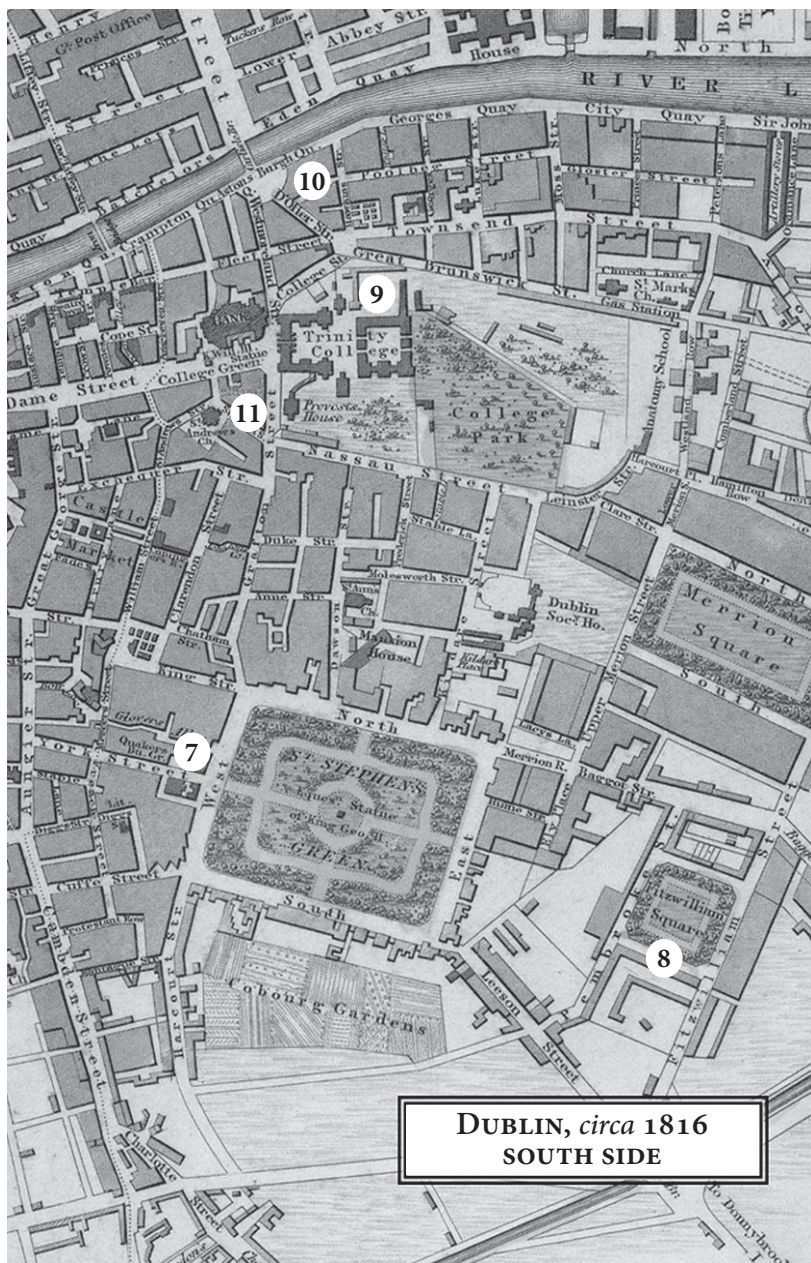




1 Rutland Square – 2 Blessington Street Basin – 3 Charlemont House –
 4 St George's Church – 5 Abbey Street – 6 Pill Lane



7 Royal College of Surgeons – 8 Fitzwilliam Square – 9 Trinity College –
10 Hawkins Street – 11 Royal Irish Academy

1

For my eighteenth birthday, Father promised me the hand of a handsome young man, which he duly delivered mounted in a glass bell-jar. The gift-box had been waiting for me in the parlour, neatly tied with a single black ribbon. Firelight danced along the curve of the glass as I held it up. The bones, blackened at their joints, were closed over in a loose grip. The index finger and thumb curled upwards, like a figure pointing in some old Italian painting.

Father said, 'Can you believe they were going to throw that away from the storage room in York Street?'

I tilted the jar so the forefinger moved ever so slightly, as if it wanted to tap against the glass. 'How old is it?'

'No one was sure, though I seem to remember it being there when I was a student.'

'I thought you said that he was young and handsome.'

'Ah, well, I can tell these things.'

I glanced at him. 'Is that so?'

'It's the ratio of the distal and middle phalanges,' he said, flexing his own fingers. 'A dead certainty.'

I spent the morning finding it a home. Mrs Perrin wouldn't allow it in the parlour, and the bookcases in the study were full,

so I placed the jar on a shelf in my bedroom, nudging it between framed portraits of John Hunter and Edward Jenner. Both had been frontispiece etchings, which I'd removed with the aid of a ruler and one of Father's scalpels. On my desk, a raven's quill lay across an unsigned letter. I'd meant to show that to Father earlier, so I fetched my shawl, hoping to catch him before he became ensconced in his work. I glanced out of my window. Frost still lingered on the lawn, and his footprints were visible leading to the mews at the bottom of the garden.

We called it Father's little charnel house, but from the outside it looked quite cheery – almost a house in its own right, with grey slates and red bricks and ivy crowding the sash windows. The stables took up the ground floor. Newton and Boyle lifted their heads above the half-doors as I passed by the carriage and cadaver cart. The rooms upstairs had once been home for the coachman and his family, and even now whenever a new case arrived, Father liked to direct the pall-bearers up to 'the living quarters'.

Its front office was sparse, just a few desks and shuttered cabinets, and a long worktable in the middle of the room. Ewan was there, seated in the corner and writing in a ledger. His pen stilled. We both waited for the other to speak, then began to greet each other at once, then stopped and fell silent. I said, 'I was just looking . . .'

'He is in the dissecting room.'

'Oh.' The only room that I was not allowed to enter.

Ewan noticed the letter in my hand. 'But I can deliver that to him if you wish.'

'Do you mind if I wait instead?'

'No,' he said. 'Not at all.' He seemed ready to find me a chair, but I hoisted myself up to sit on the edge of the examination

table. Ewan cast his eyes over the work surface, before returning his attention to the ledger.

Father's assistant was a young man from the Scottish Lowlands who had come to Dublin to study medicine at Trinity. His second year would begin in the autumn, but for several months he had worked alongside Father for practical experience. Ewan was tall, a few inches taller than me, with slim fingers, a thicket of chestnut hair, and eyes with a downward, wistful slant. He would often work late into the evening, and from my room I'd see candlelight flickering in the windows at the foot of the garden.

Father emerged from the dissecting room bearing a tray covered in white cloth. He smiled when he saw me, pushed the door closed with his heel and placed the tray on a side table.

I slipped from the bench and held my letter out. 'Can you sign this?'

'What is it?' he said, reaching for his spectacles.

'A letter to the editor of the Royal Society.'

'Your observations on the sunspots?'

'Among other things.'

Once the glasses were perched on his nose, he took the page and held it close to his face. 'Abigail, did I not forbid you from writing to the Royal Society?' His lower lip protruded as he tilted the page towards the light. 'After last time.'

'No, you only forbade me from forging your name.'

'Oh, yes. That was it.'

I went to the table where the covered tray had been set down. Ewan stood next to it, filling a glass bowl with water from a pewter jug.

I said, 'What's this?'

'I'm not sure I should—'

'A very sad case. Came in yesterday.' Father spoke while continuing to read, the corners of his mouth downturned. He frowned at the letter. 'Are you sure this figure is correct?'

'I checked it twice. May I take a look?'

Ewan gripped the side of the tray between his thumb and forefinger. 'Really, I am not at all—'

'You may.'

The edge of the cloth was thick because of the double-fold of the hem. I waited for Ewan to remove his hand and then drew the fabric aside.

Two small organs sat in the middle of the tray lying perpendicular to one another. They were squat with a slight tapering, appeared dry to the touch, and were coloured a strange blend of pallid brown and red, with tinges of green and blue.

'Lungs,' I said. 'The lungs of an infant.'

Father dipped a pen in ink and signed his name to the letter. 'A new-born boy.'

'Brought from the Rotunda?'

'No. There was an incident in the home of Mr Nesham in number forty-four.'

I knew of the man – a middle-aged barrister who lived across the square with his young wife and toddler daughter. The family would take strolls together in the sheltered paths of Rutland Gardens, the girl swaddled against the unseasonable cold.

I looked down at the tray. 'Was this . . . his son?'

'Oh no, no.' Father paused and pursed his lips. 'Well, I presume not.'

He said that the child belonged to a young servant first employed by the Neshams as a nursemaid. 'In the past few weeks, Mr Nesham came to suspect that the maid was in the family way, though the girl denied it. On Sunday she took to

her bed complaining of sickness, with symptoms so severe that a doctor was called, and he found that she had given birth within the previous twenty-four hours.'

Father placed his pen nib-first in its upright holder. 'The girl said the child fell from her, early in the morning while she happened to be out of bed. He was already dead, or died when he struck the ground, and she was so distraught, and felt so forlorn, that she bundled him up and dropped him in the Blessington Street Basin.'

The basin was a city reservoir not far from here. Father paused in his account and came to the table. 'Mr Weir, put some more water into that beaker. Up to the gallon.'

Ewan poured until the level reached a small marker etched in the glass.

'Did they find the child in the reservoir?' I said.

'No, there is more to it.' He straightened his shoulders and cleared his throat. 'But first, you may have noticed, Mr Weir, that the lungs are not displayed in their true position. They are back-to-front and top-to-bottom. So,' he said, raising an index finger, 'how can we tell the left from the right?'

Ewan blinked twice, and bent lower to peer at the tray. 'Yes,' he said quietly, 'the way to distinguish the lungs.' He folded his arms across his chest. 'The distinct features of the left and right . . .'

I began tapping my thumb against the corner of the table. 'Where did they find the baby if not the reservoir?'

'Come now, Ewan,' said Father, eager for his pupil to get the answer. 'We went over this just a few weeks ago.'

After more of his humming, I pointed into the tray. 'That one was on the left. It contains the cardiac notch and has no middle lobe.'

‘Abigail, the question was for Mr Weir.’

‘But I want to hear the rest of the Nesham story.’

‘Ah, yes. Well, before he asked the authorities to trawl the city basin, Mr Nesham decided it best to search the maid’s room. The child was discovered wrapped in a rug and concealed beneath the bed. As Mr Nesham unfolded the bundle, he said to the girl that he hoped she had done no violence to the child, and she replied, “Oh sir, you will soon see.” He found the boy with his throat cut, and a penknife lying on his breast.’

I glanced again at the two tiny lungs, stark against the metal tray. ‘She murdered her own baby?’

‘That is the assumption. Though the maid insists the child was dead-born; that she had taken the blade to cut the navel string, and at that moment, when she saw the consequences of her sin and shame, such was her state of mind that she did not know her actions.’

Ewan’s face was solemn. ‘That is hardly a credible claim.’

‘No,’ said my father. ‘But since it could spare her being charged with murder, it is one that deserves to be tested.’

He drew the glass bowl towards him and placed an oil-lamp beside it. The water was a bit cloudy, with tiny particles swirling this way and that as if they’d been startled by the light.

Father picked up each lung in turn and slipped them into the water, as Mrs Perrin would drop fillets of meat into a pan. The organs drifted down; tiny bubbles formed and clung to their sides. They slowed as they neared the bottom, bumped against the base of the bowl and each other, before beginning to climb again. They rotated upwards, breached the water’s surface and remained afloat, their tops bobbing and glistening in the lamplight.

Ewan and I had leaned down to look closer so our heads almost touched. He said, ‘The lungs are buoyant.’

‘What does that mean?’

‘The baby must have taken a breath.’

Father prodded one so it submerged, and he watched it float to the surface again. ‘I would say several. In fact, he may have cried for a few moments. I am surprised that it did not alert the household.’

There had been a hailstorm that night. I’d lain awake listening to the incessant tattoo – the strongest gusts had sounded like boots crunching through gravel.

‘She did murder him,’ I said.

‘Abigail, what have I told you about jumping to conclusions? This only confirms that the child *was* murdered.’ He picked up a large perforated spoon, like those used to remove poached eggs, and the lungs drained as he fished them out. ‘Though I admit she is by far the most likely culprit.’

‘Why would you doubt it?’

Father handed the spoon to Ewan. ‘Mr Weir, will you return this to the kitchen, preferably without Mrs Perrin seeing you, then use the water on the orchids in the greenhouse?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘I promised Nesham that I would visit his home in the afternoon to tell him what I had found. Then I have a lecture to give.’ Father began to look around his office while patting the sides of his pockets. ‘Abigail, we also have an appointment in town, so you’d best come with me.’

I thought he’d forgotten – had *hoped* he’d forgotten. An afternoon undisturbed in the library had beckoned. ‘Perhaps we should postpone that. Your meeting with Mr Nesham is too important.’

‘We cannot. Mrs Meekins is our only remaining option. And when we speak to her, you are not to question her methods.’

‘Even if they make no sense?’

‘Especially if they make no sense.’

Ewan had been watching our exchange, but when I glanced at him, he took up the spoon and withdrew. Father said, ‘You know your mother wished for you to develop pastimes that were more . . . typical for a young lady.’

‘But—’

‘So I want you to be good.’

My letter remained on his desk, and I gently brushed a finger over his signature. The ink didn’t smudge, at least not very much, so I folded the sheet into my pocket and said, ‘Yes, Father.’

My bedroom was on the second floor of our house in Rutland Square, bought by my father just before I was born, reflecting his intention then to have a large and sprawling family. But that was not to be. Since there was no shortage of space, I had been given my own room from an early age: a wide chamber with two tall windows and a high ceiling, which I grew into like a hand-me-down dress. I lay reading on my bed for much of the morning, though occasionally I had to leaf back a page or two when my mind would wander to the infant in Father’s workrooms.

Clarissa called on me before noon and suggested we while away an hour at the art exhibition in Hawkins Street. By the time we set off, a fog had settled over the city, lending each shop window a candlelit glow. The mist drifted over the Liffey and swallowed up the masts moored outside the Customs House.

Clarissa and I had been friends since childhood, ever since the day I whispered an answer in her ear as she floundered in Sunday school. We were the same age, give or take a few months, and

though she was the daughter of our pastor, Rev Egan, Mrs Perrin was rather wary of her influence. Clarissa suffered from anaemia, and had been prescribed iron-rich stout by her physician. Early on, she began saving up the bottles in order to share them with me. She would smuggle the stout beneath bundles of cotton in her embroidery basket, and we would sip and chat and giggle at our boldness. At first I told her not to, since they were intended to make her feel better, but she said not to be silly; after all, she liked having a pale complexion.

In the carriage, she sat huddled in her fur-lined pelisse, and looked at the sky with displeasure. 'If the summer continues like this, Abby, I am resolved to move to East India, or the Carolinas.'

'You would soon complain of the heat,' I said.

'Never.'

I followed her gaze. Back in the spring, almost overnight, a dry fog had crept over the city, and had lingered ever since despite the buffeting of wind and rain. Electrical storms had become frequent, discharging so much forked lightning that people thought the skies must clear, that the atmosphere would be diffused and spent like the inside of a Leyden jar. But each time, we rose to discover the arid mist still in place, dimming and reddening the sun, and making the black dots scattered about its disc quite clear to the naked eye.

I turned back to Clarissa. 'What about all the suitors you would leave broken-hearted?'

'I would be sure to remember them with great fondness.'

The carriage slowed as we neared the Society of Arts, a handsome building on a narrow side street. A queue had formed at the entrance, but another group of people were standing nearby, men and women all dressed in black. The men wore

coats fastened with metal hooks instead of buttons, and a white cravat tucked beneath the collar.

Clarissa said, 'The Brethren.'

I had seen their members quite often of late, standing outside church railings, or handing out leaflets beneath Nelson's Pillar. They were led by a preacher named Mr Darby, who had arrived in the city the year before, and as the weather became ever worse, their numbers seemed to grow. They conducted strange rites in public – dark processions that wound through the streets, and baptisms by immersion in the sea.

Clarissa said, 'My father has come to dislike these evangelicals. Though I think he is mostly saddened at losing members of his own congregation. The Bowens, the Neshams, the Walkers, they have all been seduced away.'

'The Neshams?'

'Yes,' she said. 'They were among the first.'

We alighted from the carriage and joined the queue. The Brethren remained silent, casting cold stares in our direction until we paid for our tickets and entered the hall.

The exhibition room was warm and brightly lit by tall, arched windows. Every inch of wall from floor to ceiling was covered in paintings, huge pastorals and battle scenes in gilded frames, small portraits of dogs and children, all fitting together like the pieces of a puzzle. Men and women wandered the floor, pausing beneath a particular canvas, or talking together on sofas in the middle of the room. Smaller galleries were attached to the main hall, dedicated to the sciences, geology and engineering. One contained pillars taken from the Giant's Causeway, and a polished white opal enclosing a drop of water. Another displayed pieces of fossil, all neatly arranged and labelled, and antlers from a giant elk found in a Kilkenny bog.

Clarissa preferred new paintings to old relics, and so we stayed in the main hall, pointing out pictures that caught our fancy. One showed a young woman reclining in a woodland. She wore nothing except for some diaphanous material that covered her legs, and she rested her head in the crook of her arm. Her skin was pale, and the trees in the background were dark and forbidding.

We regarded it for a few moments, and I said, 'She must be freezing.'

Clarissa smiled and tilted her head. 'I wonder what Mrs Hone would make of it.'

When we were younger, we had attended drawing lessons together at a house in Merrion Square. An old master portraitist taught local boys in the use of oils, while his wife, Mrs Hone, gave lessons in watercolours to three girls: myself, Clarissa, and Edith Gould from Fitzwilliam Square. Mrs Hone referred to us as her Three Graces, and we spent many warm afternoons wandering the paths in Merrion Park picking flowers for our still lifes. Edith was by far the most talented, and we had remained friends for several years, but neither Clarissa nor I had spoken to her in months. The Goulds had been another family to join Mr Darby's church, and now our paths rarely met.

The final gallery was the hall of statuary, a semicircular room lined with busts and pieces of cast bronze, dominated by three life-size sculptures of Greek gods: Poseidon and Zeus, all twisting torsos and taut muscles, and Aphrodite, partially draped, her head downcast with blank, staring eyes. Each statue stood on its own plinth, and people walked between them. There was some commotion behind us, and I turned to see two members of the Brethren marching through the hall,

an older man and a girl of no more than sixteen. They must have barged in without paying, for a curator followed behind them, remonstrating loudly.

The man reached the hall of statues and gazed up at them, his face a mixture of horror and anger. 'We may as well be in the temple of Belial,' he said almost in a whisper, and he faced the crowd. 'Look at you all, revering these devils, these vices of the heathen made manifest. For such things God poured his fire on the Cities of the Plain.'

The curator had caught up, and he said, 'Sir, you must leave. You cannot—'

'And you are the worst of them, sir, to peddle such filth, to allow such wanton and indecent displays, and to young ladies in particular,' he said, pointing in our direction. Clarissa glanced at me, and I saw her mask a smile.

The curator had to catch his breath. He said, 'Decency or indecency, sir, depends entirely on the prurient imagination of the observer. Perhaps that is your cross to bear.'

Other wardens and patrons surrounded the man and, despite his spluttered warnings of God's retribution, they began to escort him towards the door. No one noticed when the girl, most likely his daughter, climbed on to the plinth of Aphrodite. The statue was freestanding, and with the first push it rocked back and forth. People began to yell and point, but too late. With a final shove, the statue lurched and tilted forward, until it toppled over.

It fell to the flagstones with a resounding boom, and was dashed to pieces; luckily, it was not an original, just a plaster cast. Fragments skittered across the floor – a section of her face showing the corner of her lips, and a hand gripping a fold of cloth.

Everyone in the hall looked upon the wreckage in silence, and then at the girl standing in the place of Aphrodite, her hands by her sides, her black dress and white bonnet, and the expression on her face – no fear or guilt or contrition. She gazed back at us, her eyes wide, a smile on her lips, almost in a state of rapture.

The hall was cleared, the girl and her father taken to a local magistrate, and Clarissa and I returned home. I told my father of what had happened over lunch. He pursed his lips and shook his head at the vandalism.

‘What a pity,’ he said, ‘that anyone should have so little regard for the history and art of such an object.’

‘If you had only seen her. She seemed so sure of her own righteousness.’

‘She is young, Abigail, and may yet look back on her actions with remorse. You must have faith in people’s good nature.’

He returned to his workrooms for a while, but by mid-afternoon was ready to see Mr Nesham. Liam was already waiting at the bottom of the steps. He took my hand to help me into the carriage. Father gathered his coat beneath his chin and slid the window shut to keep out a whistling breeze. After a few moments, he said, ‘I shall only be speaking to Nesham for ten minutes, if that.’

I watched him sitting with his shoulders hunched, one hand clasping the top of his collar. ‘Do you not have your scarf?’

‘I may have misplaced it.’

‘Mrs Perrin spent a week knitting it.’

‘A week? I daresay it’ll turn up.’

The carriage turned into Palace Row: the north side of the square, and the most fashionable, since its height gave the

houses a view over the city and central gardens. A small Tuscan temple stood just inside the railings, where porters used to keep sedan chairs back when the Sunday evening promenade was considered the most elegant amusement in the city. Now the doors to the grand granite shelter were padlocked shut.

I removed my own scarf and looped it over Father's shoulders. He told me not to fuss, but still stuffed it beneath the lapels of his coat. 'What about you?' he said. 'You'll catch your death.'

'I don't feel the cold.'

'I was saying, that when we get to Mr—'

'I know. Ten minutes.'

The Lying-In Hospital took up the south side of the square in its entirety, and the gardens were used to provide for its upkeep, for the gentry would pay fivepence for open-air concerts, with tea rooms and card assemblies in the Rotunda. I used to look out each Sunday evening at the gaily dressed couples strolling the paths. Hundreds of coloured lamps festooned the branches, and I'd hear the strains of an army band and snatches of bright laughter. But then my eye would wander to the windows of the hospital overlooking the scene, and I'd imagine the women within, many from the poorer parts of the city, packed in squalid wards with unclean sheets and no ventilation, and mothers cradling those children – one in six – who would not live past their tenth day.

The promenades no longer took place, and not just because of the peculiar weather. A group calling itself the Association for the Discountenancing of Vice had petitioned the hospital to halt the weekly entertainments since they took place on the Sabbath, and the governors complied. Clarissa had said that it was typical: the finest amusement available in the city, shut down just as we were old enough to attend.

When we reached the house, a maid answered the door and brought us up to the front drawing room. It wasn't long before Mr Nesham entered. He stood on the threshold, and said, 'Lawless,' in greeting while holding out his hand. Nesham had a thin, lined face, and a blood-red cravat spilled from the collar of his shirt. He was about to speak again, but then noticed me standing near the window.

Father said, 'My daughter and I have business in town. You do not mind if she waits while we speak in your study?'

'Of course not.' Nesham looked at me squarely. 'I shall have Martha bring you some tea. It's Alice, isn't it?'

'Abigail, sir.'

His eye lingered a moment longer, and I thought of how his wife was only four or five years my senior.

Both men withdrew, and I was left alone to drift about the room, listening to the muted sounds of an unfamiliar house. I looked out over the central garden, and towards the terrace away in the distance, counting the chimneys over the treetops until I fixed on a pair of windows with tendrils of ivy curling about the sills. That used to be my mother's room. On the wall, there hung an oil painting of a man in powdered wig and fur-lined robe. He reminded me of Mr Nesham; something about the eyes. He stood with his shoulders back, a gavel clutched in one hand and a Bible in the other, his finger inserted at a certain page. I looked closer, but there was no verse or passage visible in the gap.

The door of the drawing room opened and the maid, Martha, backed in bearing a tea-set on a silver tray. She was followed a moment later by the mistress of the house. Mrs Nesham was dressed in the garb of the Brethren, a black dress with white lace around the neck, and she carried three letters fanned in her right hand, their stamped red seals unbroken.

She stopped when she saw me. 'Who is this?'

The maid said, 'The coroner's daughter, ma'am.'

I straightened my shoulders and clasped my hands demurely in front, as my mother had taught me.

'Martha, if anyone calls, I shall be busy until four. Have you checked on Lucia?'

'She's still napping.'

'And where is Mr Darby?'

'He is taking some air in the back garden. Shall I fetch him?'

'No, I shall look for him there.' Without further comment, Mrs Nesham left the room. Martha placed the tea on a nest of tables and went to follow her mistress. She pointed to a pull cord, saying, 'If you need anything else, miss, just ring,' with a demeanour that suggested such an action would not be looked upon kindly.

The minutes passed and there was no sign of Father. We would miss our appointment if he did not come soon. Martha had left the door ajar, and I pulled it wider. Nothing stirred in the landing. Across the hall, just at the edge of hearing, Father and Mr Nesham were speaking in the study.

Nesham was saying, 'Emilie had always been a fine servant. Meek and conscientious. It has been a dreadful shock. Especially for my wife – to know that Lucia had been nursed by a . . .' There was a pause then, and the clink of a decanter. 'When I questioned her, she told me of an intimacy with a fisherman in Gorey while visiting her family last year. I wrote to Mr Casey on Monday. I tell you it wasn't easy; such a thing for a man to discover about his daughter.'

A door opened and banged shut in the ground floor, causing my heart to leap, but there was no other movement in the stairwell.

‘They confined her in the Rotunda, though considering what you found, it won’t be long before they take her to Newgate.’

After another pause, Nesham asked about the proceedings at inquest. He said, ‘There are some who may be concerned at what might be aired at a public hearing.’ His voice became muffled, as if he’d turned and moved to another part of the room, or perhaps he just spoke more quietly. No matter how I listened, I could hear no more of the conversation.

The carpet on the stairs was dappled with colour from a stained-glass window at the top of the return: four panels depicting each of the seasons as classical figures. I went to look closer. Spring was a fair-haired maiden in a flowing blue robe; Winter an old man with a bundle of sticks gathered against his shoulder. A line of poetry in a garland of holly read, *See, Winter comes to rule the varied year.*

The window looked out over the back yard, where a man in a dark morning coat was wandering along the path, his starched collar turned up against his chin. He stopped beneath a tree and reached towards a low-hanging leaf, holding it for a moment as if feeling its texture. Then he tugged on it, bending the bough until the leaf was plucked away.

Before now, my glimpses of Mr Darby had been fleeting. He was younger than I had thought, with little or no grey in his dark hair, and his shoulders were square.

Mrs Nesham came into view, and Darby watched her approach without offering a greeting. She had left the house without a shawl, and she gripped both her elbows. They spoke for a few moments, standing close to one another like dancers at the beginning of a set. She gestured towards the house, and he swept his eyes up and over the windows. I took a step back

in case he saw me. When I peeked again, they had turned to walk away, and I watched until the path became hidden by a trellis of creeping vines.

I should have returned to the drawing room, but didn't relish the prospect of sitting alone beneath the gaze of Nesham's ancestor. In the floor above, one of the doors was half open, and I glimpsed Martha next to a crib holding the Neshams' daughter, Lucia. The child was tired and ill-tempered, attempting to pull her sleeping-cap away while Martha hummed strains from a lullaby.

At the end of the hall, another open door revealed the foot of a bed, its thin mattress undressed and stained, and I knew that this had to be the room of the nursemaid, Miss Casey. I went to look closer. A simple locker stood between the bed and a cast-iron fireplace, with a large closet in one corner. The room was tranquil and still, and I held my breath to listen. How different it would have been a few nights before: a storm blowing outside; the lonely, frantic labour; the violence done to the child and the grim purpose in concealing his body.

The bedside locker was empty except for a small King James Bible bound in black leather. I leafed through the pages, and was about to return it when I noticed an inscription in ink on the title page:

My Dearest Emilie, To light the way . . .

There was an elaborate monogram of three initials, embellished with swashes and ribbons and wide figure eights. One of the letters was an R, but I couldn't tell if that denoted a Christian, middle or surname. The handwriting belonged to a man, but a close relative wouldn't have signed off so formally, and I didn't think the sentiment or penmanship belonged to a fisherman from Gorey. I held the cover open with my palm to grip

the thin sheet by its corner, but then I paused. Wouldn't tearing a page from a Bible be deemed a desecration?

The binding in the book was rather loose so the page ripped out easily. I folded it twice, placed it in the pocket of my dress, and surveyed the room more closely. There were dull brown stains in the knots and gaps of the floorboards. Inside the wardrobe, the maid's clothes hung from a rail and her undergarments were stacked on shelves. The corner of a wicker basket peeked from behind a bundle of petticoats.

It held knitting materials: balls of wool and needles, newly made articles of baby clothes, as well as flannels and calico. A tiny cardigan of light grey wool was unfinished; the needle inserted in the looped stitches; a trail of yarn attached to the ball, still unsnipped. I looked over to the bed and imagined the maid working by candlelight during the cold evenings, hastily concealing the basket whenever anyone entered the room. I delved through some of the completed items: stockings and mittens, coats and hoods – hours and hours of labour. How could the girl's intentions towards her child have changed so drastically?

I'd lingered too long. Footsteps approached in the hallway, and, with the door wide open, I was sure to be spotted. What could I say, except that I'd come up out of curiosity, but my intrusion would reflect badly on Father. Perhaps he would forgive me when I told him what I'd found.

Then Lucia let out a piercing cry. Martha muttered and walked back towards the nursery. I replaced the basket and crept to the door, watched as the maid entered the child's room, then darted silently to the main staircase of the house, heedless now of running into anyone else.

The drawing room was as I'd left it. I sank into one of the

sofas to catch my breath, just as Nesham and my father entered the corridor. I sat up to compose myself. Then I saw that my cup was untouched, still full to the brim. I poured the tea into a potted houseplant beside the armrest, and held the empty cup in my lap as the gentlemen walked in.

Nesham was first through the door, and I thought his face betrayed a hint of displeasure or irritation, but the look was fleeting. Father followed after, and he said, 'My dear, we're sorry to have kept you.'

I placed the cup on a side table, smiled sweetly and said, 'I was hardly conscious of the time.'

2

Father was in a rush to get to his lecture. He quickly introduced himself to Mrs Meekins before heading off, and I was left in the old widow's clutches for well over an hour. The lesson wasn't all that taxing. We sat beside her six-octave piano while she described her style of tuition, as well as exercises to master phrasing and musical expression. At one point she said, 'Show me your hands, my dear.'

Her skin was cold and dry to the touch. She noted that my fingers were slender enough to fit between the black keys to play the tail ends of the ivories, but then she tutted. 'A shame that they're so bereft of muscle.'

I was about to mention that the muscles controlling the fingers were in the palms and forearms, but thought better of it.

'Your mother's were the very same,' she said.

'You taught my mother?'

'Oh, yes. When she was just a girl. Not much older than you are now.'

I looked around and imagined my mother in her youth entering the room, sitting here just like me, perhaps at this very piano. I ran my fingers along the grain of the key slip.

Mrs Meekins said, 'She played with great tenderness, and

learned many tunes by ear, but she was too impatient to master proper technique. I hope you do not take after her.'

I had never heard my mother play, even though we always had a piano in the parlour. 'People say that I am more like my father.'

By the time the lesson had finished, the air outside had grown colder and a heavy rain was turning to sleet. Liam was waiting with the carriage, a welcome haven from the chill wind. People on Sackville Street hurried to take shelter, some looking for refuge under the granite plinth of Nelson's Pillar. The gate porter kept them at bay. It cost tenpence to climb the internal staircase and look upon the city from the viewing platform, and he was determined that none should sneak up without paying.

I was eleven when that monument was completed. Father and I had joined the crowds to watch the statue hoisted into place. There was bunting on the GPO, and the union flag billowed overhead. Nelson had listed as he was lifted up. Even then I'd imagined the consternation if he slipped from his ropes at so great a height to be dashed against the pavement. I was a little disappointed when he was set securely atop the column, as those around us cheered.

We arrived at the College of Surgeons, a grey building of arched windows overlooking St Stephen's Green. I peered through the railings into the park. This time of year, there should have been a promenade of ladies in light muslin dresses and opened parasols, but today the paths were empty. I settled back in the seat-cushions and waited for Father to emerge.

He had been giving demonstrations in the college for years – to prepare new surgeons for what they would face in the law courts if ever called to testify. Father had been elected coroner

for Dublin's north wards at a time when it was more common to appoint a solicitor or barrister. When he was a young surgeon, he had given evidence at several inquests and was often troubled by their failure to identify cases of murder.

He explained it to me once, how coroners from the legal tradition were quick to side with their brother lawyers during the examination of doctors, so that the significance of medical testimony was routinely undermined. And those doctors, my father excluded, were often cautious in their evidence, fearful that a frank opinion later dismissed at trial could lead to a loss of reputation.

After he was elected, he did all he could to remind lawyers that they were permitted in his court as a courtesy – they had no right to be there, though he never refused a suspect the proper representation. His forthrightness raised the hackles of the legal profession, a sensitive body to begin with, he said. 'They question my grasp of jurisprudence. As if any man or woman of moderate intelligence could not master the laws dealing with my duties in the course of an afternoon. The real problem lies with coroners who have no understanding of forensic science.'

Father would compose his lectures in the parlour at night, and would often ask me to retrieve books from the library, to track down some obscure reference or case study, so much so that I came to know the location of every volume, and at least some of their contents.

A gust of wind caused the sleet to swirl, and grey flecks alighted on the oily surface of a puddle like ash from a bonfire. Father was late, as usual, and poor Liam was sitting out in the weather. If I invited him into the carriage, he would refuse, so I got out instead.

He looked down at me. 'What is it, miss?'

'Father has probably become lost in conversation with a student or some old professor,' I said, the side of my bonnet fluttering against my cheek. 'I shall fetch him.'

I turned and leaped over the puddle, climbed the steps and pushed open the heavy wooden door.

The noise of the wind and clatter of hooves was replaced by a cool, shadowy hush. Trainee surgeons walked through the corridors, satchels and books clasped beneath their arms. Some turned their heads to look at me, for not many girls my age would have been seen in those halls; not many girls at all, except for those carried in lifeless on stretchers.

I followed a passageway that led to a set of double doors. A young man approached, opened them and slipped inside, giving me a brief glimpse of tiered benches rising into the gloom, and the corner of a table in a bright pool of light. I also caught a snatch of my father's voice before it was shut out again. I climbed some stairs in the hallway that led to the upper tiers, pushed one of the doors ajar, and crept through.

Several students sat in the benches before me, but none looked back to see my entrance. Others were dotted about in shadowy rows that filled the circular hall. There were large windows just below the ceiling, the shutters opened in such a way that grey light fell upon the dais at the front of the hall, where oil-lamps and candles illuminated a narrow worktable.

Father stood behind it, his coat removed and shirtsleeves rolled up. A man lay on the table, naked except for a piece of sack-cloth covering his face, and with a gaping hole in his torso, the skin folded back on each side like white linen. I had often seen bodies brought to Father's workrooms, but none like this, none so exposed and undone. I was ready to back out of the