have anything to do with it.'

Hettie didn't know what passed between Grandmother Winstanley and her mother. All she knew was that the bedtime stories stopped, and she felt in their place her mother's disappointment that she'd given birth to such a timid creature. The nightmares were slower to depart, the images sketched by her mother and coloured with the vivid palette of a child's imagination. Her understanding was that by confiding in her grandmother those eight words, eyes squeezed tightly shut, she had forfeited the right to ask her mother questions. A drawbridge was pulled up, leaving her outside.

Grief is a strange opponent. For a long time, Hettie didn't feel her father's loss; after all, she had no memories of him. She couldn't recall the curl of his hair, the spacing of his clear blue eyes, the line of his jaw. Then, when she felt his absence, she learned that you don't simply

grieve for the person who's gone, but for things that *might* have been. Her thoughts travelled long lonely corridors, questioning what her father valued more: his family or the mountains. She conjured up the moment when her mother held her in her arms and took her hand to make her wave her daddy off on what would be his final jaunt. 'Say goodbye to Daddy. *Goodbye, Daddy.'* If she hadn't forfeited the right, Hettie might have asked, 'Did Father love us?' but the only possible answer would have been, 'Of course he did!' and it wouldn't have been enough, because he had made his choice. It was the mountains he chose.

Marrying a doctor should have provided her with some kind of insurance, although it was not the only reason Hettie accepted Walter's proposal; she was not nearly as calculating as that. If the worst happened, and she always imagined that it would, a doctor would know what to do. She found she could rest easier by his side. At night her sleep was dreamless, and what a gift that was.

But then Robert arrived and Hettie knew the odds. One in six babies don't live to see their first birthdays. Her vigil was constant. Was he breathing? Was he too hot, too cold? When Walter was out on his rounds, she consulted his medical journals, realising there was more to guard against than even she had been aware. When her husband arrived home smelling of tallow and smoke and filth from the gutters, she knew he'd been east of Trafalgar Square, but could only guess at what squalor he'd encountered. People packed too tightly together, barely any ventilation, communal water pumps – polluted, more likely than not – and privies shared by multiple households. And as for the ailments he'd treated (tuberculosis, almost certainly; cholera, perhaps; smallpox, hopefully not). He always scrubbed his hands, but Hettie insisted he changed his clothes before sitting down to dinner or going to say goodnight to their son.

If she'd thought she would relax after Robert turned one, Hettie was mistaken. Even before Robert took his first steps she recognised that he'd inherited his grandfather's itch. Now, she could barely hold back her sense of dread. There was little she could do to protect Robert from himself. Instead her question was, *How long can I stop him scratching?*

## CHAPTER FOUR

1872

Robert is ten years old when his father bids him to go and wait in his surgery, an instruction so unusual it brings the boy out in a cold sweat. He can't recall having been caught doing something he oughtn't to have done, but even ordinary things have upset his mother of late. The other day all he did was pull back the heavy curtain in the front parlour.

'Robert!' she'd shouted. 'Do you want to let all of London's soot and grime inside?'

He hadn't noticed her sitting there, in a dark corner. All he'd wanted was to let in a little daylight.

The book-lined surgery is where Walter receives patients who don't require (or can ill-afford) house calls. Mrs Dwyer casts a critical eye over those who come pounding on their door at first light, heavy-lidded after a night-time vigil. A man who arrives wearing work boots and gaiters may be left shivering on the doorstep, but a man with ink-stained fingers will be bustled into the warm and given a seat, perhaps even a cup of tea, while she goes to rouse the doctor. Walter holds the people of Grub Street – the writers, typesetters and printers – in high esteem, but both kinds of patients are the type to consult a physician only when Dr Collis Browne's Chlorodyne fails to break a fever. Perhaps the poor desperate souls have tramped several miles, having heard that Dr Cooke said, 'Put that away,' when their neighbour offered him coins. Mrs Dwyer shakes her head, frustrated that reports of such kindness pass from mouth to mouth, allowing her employer's good nature to be exploited. Usually when it's too late for him to make a blind bit of difference.

*'And, of course, the other doctors don't take kindly if they hear of it,' she tells Robert.*

*'But if the patients have no money to pay, wouldn't they be turned away elsewhere?'*

*'All I'm saying is it doesn't go down well.'*

As the boy knows from school, being made to wait is a punishment in itself. The masters string it out and string it out, so it's a relief to get whatever's coming your way over and done with. All the same, his curious eyes wander. *The British Medical Journal.* Well-thumbed studies of anatomy. Buchan's *Domestic Medicine.* Dr John Snow's breakthrough study on cholera. Over there is his father's black bag, stocked with ointments, spatulas, splints, ready for any eventuality. On the table by the window are his tools of the trade: a pestle and mortar, a stethoscope, a microscope, bottles of medicine corked and tagged. And on the side desk where his mother writes her neat columns of figures, an unusual number of fee notes, skewered on a prong.

A hitch in Robert's throat: he cannot recall an unusually high number of patients that would account for them.

Robert glances into the hallway. No sign of his father. He crosses the room and thumbs to the bottom of the pile. The chits go back two months. This is not how things work. *'Any woman who keeps her own housekeeping book is perfectly capable of maintaining a set of business accounts.'* His mother transcribes details in the ledger, filing as she goes.

What can it mean?

Footsteps. Robert scuttles back in front of his father's desk, eyes front, hands behind his back.

"There you are." Walter closes the door with a click. "Sit yourself down. I've something to tell you."

Not the words he feared. ‘Your mother tells me’ or ‘I’ve received a letter from your headmaster’. The boy sits, back straight. If not a telling-off, what might the alternative be?

“We’ll be moving.”

Delighted, he inches forward. “To the house in Cheyne Walk?”

Momentarily, his father looks flummoxed, then his expression clears. *Oh, that house!* “It was only ever a pipe dream. Surely you realised?”

But Robert didn’t. He feels as if a despicable trick has been played on him.

His father’s frown is almost an apology. “We’re not, and we’re probably never going to be rich.”

*You could be – if you made more calls to well-to-do widows. If you’d only listen to their descriptions of unspecified ailments and recommend a ‘change of air’.* “Then where, sir?”

“South of the river. A place called Carshalton.”

Is he to be uprooted from all that’s familiar? Away from the settings of his father’s stories, his inheritance. Trousers worn by murderers, the princes in the Tower. And what about his hard-won freedoms? Streets he’s only recently claimed, having countered each of his mother’s objections? He’ll stick to the main roads; he won’t take any shortcuts or speak to strangers (the Italian organ-grinder hardly counts). He’d like to ask why, but why isn’t an acceptable question. Instead he asks, “But what about your practice?”

“I’ll need to stay in town to tie up a few loose ends.”

A child isn’t expected to have loose ends. What is it to his father that he’s been waiting for the opportunity to win back his prize marble – the amber cat’s eye – from Cyril Wharton? “And when will Mother and I move?”

His father doesn’t meet his gaze. “Next week.”

Robert’s head swims. So soon? “What about school, sir?”

“It’s all settled. You’ll go to Cheam School.”

He can hardly claim he’ll be disadvantaged. Cheam has a reputation for being one of the best preparatory schools in the country. “Will I have to board?” So far he’s avoided the need.

“I shouldn’t have thought so. You could walk there in under an hour.” Robert cannot tell if he’s disappointed or comforted. Something of his confusion must convey itself to his father, because Walter says, “Perhaps I should look into it.”

A fresh wave of panic surges, the thought of two hours’ freedom being snatched back. “I can walk, sir. I’ll manage.”

“Well, then.” His father slaps his thighs and stands. “A new beginning.” But the tight smile on his face quivers and it occurs to the boy. This is some whim of his mother’s. She has pestered and pestered until Walter caved in, knowing he’d never hear the last of it.

There is no one Robert can take his shock and resentment to except Mrs Dwyer. He clatters downstairs. When he enters the low-ceilinged kitchen the heat from the range is intense. Temperature aside, under normal circumstances Robert likes this place. Shelves of copper pots and pans are arranged by size. Each, he knows, emits its own distinct note when turned upside down and struck, something Mrs Dwyer tolerates, provided she doesn’t have one of her heads. He needs no reminder to replace the pans in order, the handles all pointing in the same direction. To him they form a scale. Here, there is a place for everything, from the wooden salt box to used tea leaves.

Red-faced, Mrs Dwyer is standing at the scarred wooden table, stripping what remains of yesterday’s roast mutton from the bone.

Normally placid, Robert barely knows what to do with this particular blend of emotions that spits and crackles like fat in a frying pan, sending the scullery maid scuttling away. He arms himself with a ladle.

Mrs Dwyer puts down both bone and knife. She wipes her greasy fingers on her apron, an operation that seems almost delicate. “So, he told you.” Her expression is pained. She, at least, appreciates the enormity of what is being done to him.

“Why didn’t *you?”* Robert slaps the round of the utensil into his palm. He’d be perfectly justified in bringing it crashing down on the tabletop.

Mrs Dwyer raises her eyebrows and keeps them raised. “It wasn’t my place.”

“I’m always the last to be told.” Robert launches himself sideways into a chair, knocking a knee painfully.

“I expect your father wanted to be sure before he said anything. Sometimes these ideas come to nothing.”

His words thicken with the effort of keeping tears at bay. “I won’t know anyone.”

“Nor will I. Not at first.”

In his misery, Robert had forgotten that this isn’t just a job for Mrs Dwyer. *His* home is also *her* home. The thought that there will be one familiar person, someone who’s known him his whole life, provides the only comfort that can be clawed back from the day. “What do you know about this *Carshalton?”*

“I understand it’s not far from Epsom racecourse. You like horses, don’t you?”

Horses are a necessity. They empty their bowels onto the cobblestones and it’s a constant battle to keep his boots clean. But Robert sees Mrs Dwyer is desperate to find something to make the hand he’s been dealt a little more acceptable. “I suppose so,” he sulks.

Robert will have cause to try to recall the precise words his father used, and exactly what Mrs Dwyer said, but of one thing he’ll be absolutely sure. At no point was it suggested to him that his mother was ill. That the move, the exchange of soot and grime for lavender and watercress, was for her sake.