

Renegade

A Ripper Novel

AMY CAROL REEVES

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One

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Twilight was the worst time for me.

That's when the guilt seeped through my veins like an illness. Nearly every night, I was plagued with dreams about the murders I had committed. I couldn't get the images out of my mind—myself, crouched up in that hothouse tree. A knife in my mouth as I waited for Julian Bartlett. Blood from John Perkins and Marcus Brown smeared on my face and skirts. I vividly remembered the feel of the knife cutting through their flesh, tearing muscle, and hitting bone. The memories made me nauseated. In my mind, I was no better than Max as he stalked women on the streets last autumn.

But then, I always told myself, the Conclave had murdered my mother. They had planned to execute William and Simon. They would have gone on killing God knows how many innocent human beings during their immortal lives, all for the greater good.

A Posse Ad Esse.

It almost made me laugh.

That morning, as always, I went ahead and got out of bed weighted by my guilt and conflicting feelings. This guilt had become a bit of an albatross around my neck, and I didn't know how to atone for it.

As I dressed, I studied Mother's portrait. My real father, the artist Dante Gabriel Rossetti, had painted it. In my mind, it was his most daring portrait—Caroline Westfield, society belle, as a lamia, nude from her waist up. Grandmother couldn't bear seeing it, so I kept it in my closet for myself. Max had sent it to me, so it was a gift from the devil ... yet I cherished it nonetheless.

As I put on my hospital work dress and pinafore, I allowed myself to think of Max. Except for the delivery of the portrait, neither William nor Simon nor I had heard from him for over four months. But I knew he was around. Somewhere. *Au revoir*, he had signed his note. We would meet again, and when we did, it would be my blood he would want. I had killed his Conclave. The elixir and elixir formula had certainly disappeared in the fire. He had lost the means of sustaining his immortality.

I shuddered as I pinned my hair back and forced myself to mentally prepare for my day. It would be my first day returning to work at Whitechapel Hospital. I hadn't been there since returning to Grandmother's house after that terrible night with the Conclave. Then, soon after Christmas, Grandmother had fallen very ill with pneumonia. I attributed it to the stresses she had endured that autumn—our many arguments, her worry about me, my friend Mariah's death. My own guilt about how I'd bucked against her rules overwhelmed me. Yet I knew that I couldn't completely conform to her lifestyle. The boundaries must be set—at breakfast, I would tell her that I was resuming my work at the hospital. Grandmother had been feeling better; she had been stronger. In fact, I could hear her now, downstairs, fussing heartily at Ellen, her hare-brained maid.

I hurried out of my bedroom and descended the stairs, anxious to begin work at the hospital.



“Where are you going?” Grandmother asked, alarmed. She paused as she ate her eggs, staring hard at my black work dress, at the folded pinafore in my arms.

When I faced her, I saw that her complexion already seemed better. She was thinner, but not quite so pale. She would be fine now without me attending to her all day.

“I'm returning to the hospital,” I said, swallowing my tea too fast and burning my throat a bit. I felt hurried as I ate.

“The murders, getting stabbed in the leg, those eviscerated women, were not enough to keep you away?”

“No, Grandmother. And there haven't been any murders for several months. I'll be fine. I must return to work. If you remember, I need to apply to medical

school soon. I have not been at the hospital since October, and I need the experience.”

She took a sip of tea.

I stood, wiped my mouth, and started to walk out of the dining room.

“Do you have anything else to tell me? Anything else that will further shock my system?” She asked this shrilly, without even looking at me.

As I left the dining room, I saw our very patient butler, Richard, waiting in the corridor with my coat.

I felt prickled at Grandmother’s tone of voice; a thread of mischievousness coursed through my veins. Oh, why couldn’t I keep my bloody mouth shut?

“Yes, in fact, I do have something else to tell you,” I said as I buttoned my coat. “William Siddal and I are dining at William Morris’s house on Thursday evening.” William Morris and his wife, Jane Burden Morris, were Pre-Raphaelites—eccentric artists and, essentially, Grandmother’s most dreaded nightmare. William had become close to them through Dante Gabriel Rossetti, his adoptive father. Gabriel had rescued William, a four-year-old orphan, from the streets and raised him as his own.

I heard the sound of her teacup smashing on the floor.

“What?” Grandmother appeared in the hallway, her eyes blazing, her back ramrod-straight. She approached me, and I saw then that she was more recovered, much healthier, than I had thought.

“You are aware that Jane Morris was William’s father’s mistress, are you not?” she snapped. “I had hoped, rather than believed, that you had forgotten about the Siddal boy, but now I see that I was devastatingly wrong. How can William dine with Rossetti’s mistress?”

“Yes, Grandmother. I have listened to your lectures many times these past months. But you know that I am, and will continue to be, friends with William Siddal as well as with his aunt. Christina Rossetti is a dear person, and both she and William have been so kind to me. William’s father’s scandals are all past history, Grandmother. The family has moved on, forgotten about them. And William has told me that Jane Morris was such a mentor to him after his father’s death. I have looked forward to meeting her.”

Quickly, very quickly, before she could say anything else, I hurried out the door, but not before seeing a small, almost imperceptible wry smile on Richard’s

wrinkled face.



As she returned to her island home, she sighed angrily, frustrated at herself for her unquenchable longings, for her hunger. She hated when it arose. She had so much to keep her comfortable, and none of the daily worries, busy routines, or petty concerns that plagued the rest of the human race.

She descended the stone steps into her home in her human form, salt water dripping from her naked legs and puddling onto the cool marble floor. She passed the library. She passed the treasure room. She passed all of her half-finished portraits, which hung on the walls. She might finish one of them someday, but thus far, none seemed worth completing. She thought vaguely about how she would have to tend to the animals in the menagerie before the evening ended. Tending to the animals was perhaps her greatest duty for the Conclave. Her keeper, when he visited her island home, often brought animals to her and took others back to Robert Buck for his hothouses or experiments. As her keeper had explained, the Conclave moved their headquarters often—so often that her island menagerie was their main menagerie, the permanent home for all of Dr. Buck's animals, serpents, and birds.

Robert Buck, the great scientist, she thought wryly.

Still clutching the skull fragment, she walked the entire length of the long great hall, the center of her small but luxurious underground home. She stopped when she came to a door that opened into a narrow set of damp stone steps spiraling upward—a shortcut to another part of her small island. This staircase was merely functional—practically a cave passage up from her underground world. Outside, her island was rocky and not easy to walk upon, particularly when she was in her human form. Thus her home offered several of these hidden stairs, leading to different parts of the island, so that she did not have to walk too far to get where she wanted. Her keeper had been so thoughtful when the home was constructed.

After ascending the steps, she slid through a narrow crevice and out into the blustery evening. As she stood outside, she surveyed some small mounds of dirt. The brown spots dimpled the sandy grass that stretched the short distance

between herself and the sea. The mounds would disappear eventually, when they became absorbed into the sea, spurting the bleached bones into the ocean waters.

She opened the mound nearest to her and patted the skull fragment into it. She heard it crunch against the other pieces of bone. Many of the mounds held more complete corpses, in deeper graves. She had found these dead ones in the ocean. Three infant bodies. Several women's bodies. Many men's bodies.

Hidden rocks in the area snagged so many boats.

Whenever she swam in the sea following a wreck, she felt fascinated by the faces of the drowned. She contemplated their aborted hopes. Often she found herself drawn to the dead, so she took them back with her to this place.

Almost all were dead.

Some, the stronger ones, swam to the safety of the nearby Orkney Islands' shores. She would watch their tiny forms struggle on the water's surface from the depths below.

None of them ever found her island. Not even the dead. The tides swept mostly away from where she lived; her shores and home remained shrouded under massive rocks and fog. Her keeper had picked her island well. If visible at all, it would seem to be only a jumble of sharp rock peaks, a place to be avoided. And if anyone arrived alive ... she frowned.

It was just better that they did not.

She contemplated the setting sun—golden, achingly glorious. Then she descended back into her home.

She would take a bath, a hot one. She hoped that the warmth would take away her resurgent cravings for flesh and blood.

These feelings had not arisen in so long. In the early years of her immortality, almost eighty years ago, it had been hard not to kill struggling shipwrecked victims, hapless fishermen. But she had gained better control after her first decade on this island. In fact, she hadn't killed in almost twenty years, and her keeper had warned her often that she could not—it would be devastating if she exposed herself, or them.

As she stepped into the bath, settling her naked form into the tub, the candlelight illuminated her skin. A chalice had been tattooed across her entire back. It was not small and indiscrete, as the Conclave's markings were, but large,

spanning the space between her shoulders. The stem extended down her spine toward the words, *A Posse Ad Esse*.

It was her mark of Cain. She, the outcast, was a puzzling inconsistency in the modern world.

Two

I was not certain what I expected to find at Whitechapel Hospital—which was now without Julian Bartlett’s and Robert Buck’s leadership—but upon arriving I found it running efficiently, with more patients and workers even than before. The overwhelming atmosphere of business and urgency, always particularly strong on the first floor, hung in the air.

“Delivery. Twins,” Sister Josephine snapped at me the moment I stepped into the first floor ward. I had forgotten her efficient and forceful personality, and I felt myself smile a bit as I followed her broad form to the delivery area at the back part of the ward. It was as if I had only missed one day’s work, as opposed to four months.

“I’m not terribly worried,” Josephine added quickly, the silver cross around her neck swinging ferociously as I hurried behind her to the curtained delivery area. “She delivered a large child last year with no difficulty. Still ... twins can be complicated.” She bit her lip.

“Of course,” I replied as we went behind the curtain. I had only seen two sets of twins delivered at Whitechapel Hospital in which both infants emerged healthily and without incident. But upon observing the patient and seeing that she was of a proper age to deliver—thirty-one—and apparently physically healthy—of good weight, with most of her teeth—my fears abated a bit. Her name was Fanny Brunson. As I read through Simon’s neatly written notes on her medical history, I saw that Josephine was indeed correct—the woman’s last delivery had been an easy one, and her child healthy.

I felt warmed when William stepped behind the curtain to aid in the delivery. Not wanting to agitate Grandmother during her illness, I had not invited William to our house. I had only seen him at stolen moments. We had had brief conversations at agreed-upon times while I walked her pug, Jupe, around our

Kensington neighborhood. I did get to visit him once, when I escaped Grandmother's home long enough to call upon Christina. But as it was high time for Grandmother to accept him as part of my life, I'd told him to come to the house for tea, on Thursday, before we left for the Morris household.

"Back in the land of the living, Abbie?" William asked with an arched eyebrow.

As I talked to him, I felt struck, once again, by his dark handsomeness—despite having known him for months now and even saving his life. Yet I hadn't seen him at the hospital in so long ... and I couldn't help but ponder, for a moment, how he looked like a portrait model rather than an overworked physician in an impoverished East End hospital.

As we talked, Simon entered the delivery area and I immediately felt a dull ache in my gut. Simon had visited Grandmother and me several times since Christmas, but he knew that I loved William. And I knew this was painful for him—particularly since he and William were far from friends. Even though they now directed Whitechapel Hospital together, I could sense the tension between them, and suspected that their working relationship was probably often difficult.

Josephine and the other nurses had left to locate supplies, leaving William, Simon, and me alone momentarily. William rinsed his hands in a lime chloride solution and began studying Simon's notes from Fanny's previous delivery.

"I have this one, Simon. But I think the nursery might need a Sunday School teacher. Or perhaps an exorcist, if those infants don't stop squalling."

Simon's lips remained in a thin, tight line. With his pale, handsome face, tall thin figure, and curly blond hair, he, like William, looked out of place. He seemed too ethereal, too lovely, to work in this place where we all smelled like carbolic acid, blood, and urine by the end of the day.

"This is a twin delivery, William. It would be wise to have two attending physicians."

"Yes, yes," William said irritably. "But you see, Miss ... " He peeked at the woman's chart. "Fanny Brunson has delivered a ten-pound child last year with ease. Twins, I am convinced, will not be a problem. And I have the excellent Miss Arabella Sharp—the future physician, bare-knuckle boxer, and skilled knife thrower—here, so I think everything should go swimmingly."

I was about to come to Simon's defense when a nurse entered with a tray of instruments.

Simon, his expression cool, nodded and left. The curtain rippled sharply behind him.

The infants came out with ease, but when Miss Brunson didn't expel the placenta, I saw William's brows furrow. He was a capable physician, but I'd worked with him long enough in deliveries and surgeries to know that he did not handle stress well. He grew impatient too quickly.

"Damn!" he cursed, then began to try to pull the placenta out himself. He should have known better than to try that.

"No, William," I whispered, so that Fanny would not hear us. She was exhausted after all the pushing and seemed to pay no attention to us. Nonetheless, I did not want to alarm her. "We should be patient, even if it takes time. I don't want her to bleed more, and there's an increased risk for puerperal fever if you pull the placenta out."

Fanny moaned as her contractions began again, and William's agitation increased even more. I remembered how agitated and depressed he had become when a young girl died after the caesarean he had performed upon her.

After several minutes, I decided that Fanny Brunson should be checked. I cleaned my hands and stepped in front of William, feeling inside her.

Simon must have heard William's loud cursing because he suddenly stepped into the curtained delivery area. "Aren't things going *swimmingly*?"

Before William could retort, I felt something and smiled.

Both William and Simon quieted and stared at me.

"Triplets."



When I finally had a break in the afternoon, I made my way up to the fourth floor to find a few stolen moments with William. I discovered that much was left unchanged since Dr. Bartlett and Dr. Buck had been there. The floor was still poorly lit, shadowed and stuffy. I tried to swallow my feelings of fear, of disgust—memories of the murders. Nonetheless, I felt myself tremble a bit as I walked down the fourth floor corridor.

"William," I said, knocking on the door that had once been the door to Robert

Buck's office. This was the office closest to the stairs. The door was already slightly ajar as I stepped inside. Although no one was in it, I saw that Simon now used the office. His desk had only a single book on it. I saw its title: *Neurypnology*. From the description under the title, it appeared to be a book on hypnosis and mesmerism, specifically something called hypnotherapy. *Curious*. I'd heard of hypnosis but did not know much about it, and I wondered what Simon's interest in it was. As I glanced about the room, I saw medical books, theology books, and several Greek Bibles lining the bookshelves. Robert Buck's taxidermied owl still peered down from a high shelf behind the desk. I felt the hairs on my neck prickle a bit.

Quickly, I continued to the end of the hall, to where Dr. Bartlett's office had been. William must have claimed that office for himself. I saw William's medical books, notebooks with his handwriting, and pens scattered about the desk. Julian Bartlett's small pedestal with the skull, that curious skull covered with pen-scratched notes, remained in the corner of the room. Again I felt myself unsettled. Wondering where William could be, I turned and saw that the large doors to the laboratory were slightly ajar.

Like the offices, the laboratory seemed very much the same. In spite of the fact that I wanted to erase the memory of the Conclave from my mind, I felt somewhat glad to see Dr. Buck's specimens still lining the shelves. All of his odd creatures in formaldehyde had always intrigued me. It was such an incredible collection. I let my eyes linger on the baby sting rays, the small sharks. A case of exotic insects. I frowned, suddenly remembering the more gruesome specimens he had kept in cases at the Montgomery Street house—the shrunken heads, the hair.

The pharmacy door in the laboratory was wide open, all of the medicines and herbal bottles stacked neatly as usual. William always insisted that it be kept orderly. I went into the side room with the tub. I hoped, as I opened the door to it, that William had had the decency to remove the picture—that little painting of the goblet with the Conclave's phrase across it: *A Posse Ad Esse*.

I entered the room.

No. The painting was still there, facing me.

Don't be foolish, Abbie, I heard myself say. *Face your fears*.

Walking over to the picture, I reached out. Gingerly, I touched it.

I hadn't had a vision since the autumn. But the moment my fingers touched the cheap wood frame of the painting, one came upon me like an electric current. I saw bubbles in the greenish depths of water somewhere. A creature, dragonlike, with a tail. Claws. In the murky water, I saw the creature's scaly haunches, thick and muscular like a lioness's, as my nostrils became overwhelmed with the smell of fish, of seaweed. The monster had hair, long hazelnut hair billowing out like burnt gold threads in the water. I saw the swift, fleshy movement of breasts.

I gasped, and the vision left me almost as soon as it appeared.

I stood there, shaking and reeling. Dizzied. I immediately thought of Rossetti's portrait of my mother. But this creature was certainly not my mother. The hair was different; I felt sure it was not her painted image come to life. But the being in the vision nevertheless seemed to be the mythological lamia—the exact creature Mother had portrayed.

Lamias were in fairy tales, in myths, in Rossetti's painting. They did not exist. Yet all of my visions, so far, had been of true events, of actual people.

The vision was baffling enough, but new thoughts now began to enter my mind. *Why did Max give me the portrait? Is there some kind of message in it?*

I felt hands upon my shoulders, then around my face. I whipped around.

"William! You frightened me."

But before I could say another word, his lips were upon mine. During the few times this year when I had met with William, it had always been in public places where we had very little time or opportunity for intimacy. Thus now, alone with William, uninterrupted, the disturbing vision melted from my consciousness as I surrendered myself to the kiss.

I fell deeper into the kiss, a melting heat building inside me. It had been too long since we had touched like this. My desire became almost overwhelming. Somehow, William untied my stained work pinafore, letting it slide away from my dress onto the floor. Then in a single movement he plucked the pins from my hair, and I felt it fall heavy around my shoulders.

My thoughts and senses became frenzied as I felt his fingers wrapped in the locks of my hair. His lips moved softly down my cheek, my neck, to the top button of my dress, which he began to unbutton. Vaguely, I thought I should be using better sense; still, in spite of this, I heard myself groan, softly.

Only Simon's footsteps entering the laboratory pulled me from my thoughts. The door to this closet was still open slightly. I hoped that he hadn't heard us.

He had.

The footsteps stopped abruptly just inside the laboratory. After a three-second pause, as I tried to quiet my breathing, I heard him turn and exit. In another moment, I heard the door of his office shut. Hard.

"William ..." I pushed him away from me, blushing as I pinned back my hair and tied my pinafore back on.

He sighed, his face flushed. He ran his fingers through his hair.

"I'm sorry," I stuttered. "I know we haven't had much time alone, but this is ..." I felt my cheeks grow fiery. "Moving far too swiftly to be rational."

He smirked. Unrepentant. I smiled and kissed him lightly.

"I need to return to work."

"Yes." He sighed again. Loudly this time. "I've got paperwork in my office." He pulled his pocket watch out and groaned. "And an old friend of ours, Inspector Abberline, will be paying Simon and me a visit this afternoon."

I had finished putting the last pin in my hair and tying my pinafore. "Why?"

William shrugged. "Actually, I'm not precisely certain. Perhaps about the Ripper murders. Still unsolved in his mind."

"Perhaps. But almost four months have elapsed since then." I felt an odd mix of amusement and pity, thinking of how the hard-working Inspector would never solve this case. Simultaneously, I also felt my general uneasiness—Max was still out there. Somewhere.

"Abberline came here a few times in January," William said. "But we haven't seen him lately. The timing is odd ..." His voice drained off a bit. As we left the laboratory, he

whispered, "So you still haven't heard from Max since the portrait delivery?"

"No."

He lowered his voice to a whisper. "And you have had no more ... visions?"

Josephine reached the top of the stairs in a fluster, wanting to speak to William about something. I felt relieved. The vision of the lamia made no sense. It did not seem to fit with the Conclave's history, or with my experiences with them. And yet, I had seen it when I touched the painting. But I felt ridiculous telling William about it now. So I welcomed Josephine's interruption.

As they proceeded down the corridor to his office, I paused at Simon's door—still shut. He was in there; I saw the lamplight stream out from under the door. I almost knocked. Oddly, I felt the urge to talk to him, before William, about the vision. I loved William, fiercely. Too fiercely. I bit my lip; certainly I loved him heedlessly. I felt myself blush, remembering how heated I'd become just now. But though I loved William, I knew I would feel more comfortable discussing the vision with Simon. I thought of how understanding he had been toward me when I first told him about my visions. Thinking of the book on his desk about hypnotherapy, I knew that Simon had more understanding of the mind's mysteries, of the esoteric.

But then I remembered hearing Simon's footsteps in the laboratory, knowing that he knew I was in there with William. I didn't love Simon, and yet, I admired him so intensely ... his compassion, even his guarded nature intrigued me. He was so lovely and enigmatic, and I often wanted to peek behind the veil of his thoughts. But I considered how sharply he had shut his office door. And the ache within me intensified, so I only paused, then continued to the stairs.

Three

On Thursday, William arrived promptly in the early evening for tea. I was hoping to kindly ease Grandmother into becoming comfortable with William, to seeing that he was not a laudanum-addicted rake like Dante Gabriel Rossetti had been. But the moment the three of us sat down in the parlor, I began to feel that I'd been wrong in assuming that this was a good idea.

Grandmother held Jupe tightly on her lap as she took tea with us, and her warmth toward William was more like an Arctic chill. I watched the clock—watched it tick away at an agonizingly slow pace. We only had fifteen more minutes to endure with her before we would depart for dinner at the Morris household. Grandmother kept asking William prying questions about his family. About his Italian relatives, the Polidoris. About his aunt, Christina Rossetti, and how she dealt with the “notoriety” of her great-uncle, John Polidori, the physician and vampire-book writer, and the scandals of her brother, Gabriel. I blushed in embarrassment and anger for Grandmother; it was beneath even her to be so rude. Yet William exceeded all my expectations in his patience with her, answering each time pleasantly and calmly.

The moment I had the opportunity, I changed the subject back to the present, to Whitechapel Hospital.

“William and Simon have the hospital functioning quite properly,” I said, stirring my tea.

Grandmother sighed. “Julian Bartlett’s death in that fire was so tragic. He was such a skilled physician, so charitable. And such a gentleman.”

William and I exchanged glances quickly. Although Grandmother knew of the fatal house fire on Montgomery Street, she, like everyone else in London, thought the house had burned to the ground in a grievous accident. Fortunately,

the fire had spread so rapidly, the flames had been so hot, that there was little but ashes left of the bodies of Julian Bartlett and his housemates—their cause of death appeared to be from the fire only.

If Grandmother only knew the truth behind Julian Bartlett’s “charitable” nature, about his feelings toward my mother. The silence in the room seemed roaring, but I did not know what to say as my thoughts turned again to Mother’s murder, back in Ireland. It had happened less than a year ago, but in some ways it felt like a lifetime.

William spoke first, setting his teacup down lightly in its saucer. “Yes, yes. It was tragic. Terrible. He was a wise instructor, and Simon and I are grateful to have had his guidance.”

Mercifully, the clock finally chimed six o’clock. Time to leave.

William and I walked arm in arm after the carriage let us out in the Hammersmith area. I had remained rather quiet during the ride. I felt bothered by Grandmother’s assumptions about William and his unstable family. I contemplated the numerous times before and during her illness that Grandmother had lectured me about them. She could not tell me anything that I did not already know; in actuality, I knew far more about the Rossetti family’s “falls” and eccentricities than she did. The fact remained, though, that I loved William. He did not seem to possess the same weaknesses as his father. For all of his failings, shortcomings, and faults, Gabriel Rossetti had been a good adoptive father to William. I frowned. Although Gabriel was my biological father, I had never met him.

As we walked, I noticed fondly the patches of daffodils just beginning to brighten gray-tinged London. The moon was a brilliant thumbprint in the sky. Still, the spring evening seemed extraordinarily chilly, and I clutched the collar of my coat tighter at my throat.

The sound of determined footsteps behind us startled me from my reveries, and I felt William tense beside me. I sucked in my breath and glanced behind us: a man in a coat, probably a solicitor or accountant on his way home from work, cast a bored glance in our direction before turning down a side street.

My fears spilled out in a whisper. “Max can’t be far, William. I know that he hasn’t given up. He’s lost the Conclave and the elixir. He cannot be immortal without it.”

Although I knew that the Conclave was gone, whenever I looked at my mother's portrait I felt the nagging sense that Max, the surviving member, must have had some reason to keep William, Simon, and me alive. He still needed something from us—or from me. I shook my head, desperate to dispel the thoughts. And now there was that odd vision of a lamia that had come to me when I'd touched the picture in the laboratory.

The evening chill had spread to my bones.

“With the exception of Max, the Conclave is no more, Abbie,” William said. “Simon and I have searched every crevice in the laboratory and offices at the hospital, and we went back to search the rubbish in the house ashes as well. They have left no secrets. Even my father's notes and Polidori's papers burned in the flames.”

“William, you say ‘with the exception of Max’ as if he's just a minor detail,” I pointed out. “He's the most dangerous one of the group. I don't wish to be too alarming, but wherever he is, he has not given up.”

We were approaching the Morris's doorstep.

“Have you had any more ... ” William's voice was barely audible.

“Visions ... ” I finished his sentence. I'd already decided that I was not yet ready to tell William of my latest vision. It seemed too out of place, too bizarre. I had to tell Simon first.

An unsettling feeling crept over me.

Quickly, I dropped my voice even lower: “Do Jane and William Morris know of the Conclave? None of the other Pre-Raphaelites, except for your father and Christina, knew of their existence. Am I correct?”

William shook his head. “My father was extraordinarily careful with the secret. Besides, Jane and William Morris are still alive, are they not?” He smiled darkly.

It was a good point.



I did not find Jane Burden Morris to be as extraordinary as William had portrayed her. It was true that her flaming red hair, made famous in her days as a portrait model, had only grayed a little, and she walked with the posture and strength of a much younger woman. She seemed well-read and articulate. But I

became disappointed with her during dinner; her aura of conceit came out forcefully, and I failed to see why she dazzled William so.

Also, I did not like the way she gazed upon me. Her expression, I sensed, was not entirely friendly. I knew that my mother, another muse for Gabriel, would have been Jane's romantic rival; I sensed that she suspected or perhaps knew the truth of my parentage.

The chill between Jane and her husband felt icy and overbearing. Her string of lovers in her long-loveless marriage had made him apathetic, even bitter toward her. Although the couple conversed comfortably, reminiscing on the past, Morris said next to nothing else. When he retired to bed as soon as he'd finished eating, I thought William and I would depart soon as well. However, William seemed in no hurry to leave, and I quickly found myself, William, and Jane sitting in the study with tea.

"Do you remember your father's pet wombats?" Jane asked William.

"How could I forget them? Those beasts had better places at the dinner table than I did."

During dinner, I had begun to feel rising irritation as Jane and William discussed Gabriel and the other Pre-Raphaelites, some of whom were still living. Though I had wanted to hear such stories, I sensed that Jane was determined to make me feel like an outsider. So by the time we were sitting in the study, I had stopped trying to participate in the conversation. Instead, I scanned the walls, which displayed many of Morris's sketches. Several were of buildings, often crumbling cathedrals. The bookcases were filled with volumes on subjects ranging from art, to architecture, to radical politics. William had once told me that while Jane was shut out from posh London circles due to her romantic affairs, Morris had been ousted as a result of his political beliefs.

I turned my attention back to William, where he sat by Jane across from me in the small parlor. I sighed in irritation, thinking that Jane's politically controversial husband seemed marginally more interesting than Jane herself.

The sigh was too audible. William looked at me sharply.

At that moment, a realization came upon me with the force of a storm wind. I scrutinized the scene before me slowly, carefully. I watched Jane Morris's hand rest on William's shoulder. It was a maternal gesture ... but not *entirely* maternal.

The truth suddenly became quite clear.

William instantly looked uncomfortable when he saw my expression.

I sat up in my seat suddenly, nearly slamming my teacup down in its saucer.

How could I have missed this?

Mentor. Friend in the years following Gabriel's death.

"Arabella, are you unwell?" Jane asked.

"Abbie!" William stood up and rushed toward me.

"We must leave," I replied curtly. "Thank you for dinner, but it is time for me to go home."

It was near ten o'clock when we abruptly left, and the night had gone from chilly to cold. A volcano of emotion erupted within me. Grandmother's warnings about the Pre-Raphaelites and their bohemian lifestyle flashed through my mind. Now, though, I actually gave weight to her words.

"Abbie ... what is the matter?" William asked. He could see that I was furious.

I ignored him and kept walking, too hurt and furious to speak.

After several blocks, I stopped and faced him. I could see my breath puff out in the air.

"You never told me."

He knew exactly to what I referred. Nevertheless, he stood silent, bewildered as to what he might say in these circumstances. I glared back at him for several more seconds. Then he spoke: "I did not think it was necessary. Why should I have told you? It was in the past."

"Tell me everything. Now."

He looked baffled. "You cannot expect"

"No, wait," I said quickly. "Don't."

I turned, walking quickly away from him, then stopped, facing him again. "No, do—I mean, not the details."

"It was a few years after my father's death. Both Jane and I grieved for him. I was nineteen, busy in my studies at Oxford. But I was lonely. I had only my aunt when I returned home."

My imagination became overwhelmed with images that I did not want to see. My mother had been far from conventional, and she had, unlike the manner of most mothers, never hesitated to tell me about basic life matters such as lovemaking.

“She’s old enough to be your mother!” I spat out. “And she was your father’s mistress. That’s revolting, William.”

“She was more experienced than I was at the time in such matters. You must understand, I was young—”

“Enough!” I yelled, cutting him off. “I’m going home.” I turned and began walking away. The tears warmed my face.

William rushed after me, panicked now.

“She is the only one I have been with.” He paused, blushing. “Other than Isabella, a friend’s sister, just after I returned to London from Oxford.”

“What?”

“But it was a brief affair. I had not yet met you.”

I had not even known William for an entire year, I reminded myself. I began to wonder if I had been mad for plunging headfirst into a relationship with a Rossetti. William’s unconventional deflowering bothered me. I worried that he might be more like his father than I had thought. And I could not stand the fact that he had known others in a way he had not known me. But then, how could I have been so naïve as to think that he had not? He was, after all, a man. Isabella, whomever she was, was forgivable. But the other affair ... with his father’s married mistress ... It seemed too much like something Gabriel Rossetti himself would do; it was so unorthodox, so bizarre. Furthermore, I felt such a jealousy toward Jane Morris. William had adored Jane almost as a mother, but now I knew that she had been more than that to him.

He laid his hand on my arm.

I shook him away. The shock of what I had discovered was still too much. I trembled in rage.

“I do not care how your father and his friends lived. I do not care even how my mother lived. But I am not going to remain with you only to end up, in thirty years, as Jane and William Morris are now.”

William looked as if I had struck him. “Why would you think we would be like that?”

Incensed, I continued, “But you have esteemed her so much in the past to me. And she is not only part of your past but part of your family’s history, beloved by your father. I can never be her, or live up to who you think she is, and you cannot love her or anyone else if you are going to be with me.”

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