

# The Household

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Stacey Halls was born in Lanchashire and worked as a journalist before her first novel *The Familiars* was published in 2019. *The Familiars* was the bestselling debut hardback novel of 2019, won a Betty Trask Award and was shortlisted for the British Book Awards Debut Book of the Year. *The Foundling*, her second, was a *Sunday Times* bestseller, as was her third, *Mrs England*. *Mrs England* was longlisted for the Portico Prize, the Walter Scott Prize and won the Women's Prize Futures Award. *The Household* is her fourth novel.

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*Also by Stacey Halls*

The Familiars  
The Foundling  
Mrs England

# The Household

STACEY HALLS

MANILLA  
PRESS

First published in the UK in 2024 by  
MANILLA PRESS  
An imprint of Zaffre Publishing Group  
A Bonnier Books UK company  
4th Floor, Victoria House, Bloomsbury Square,  
London, WC1B 4DA  
Owned by Bonnier Books  
Sveavägen 56, Stockholm, Sweden

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is  
available from the British Library.

Hardback ISBN: 978-1-83877-681-7

Export ISBN: 978-1-83877-848-4

*Also available as an ebook and an audiobook*

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Typeset in Dante by EnvyDesign Ltd  
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.



Manilla Press is an imprint of Zaffre Publishing Group  
A Bonnier Books UK company  
[www.bonnierbooks.co.uk](http://www.bonnierbooks.co.uk)

*For Keith*





Rising is a thing unknown. It cannot be. It is all descent.

*Lectures on Female Prostitution* (1842)

Ralph Wardlaw

There is a lady in this town who from the window of her house has seen such as you going past at night, and has felt her heart bleed at the sight. She is what is called a great lady, but she has looked after you with compassion as being of her own sex and nature, and the thought of such fallen women has troubled her in her bed. She has resolved to open at her own expense a place of refuge near London for a small number of females . . . and to make a HOME for them.

*Appeal to Fallen Women* (1847)

Charles Dickens

‘Martha wants,’ she said to Ham, ‘to go to London.’

‘Why to London?’ returned Ham.

They both spoke as if she were ill; in a soft, suppressed tone that was plainly heard, although it hardly rose above a whisper.

‘Better there than here,’ said a third voice aloud – Martha’s, though she did not move. ‘No one knows me there. Everybody knows me here.’

Then Martha arose, and gathering her shawl about her, covering her face with it, and weeping aloud, went slowly to the door. She stopped a moment before going out, as if she would have uttered something or turned back, but no word passed her lips. Making the same low, dreary, wretched moaning in her shawl, she went away.

*David Copperfield* (1849–1850)

Charles Dickens



# CHAPTER 1

## *The White Cockatoo*

Martha is quite alone in the house. Another girl, Mrs Holdsworth said at breakfast, will arrive before supper. It is a dull morning in mid-November, and she lights a lamp because she can. It whirs and spits as she carries it from room to room, familiarising herself with the layout of the house – or the cottage, as Mrs Holdsworth calls it, though there is little of a cottage's modesty about it. The rooms are large, the ceilings high and airy. The staircase has a smooth walnut handrail. Outside, there is a white-painted wash-house, a wide lawn and an orchard. The garden is dead and dreary. There are no dwellings either side, and beyond the back fence, a dozen cows graze placidly, paying no mind to the grey-brick house or its residents. In the distance, brickfields and nurseries mark the flat land like pox. Yesterday, on Martha's journey here, the early darkness acted as a blindfold. She has no idea where Shepherd's Bush is, only that London is near enough.

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Mrs Holdsworth has gone to the post office at the end of the lane. Martha heard the street door close, the key turn in the lock, the smart tread of her boots on the path. The sound is ordinary to her; she is quite used to being shut inside places. What she is not used to is the silence, for at the Magdalen Hospital, even the dead of night was broken with coughs and sniffs and sneezes, with bodies rearranging themselves. Here at Urania Cottage, the quiet descends like a woollen helmet. Things that ought not to make noise do: chairs creak; sashes shudder; candles sputter in the draughts. Martha cannot remember the last time she was absolutely alone, and finds herself unsettled by it.

She stands in the bedroom – *her* bedroom, which she will share with two others. The shades are down, and the dim lamp casts a gloomy pall over the furniture: brass beds, a shelf lined with books, a medicine cabinet and washstand. Beneath each of the beds is a brand-new chamber pot. The fireplace stands empty, to be used only in times of sickness, so the room is cold, but Martha does not notice. She puts her thumbnail to her teeth, as is her habit, and chews.

For the time being, Martha and Mrs Holdsworth, the matron, are the sole occupants, and last night passed an awkward evening in the parlour. Martha spent most of it letting down the nightdress Mrs Holdsworth gave her, and making a fine mess of it. She has always been poor at sewing, despite her mother's talent, and knows she must improve.

Mrs Holdsworth collected Martha herself from the Magdalen Hospital at Blackfriars, as though she were an important parcel. As they journeyed through the streets, London grew darker, like a great lamp turning down, and Martha was aware that a part of her life was ending, another beginning.

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She spent a year at the Magdalen laundry, washing, pressing, ironing, and the burns on her hands have faded to a tapestry of faint scars. The man who recruited her to Urania Cottage – Mr Dickens, who seemed to glimmer with the energy of a child – saw her hands and asked what she would make of becoming a servant. She replied that she was not afraid of labour and then somehow found herself revealing that it stilled her mind. He appeared to like this and made a note of it on pale-blue paper edged with gold.

The parlour is at the front of the house. Martha goes downstairs with her lamp and stands in the doorway, looking in. Richly furnished in shades of plum and grape, it is too grand a room to remain in for long without touching something. A crimson oilcloth covers the central table, and sermons are framed on the walls. It is rather a challenge to be left alone with all these luxuries: the calfskin books, the drawers groaning with silver plate, the snowy pillowcases. Martha finds herself obsessively assessing the value of things, for everything at Urania Cottage is brand new, from the wallpaper to the little pouches of dried lavender in the fresh pine drawers. Everything has its own distinct smell of wealth and promise.

A thought occurs: what if her first morning alone here is a test? The most dependable of people might be tempted to slip a candlestick up a sleeve. She shuts herself out of the room, polishing the door-knob with a handkerchief.

The night before, by the fire, after a quiet supper of chops and fried potatoes, Martha asked Mrs Holdsworth if she was allowed to write to her sisters. Her older sister, Mary, works as a pastry-cook in a shop near Oxford Street; her younger sister, Emily, is a housemaid in Reading, not far from where they grew up. She has not spoken to either of them in more than a

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year; at the Magdalen, she'd been too proud to send her address to Mary, too ashamed to share it with Emily.

'Of course,' Mrs Holdsworth replied, looking up from her mending. 'I ought to have told you sooner that you may write to whomever you wish, though all outgoing and incoming correspondence will be read by me. You may use the stationery in the dining room and ask me for stamps.'

Martha copied two identical notes, keeping them brief, and was purposefully vague about where she had lived for the last twelve months. If she had allowed herself to think about how concerned they might have been, how they might have tried to find her, she would have hesitated to write at all, and so she passed the notes to Mrs Holdsworth before she could change her mind.

She goes now to the kitchen, the humblest of all the rooms, and the one she feels most at home in. She pulls a chair from the large, scrubbed table and sits on her hands, looking into the larder, where the shelves are neatly ordered, stacked with clean new jars and pots not yet smeared with fingerprints. Beside the larder is the scullery, which is as cold as an icebox. Just outside the kitchen, in the hall, a door beneath the stairs leads to the cellar, where wine, beer and coal are kept. Mrs Holdsworth wears the keys like a talisman at her waist. Though Urania Cottage gives the appearance of an ordinary house, so much of it is fastened away from curious fingers: the linen cupboard, the stamps, the cellar. There are drawers that do not open, doors that remain locked. It reminds Martha of a doll's house, of a staged domestic life where, upon closer inspection, the fire is a pile of ribbons and the windows are pasted shut.

The house, she was promised, is the first clean page in a

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new book for girls like her, who wish to begin their lives again. Even now, Martha does not fully believe in such charity. There is bound to be a catch, a price she will be obliged to pay at some point.

Glancing around the kitchen at the china she unpacked last night, at the custard glasses and the meat screen, the new-fangled beetle-trap crouching like a toad beside the range, the row of neat aprons hanging like question marks on pegs, the sense of new beginnings, the pressure to succeed, threatens to overwhelm her. With nobody else here, she feels like a ghost.

She has the urge to make noise, to leave her mark on the house, to prove that she is real, if only to herself. Remembering the delivery from the grocer that is yet to be unpacked, she goes through to the scullery and draws from a box a small copper tea-kettle. An enormous cream dresser covers the wall behind the door, and she places the kettle in the centre of an empty shelf and stares at it. She takes it down again, wiping away the smears her fingers have made on the polished surface with her apron. Then she replaces it, wipes her fingers again, and begins stacking the jars.



In the first-floor drawing room of a large house off Piccadilly, a tall, exquisitely dressed woman places a porcelain cockatoo on a perch before the window and looks out at the bleak day.

In the park across the street, the trees are bare, but the thoroughfare below has no season. At midnight and high noon, in the dead of winter and the closed fist of summer, it is thronged with carts and carriages, animals and people. In France, she missed the clatter and peal of wheels and hooves, the proximity

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of life on the other side of the sash. She arrived home a little over an hour ago, and is still wearing the layer of grease and grime she has acquired from travelling.

‘Miss Angela,’ her companion, Hannah Brown, calls from the tiny sitting room next door, ‘Mr Faraday has invited you to be a dinner guest at the Royal Institute on Saturday week.’

The sitting room is Angela’s favourite in the house. The walls are lined with books, and from a gilt frame above the chimney-breast, her father gazes down as Mrs Brown works diligently through the piles of correspondence that arrived while they were away.

Mrs Brown calls again. ‘He would also be grateful for the recipe for Mrs Wild’s oyster and vermicelli soup.’

‘I should think Mrs Wild would be flattered to give it,’ Angela replies without moving from the vast window. The cockatoo was a present from a friend, and she uses it ironically to mark her comings and goings. Its presence on the perch signals that she is in London.

‘And St Stephen’s infant school should like to know if you might fund a magic lantern and slides for their New Year’s Day feast.’

‘I don’t see why not. Tell them yes.’

Angela watches the fluid street below. If London has a colour, she thinks, it is brown. Paris is pale grey.

‘Anything yet from the duke?’ she asks, trying to sound careless.

‘Not since Dover. Were you expecting something?’

The doorbell chimes in the depths of the hall.

‘No, no. I rather hoped – never mind. I ought to bathe. And you ought to rest.’

But she knows the older woman will not. Mrs Brown has



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been with her since Angela was a girl of thirteen, about to embark on her first tour with her mother. The three of them completed a circuitous route of Europe, absorbing paintings in Munich, sculptures in Lausanne and volcanoes in Naples. On her return to London two years later, Angela was barely recognisable from the reed-like creature who once sank into the upholstery in her mother's friends' drawing rooms. Almost two decades have since passed, and though Angela's lesson-books were given away long ago, Mrs Brown remains, with the addition of her husband, the retired doctor William Brown, who had accepted that Angela came like a dowry with his wife.

The Browns live in an apartment at the top of Angela's mansion on Stratton Street. They are more like devoted parents than servants, bickering in Angela's presence, and neglecting to tell one another all manner of things, but generally very agreeable to live with. Agreeable for Angela, at least, who is good-natured and attentive to their needs. Her own parents died nearly four years ago, and the Browns occupy the chasm they left quite comfortably. Dr Brown delivers letters for Angela and helps with the wine delivery. More often than not, he can be found wandering the shops off Regent Street, searching for a mechanism for his watch or dining with generals at his club. Mrs Brown spends most of her time with Angela. In another life, she might have been a tenant farmer, with her sturdy disposition, her flagrant disregard for weather and temperature. Her skill is containing and sealing off Angela's feelings, no matter how stormy. She is the thermometer to Angela's mercury.

When the Browns take the occasional trip without Angela, her home feels very empty indeed. It is far too large for one

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person, so she often fills it with friends and acquaintances and acquaintances of friends, and several times a week serves dinner for twelve. The bells are always ringing, the silver rotating, and the constant procession of boots have worn the steps smooth. The house, four storeys of brown brick with more windows than anybody might bother themselves to count, is like an extension of Piccadilly below it: a bustling inn on a busy highway.

The Stratton Street mansion was left to Angela by her grandmother, Lady St Albans, along with a sum so extraordinary the figures appeared at first glance to roll across the page like ball bearings. On a hot, dusty August day, Angela stood with her family in a darkened room in Furnival's Inn as her father's lawyer read the terms of Lady St Albans' will. Angela was made the sole heiress of her estate: a decision so controversial that the broadsheets fell over themselves to announce it. Her five older siblings received nothing, two aunts nought and her mother only a small amount, for Lady St Albans was Angela's grandfather's second wife and not a blood relation to the family. Nor was she accepted by them. Lady St Albans' desire was that Angela, the youngest bud on the family tree, received everything: half a million pounds, an income of fifty thousand a year, plus a half-share in the bank Coutts and Co., the family firm Angela's grandfather founded, not to mention all her jewellery, property, stocks, shares and securities. One condition of the will was that she take on her maternal grandfather's name, Coutts, becoming Angela Burdett-Coutts. As the years passed she found herself dropping the Burdett, for having had two names most of her life, three felt like too many to carry, and so she began dashing off her letters as Angela Coutts, and others followed suit.

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The newspapers screamed that the bequeathment made her the richest woman in London. An image was formed in her likeness, conjured from ink and paper: glamorous, attractive, dripping with diamonds, suitors falling at her feet. What they and the rest of the nation would not accept, though, was Angela as herself: sensible, private, entirely unostentatious. But mostly she was a young woman grieving for her grandmother, of whom she was dearly fond. The visits to Lady St Albans' country house at Highgate, where she kept pigs, and where at Christmas Angela would pick firs and holly from the garden; the trips to the coast, where they would take rooms overlooking the sea; the nights at the theatre; the horse rides on the heath – all of it had come to an end at the same time that Angela was forced to emerge into the public gaze, in which she had no interest, and which she would discover came with a heavy tax no banker's draft could resolve.

Angela adjusts the cockatoo and brushes an imaginary speck of dust from its tail. The maids have been in this morning, and the bird is immaculate. Sitting level with passing omnibuses, Angela often comes face to face with curious gazes peering through the dusty glass. On one occasion, a gentleman from Putney wrote to the mistress at Stratton Street to enquire of the bird's authenticity. He had a bet with his friend who thought it an ornament, and Angela was sorry to disappoint him.

'I think I'll have more coffee,' she says, too quietly for Mrs Brown to hear.

The older woman appears in the doorway, clutching a pale-blue letter. 'The house at Shepherd's Bush is finally ready, and Mr Dickens invites you to view it. He is "regretfully busy",' she reads aloud, 'but "trusts everything will be to your liking".'

'Perhaps I will visit this week. I'll take my bath now.'

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Mrs Brown retreats to the bureau beneath the window, and at the same time Stockton, the footman, appears in the drawing room. He performs a shallow bow and passes her a card.

‘Beg pardon, miss,’ he announces. ‘I told the gentleman you were resting but he insisted it was urgent.’

‘Parkinson,’ she says, taking up the card. ‘I wonder what he wants?’

But her body knows. A knot tightens somewhere inside her, and when Stockton leaves to fetch him, she automatically closes her eyes and breathes deeply. She hurries to the little sitting room.

‘Mr Parkinson is here. He told Stockton it was urgent,’ says Angela. It is all she needs to say.

‘We don’t know it concerns *him*,’ Mrs Brown returns with authority. ‘Every time the lawyer comes, you think it will be about that, and it almost never is. He likely has some papers for you.’

Angela glances at her father’s picture above the chimney-breast. She does not like the portrait, which is mostly darkness; he is almost in profile, with half his face in shadow, and she wills him to turn and look at her. Her mother she misses dearly, but there was something about being the youngest and a girl that made her feel like a Christmas present to her father. Her mother had the same smile for all her children; her father’s was especially for her.

Parkinson is waiting for them. A nondescript man, he might be anywhere between forty and sixty, and has barely aged in the years Angela has known him.

‘Miss Burdett-Coutts,’ he says, taking her hand in his. Parkinson is one of the few remaining people who call her by her full name, out of respect for her father, which she respects

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in him. 'Thank you for agreeing to see me. I trust your time in France was enjoyable?'

Angela withdraws her hand and pulls her mantle closer. 'Very, thank you, Mr Parkinson. The Jardin de Tuileries is beautiful in the frost.'

'Indeed. My sincerest apologies for calling so soon after you arrived home, but it is necessary for me to alert you to—'

'Has he been released?'

Parkinson's face darkens. 'I am afraid so.'

Angela straightens her sleeves and exhales through pursed lips. 'I felt it, as soon as I came back. I felt it.' She shoots a troubled look at Mrs Brown, who reaches for her as if she is a girl of thirteen again.

'I am sorry, dear.' Holding her tightly, Mrs Brown rubs Angela's arm before turning to face the lawyer. 'Do you know *why*, Parkinson? It is far too early, is it not?'

'Yes. He realised there was a chance of release if he claimed bankruptcy, and so he successfully petitioned the court. His pardon was granted at the beginning of the week.'

'This week! I wouldn't have come home if I knew. I would have stayed in France. When did you find out?'

'The chief commissioner delivered the news himself, not an hour ago, at the office. I came directly.'

Angela glances instinctively towards the window. 'When?' she asks.

'He will be freed from Clerkenwell prison in the morning.'

There is a heavy pause as they absorb this.

'Have you had any correspondence from him?' Parkinson asks.

Angela glances at Mrs Brown, who replies: 'Nothing for some months.'

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‘Do pass anything to me, Mrs Brown. He may enlighten us to his plans.’

‘He was supposed to have four years!’ Angela cries. ‘I cannot understand why they let him out again. How can the law serve him and not me, whom he lives to torment? How is it just, when his release makes me a prisoner?’

‘I am so very sorry, miss.’

‘I will never be free of him, will I, Parkinson? I cannot imagine a day when I will ever be rid of Richard Dunn.’

Mrs Brown clutches at her arm, her own cheeks indignantly pink as she shakes her head. ‘It isn’t right, you know. It isn’t right at all, how that man worms his way through loopholes and weaknesses. The law ought to be harder on him.’

‘I fully agree with you, Mrs Brown.’

Dr Brown appears at the drawing-room door. ‘What’s all this?’

‘Richard Dunn,’ Mrs Brown spits, ‘has been released from prison once again.’

‘No! It can’t be. Parkinson?’

‘I’m afraid Mrs Brown is correct.’

‘Then the law truly is an ass. My dear’ – he addresses Angela – ‘do not be disheartened. He shan’t come within ten yards of you if I have anything to do with it.’ He shifts his gaze to Parkinson. ‘Ballard will resume his post? I presume you have already sent for him?’

‘I shall send a note to the police station at once.’

‘You may write it here,’ the doctor commands. ‘And I shall take it to the station myself.’



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An hour later, in the bath, Angela washes herself unhappily as some of her most unpleasant memories come flooding back. This year marks not only a decade since her inheritance – a gift that came with a curse. Shortly after that hot day at Furnival's Inn, her father forwarded two letters from a man named Richard Dunn to Angela, which declared his love so freely that her father wrongly assumed she had found a lover. Bemused and even a little flattered, Angela presumed they had been written by a madman and forgot all about it.

Some weeks later, Angela went with Mrs Brown to take the waters at Harrogate. A day or so after they arrived, Angela found a calling card in her hotel room, and recognised the name instantly. She enquired with a porter and was thoroughly chilled to learn that Dunn had booked the room opposite hers.

It was then that their hellish game of cat and mouse began. A slim, tall, moderately successful barrister twenty or so years older than herself, Dunn was undeterred when Angela removed herself and her belongings from the Queen's Hotel and found rooms across town. Within an hour, another letter fluttered onto the doormat. She threw it on the fire and braved a walk through the mineral wells with Mrs Brown, but on their second circuit of the flower-beds, Dunn appeared at her elbow, and for the rest of her stay, not a day passed in which he did not make himself known.

The man was not discouraged by her coldness or the harsh manner she showed him, and so, not wanting to worry her parents, she wrote to Edward Marjoribanks, a senior partner at Coutts & Co. and a dear friend of her father's, who advised her to apply for protection from the local magistrate. A policeman, the dependable Ballard, was dispatched from London to the North Riding and, armed with the magistrate's

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warrant, arrested Dunn one cold, sunny morning in the street outside the house. Though it seemed a drastic step, she was relieved, for a part of her feared he would turn violent; there was something about his smooth, even-tempered exterior that deeply frightened her. She watched from an upper window as he cursed and swore at Ballard and, on seeing her, cried that she was a whore, shouting with such vitriol she was left trembling. The whole experience was so unpleasant that she did not stay in Yorkshire to see him fined.

But Dunn did not pay. Instead, he was sent to prison for a little over a month, during which time Angela returned to London and her parents. She was twenty-three years old.

Of course, Dunn did not dissolve away, as Angela had hoped. Shut inside her rooms in Harrogate, uneasy and frustrated at the disruption he had caused in her otherwise smooth life, she only ever imagined it was temporary. She could never have dreamt what would follow: a decade of looking over her shoulder, of fear pricking her skin.

Dunn's furious cries return to her whenever she throws his letters in the fire and watches them flare and curl. Parkinson has asked her to hand all correspondence to him, but she can barely stand to know that something Dunn has touched is in her house. Though left unopened, his letters call out to her with threat and malice, his words scored through the paper like scars.

The bath-water cools, and she forces her thoughts away from Dunn and instead thinks of the duke, who is at home in London. If Dunn is to be released tomorrow, she ought to visit her friend tonight, though her bones ache so, and no matter how much she soaps herself, she cannot clean the dusty road from her skin. It is already growing dark, and in the morning



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the doorbell will chime, and the little tray in the hall will fill with cards, and Richard Dunn will pass through the prison gates a free man, and turn his clear, steady gaze upon her.



At the Westminster House of Correction, almost as soon as the morning gun is fired, the door of cell number six bursts open.

‘Get up,’ barks the turnkey, an unpleasant woman with a perpetual grey sheen, like turned meat. ‘Tracey wants yer.’

It is an hour before dawn and very cold. In the top bunk, two girls rub their eyes and peer at the grim halo offered by the warden’s lamp. Josephine rises first, causing the damp chill of the cell to penetrate their woollen nest. Her bed-mate makes a noise of complaint.

‘Where’s the other’n?’ The turnkey stands on the threshold, her currant-like eyes narrowed beneath a grubby mobcap.

‘Here,’ Josephine replies through a great yawn, sliding her head down her shoulder to indicate Annie.

The turnkey lifts her head suspiciously but makes no effort to move further into the room. ‘Get up, the pair of yer. Tracey wants a word.’

Had the dismal wintry light risen with them, it would have revealed a brick room no larger than four feet by ten, with two slim beds stacked against the wall adjacent to the door. Below the window, which is covered with bars and set too high in the wall to look out, a low stool sits before a desk so frail it might as well be made from matchsticks. A Bible sits untouched on its surface. The desk is superfluous to Josephine and Annie’s needs; they are poor readers and even worse writers, and neither has been sent a scrap of mail.

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The two of them drop like stones from the top berth and put on their rough dresses and boots. The early hour and the darkness have stolen any curiosity about why the governor might like to see them. Silently, they follow the turnkey to the vast and empty oakum room, where in half an hour hundreds of women will sit side by side, picking tar-coated rope into threads.

Lanterns illuminate a curious scene. The prison governor, Augustus Tracey, a tall, slender man with silver hair piled like ashes on his head, is leaning against the platform with his long legs crossed. Before him, grouped on the first and second row of benches, are five of their fellow inmates, some of them known to Josephine and Annie. Barrels and baskets of rope crouch against the dark walls like stowaways. In the pre-dawn light, the scene appears not unlike a prayer group aboard a ship.

‘That be all, sir?’ asks the turnkey.

Tracey thanks her and she closes the great doors. In the passage beyond, the inmates can be heard shuffling to the washing cells.

‘Please,’ says Tracey, indicating that the new arrivals should take a seat on the low benches before him. Josephine sees the governor’s eyes flick to the thick scar that runs through both her lips towards her jawline. Just as quickly, he looks away. They settle closely beside a small, rickety-looking girl, and Tracey distributes a pile of papers, one to each of them. In the poor light, they peer and frown at the close print, and a rough voice speaks up from the front.

‘Can’t read, sir.’

The voice belongs to a young woman sitting on the front bench, whose reddish-gold hair frizzes beneath her cap.

‘Ah,’ said Tracey. ‘Thank you, Miss—’

‘Walker, sir.’

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‘Miss Walker. No matter. It was always my intention to read the address to you. These copies are for you to revisit in your free time.’

Josephine yawns and looks around at the painted iron pillars, at the misshapen baskets where endless serpents of rope await them. She is serving a sentence of six months, and in thirteen days will be released. This is her first time in prison, and she has not minded it, but only because of Annie. Quick, warm, brilliant Annie, with her soft hands, her giant, gentle heart, her slick tongue. Some stroke of divinity placed Josephine in Annie’s cell on that first morning, and though they didn’t meet until their work was completed and supper eaten in the chilly dining hall, by nightfall Josephine was in love. Annie seemed instantly like a friend, and from that day on they have barely been parted. For more than five months, they have worked, prayed, eaten and exercised beside one another, earning red stars for their diligence. At night, they share a bunk and cover each other’s mouths with their hands. At the close of the first week, they scratched their prison numbers into the brick where their mattress met the damp wall, and there they remain, inscribed forever.

The strength of her feeling is so that Josephine finds she does not want to rejoin the outside world. Beyond the safety of the prison walls lies chaos and threat. Here, they have everything they need; outside, they have nothing. Annie is due to be released in five days, but she has asked to stay so that she may leave with Josephine. As far as Josephine is concerned, she herself would stay another year, two, five, as long as she could be with Annie. Tothill Fields, or the Westminster House of Correction, is a dreadful place: biting cold in winter, stifling in summer. The gangs are as vicious as

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the rats that scurry through the airless corridors. The blankets are thin; the work is tedious and makes cat's meat of their hands. But they are able to sit close by one another, and in the silence, Josephine can daydream about what life will be like with her love. She would withstand all of it a thousand times over for Annie.

'Doubtless you are all intrigued as to why you've been summoned from your beds,' says Tracey over the sniffs and yawns. A pool of blank stares meet him; of course, he has never slept in a prison bed and supposes them comfortable enough to be summoned from.

'All of you are facing release in the coming weeks, and there is an opportunity, for those of you who are interested, for when that day arrives. A friend of mine has opened a house not far from here, for women like yourselves, who wish to continue their journey of repentance away from the situations and temptations they have left behind.'

In the pause that follows, one woman asks: 'What's repentance?'

With long fingers, Tracey shifts the lantern an inch away from him. 'Repentance? Ah, making amends.'

'Needlework?'

'No,' he says. 'The opportunity is a place within this house, not far from London, the purpose of which is to help women who have fallen. There, you will live in each other's company, train in service and eventually – eventually,' he repeats for emphasis, 'go abroad and begin new lives in a distant country.'

Half a dozen faces cloud with suspicion. 'You're transporting us?'

'No. No.' Tracey shakes his head, as if wondering how to begin again.

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‘What is it then?’

‘Listen carefully. You, the seven of you before me, are all in possession of red stars on your armbands.’

Several hands reach automatically to touch the crudely sewn patches that distinguish them from their cellmates.

‘You are good workers, and your behaviour sets you apart from your peers. You, above six hundred others who pass through here every year, have the potential to reform. You have the potential to change the direction of your lives. The virtuous inclinations within you have been noticed, not only by myself but by the wardens, and have elevated you to be chosen as candidates for this new venture. There is no cost to yourselves. There is only gain.’

‘But what is it?’ asks the first red-headed girl. ‘Not another prison?’

‘It is a home. A place of refuge. The sort of happy, comfortable place some of you may not have known in your short lives. I have been assured that, there, you will be treated with the utmost kindness. You will learn how to keep house, so that one day you may keep your own. You will learn many things it is good and useful to know. You will be trained for service, and once you have proved yourself in ways moral and practical, your passage will be paid to a new country as *émigrées*, not prisoners. You will enter this new land as free women, free to work, to marry, have families of your own. The possibilities are limitless.’

In the great dark room, the women are quiet and thoughtful. Josephine’s smallest finger finds Annie’s and curls around it.



## CHAPTER 2

### *The Oakum Room*

Jean Holdsworth shifts her basket onto her left arm to hold open the white-painted gate for the young woman following her. The girl looks much younger than she is and holds her shawl in a fist beneath her chin as if against the rain. Mrs Holdsworth, herself in her early fifties, is dressed in half-mourning.

In January, she will be able to put away the grey and lavender and return to ordinary colours, which now seem as unusual and garish as the garments the girls living at the cottage are expected to wear: raspberry poplin, lilac satin, bold checks in blues and greens. They seem to her more suited to a night at the theatre than a refuge for fallen women, too closely aligned with their pasts than their futures. The fabric has been bought from a draper in the Tottenham Court Road, and there is no mistaking the expense. She has raised her concern to the committee about what the girls might look like, trussed up in

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silks and satins with their plain faces and rough hands. What ideas, at the very least, would it give their neighbours?

But her worries have been dismissed. Not being one to take no for an answer, Mrs Holdsworth argued that the budget would be better served in the linen cupboards or even on a maid; for four pounds, they could have two young girls from the village do the laundry and cooking. When this was waved away, she played her final card and made the point that such expensive outfits might tempt the young thieves among them. But she swiftly learnt that the committee wish her to be forceful only with the residents.

The dresses are only part of her initial doubts. How the girls' religious needs are to be served has not yet been arranged. The committee has decided they will not leave the house for any reason, including to go to church, and so a chaplain will be found. Mrs Holdsworth mildly suggested that the girls, of whom she is in sole charge, might be liable to become flighty if they are obliged to stay indoors at all hours. She was then reassured that the girls will not *wish* to go outdoors with all the chores and lesson-books and sewing available to them, as well as the endless supply of coal. The committee is convinced that by simply removing them from the metropolis, with all its vices and opportunities for sin, the girls will transform as if by magic into meek, fluffy church mice.

Mrs Holdsworth asked if they would be permitted to exercise in the garden.

'Of course they may exercise in the garden!' somebody retorted. 'This is no prison.'

'Sirs, if you please,' said Mrs Holdsworth. 'There is a danger of the girls finding life here . . .' She groped about for an appropriate word and settled eventually on: 'dull.'



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‘My dear Mrs Holdsworth—’

‘Let her speak.’

‘I only mean to say that these girls will have only recently been awarded their liberty. They will come voluntarily, and to find their freedom restricted once again . . . it will be off-putting, to say the least. I can’t predict how many will remain if that is the case. In my opinion, I should be amazed if any last until Christmas.’

Her gentle Paisley burr allows her to tell the truth with minimal offence.

In late October, all but one member of the governors’ committee of Urania Cottage gathered around a polished table in the dining room at Devonshire Terrace, engulfed in a low-hanging fog of tobacco. As well as Mrs Holdsworth, the company comprised Mr Dickens, a clergyman, two prison governors, an educationalist and Dr Brown. Angela Burdett-Coutts, who had invited Mrs Holdsworth, was not present, and Mrs Holdsworth was mightily disappointed. She knew she ought to find comfort in the fact of there being another woman on the committee: a rare thing. But appealing directly to Miss Coutts is on a par with a lowly court official requesting an audience with the Queen. In the familiar masculine environment of whiskers and brandy, Mrs Holdsworth felt her old, tough skin form like a suit of armour. With the exception of the prison governors, not one of these men has actually worked in a prison or workhouse. Still, Mrs Holdsworth knows their type. In her working life, she has come across many boards and committees who are more familiar with the thick carpets and tobacco fug of board rooms than with the wards and sickrooms below.

For this situation, she left a good job as superintendent of

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the lying-in ward at Bridewell House of Correction. The position of matron at Urania Cottage was not one she found and applied for herself; she was invited to do so in a letter, written on pale-blue paper, handed to her personally by the governor at Bridewell, a man named Sharpe. Mr Dickens's note was flattering, but she was not overcome by it. Of course she was familiar with his novels, but she has no time for such things. He was a friend of Sharpe's, and after some gentle persuasion, she found herself in the governor's house, sitting across from them both. It appeared that Sharpe wished for her to take the job almost as much as his friend, and so she agreed, as to refuse would have felt like turning down a favour. And she was ready for a change of scenery, a change of routine. Since her husband died seven years before and she shut up the house at Greenwich, she has not stayed in a position longer than two years, and that time was approaching. A quiet house in the country, a small group of inmates, whom she would come to know intimately: it was just what she needed, though she knew the chaos and crush of the city prisons would call to her again.

On this November afternoon, she and the young woman bundle themselves inside the cottage, and she senses at once that the downstairs fires have gone out. She looks in the parlour and the dining-cum-schoolroom, then calls for Martha. A moment later, the tall young woman appears in the passage to the kitchen, looking stricken.

'Martha, have you not kept an eye on the fires? Don't tell me the range has gone out.'

Martha's face replies for her. Then she turns her quiet, grey gaze on the young woman standing in the gloom of the passageway, clutching her shawl.

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Mrs Holdsworth sighs. 'This is Polly. Polly, meet Martha, our first resident.'

The girls eye one another warily. Polly looks dreadful. Her dress is thin, the cuffs and collar frayed and worn, and the shawl wrapped around her shoulders offers little warmth. Violet smudges beneath her eyes make her appear very white, and her brown hair is dull and stringy. Mrs Holdsworth asks Martha to show Polly to her bedroom while she fetches her clothes and timetable, and the two girls go upstairs, Polly's canvas bag bouncing against her skirts.

The linen, outdoor clothes, bonnets and boots are kept locked in two large presses on the landing, for which Mrs Holdsworth keeps the key on a silk belt. Loading her arms with cotton and wool and taking a set of stays from the heap on the shelf, she is at once reminded of bones and the pork she has forgotten to order from the butcher. She thinks for the hundredth time how badly she needs a deputy.

In the back bedroom, Martha is sitting on her bed, Polly standing beside hers, still clutching her bag. Mrs Holdsworth sewed it at eleven o'clock the previous evening, having remembered a minute after blowing out her candle; she worked from her blankets with tired eyes.

There is an awkwardness between the two girls, with them being forbidden to discuss so many things: where they have come from, why they are here. What they have left. A dozen portcullises of conversation remain fastened, and effort must be made to find an opening. It will be easier, she thinks, when more arrive and there is no want of things to do.

'Here are towels, linen, an apron and a dress. You may adjust it after supper,' she says, passing the bundle to Polly, who reaches for it, her shabby sleeves rolling down to reveal

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yellowing bandages at each wrist, bronzed with rusty stains. Colour flares instantly up her neck, invading her cheeks. Martha turns respectfully away as Polly quickly covers her arms.

‘There is mutton broth on the stove,’ says Mrs Holdsworth, after a moment’s hesitation. ‘Martha, would you make the fires up again? And this time keep them burning.’



‘I been thinking, we could go hop-picking in the summer. I done it once with my cousin, years ago. Kent, it was. We walked from her house all the way there. Miles! We slept outside every night.’

They are walking around the prison yard in the rain. The prisoners are expected to exercise in all weathers, and are given no extra layers to do so, though the temperature is barely warmer indoors. The rain does not bother Josephine. Far worse is how, with no fire, their damp, chilly dresses never thoroughly dry, and by evening their very bones are cold.

Annie is not listening to her and says: ‘Australia sounds warm, don’t it? It has to be if it’s the other side of the world. Whatever we have, they have it upside-down. If it rains here, it’s sunny there.’

Since Governor Tracey told them of Urania Cottage the previous morning, it is all Annie has talked about. That night in bed, by the dying stub of a candle, she frowned at the close, black little words on the paper Tracey had given them, written by his friend, who had signed himself *their* friend. Neither she nor Josephine can read well, but she stared and stared anyway, as though if she peered hard enough, she would unlock the mystery of the words.

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‘I was talking about Kent, you goose,’ says Josephine.

‘I know you was,’ Annie replies. ‘It made me think of warm places.’

‘Kent ain’t that far away.’

They complete another circuit. Josephine knows that Annie wants them to go to the cottage, the home for fallen women. Is she a fallen woman? The term sounds to her quite grand. Each time Annie has talked of it, Josephine has gently steered the subject away to other avenues of possibility. She does not believe for a moment that the women who go to live at the house will have the same liberty as those who leave the prison. The place sounds to her like a no man’s land, a purgatory between the House of Correction and freedom. But Annie is interested, and there is something about this that worries Josephine. It is not the fact there will be other girls there or that it is outside of London; it is that they will not be able to be free with one another. Their love, a living thing, will have to be trapped like a mouse beneath a teacup for as long as they live in the house. This does not appear to have occurred to Annie.

‘I shouldn’t care to live anywhere but England,’ Josephine says.

‘Why not?’

‘Because you live here.’

That morning, at breakfast, Annie remarked that she had never left London. She asked Josephine about the places she had lived with her family. Her father was a gravedigger and the Nashes moved all over – Kensal Green and Norwood and Bow, close enough to not be true countryside, but quiet and dull all the same. Josephine answered honestly. She has no wish to leave London, which she feels is the very heart of the universe, where the gutters run with blood and the largest road is the

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river, teeming with life. The London she knows is so far from the damp stone cottages of her childhood, her father lying on the rag rug, mud crusting his fingernails, drinking stewed tea as the fire sank into itself. All her siblings are dead, picked off like coals collapsing into the grate. Her mother was gone long before them.

The city is cruel but not heartless; it always offers a step to sit on, a secret corner to tuck oneself inside. There are thousands of people working thousands of jobs, fine parks and wide streets in which rich and poor may walk side by side. In London, a cat may look on a king.

And Annie is a Londoner, born above a Soho pawnbroker's into the sort of large, loving family that Josephine envies. Annie's siblings scattered into service, labour, child-rearing. Her mother, a charwoman, was sick and lived with Annie's older sister Maud. Annie sent money when she could, but after a sizeable doctor's bill, she took it upon herself to relieve the household she worked for of a few items of laundry: a couple of chemises, a petticoat or two she did not think would be missed. They were. Mr and Mrs Howard of Charlotte Street attended the court hearing and watched passively from the gallery as their maid was sentenced to a nine-month term at the Westminster House of Correction. There was nobody to pay another doctor. Annie's mother died, and the family splintered like kindling.

'One thing about it,' says Annie, as though their conversation never ceased, and in a way it hasn't, 'is we wouldn't have to find board.'

Josephine hasn't thought of this and feels something inside her sit up. She accepts that their options, if they must be honourable, are limited. A laundry is the most likely place they will

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find work, though these days work is hard to come by. There are too many young women like them looking in the city and more arriving each day. Annie appears to have no knowledge of this, having been fortunate in her situations. Now, without a reference and with a mark against her character, she will no longer be welcome in the tall cream houses she'd come to know. If they find themselves in the laundries – Bethnal Green, perhaps, or Cambridge Heath – Josephine wonders how long Annie will tolerate the scalding and plunging, the steam and the sweat and the burns.

Later, when they lie in the top bunk, fitted snugly into one another, with the perilous slats cracking beneath them, something is troubling Josephine. 'I don't understand why we was chose,' she tells Annie, running a finger down the round of her cheek.

'Me neither,' says Annie.

'They must have been watching us close. I hope not too close,' Josephine adds wickedly. She pushes her nose into Annie's neck. Somehow she smells better than anything else.

'Twelve days,' she says when Annie is quiet. They are whispering, as talk is forbidden after lock-up. They have learnt to do everything quietly. Annie's hand finds hers in the dark.

'We must give Tracey our answer in the morning.'

Josephine says nothing. The letter Tracey read spoke of distant countries. The colonies, he called them. Not a single land but a group of them, further than the limits of their imaginations. It is like trying to picture a new colour.

'I think we do it, Jo. Together.'

'The bit about becoming the faithful wives of honest men ...' Josephine cannot keep the uncertainty from her voice.

'They can't force marriage on us. They can't force nothing

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on us. Where better to start again, Jo, but somewhere far, far away?’ She traces the outline of Josephine’s fingers. ‘How about I make you a promise? We don’t get on a ship nowhere unless you want to. And if you ain’t ever ready, we don’t go.’

Josephine is silent again, and Annie puts her face even closer, so that their foreheads are almost touching, and their breath becomes one.

‘If you don’t like it, we’ll come back to London. I think you will, though.’

Josephine frowns. ‘I don’t know why they chose Sarah Brigham,’ she says. ‘I should hate to live with her.’

Annie laughs. ‘She ain’t going – she told me so today. I don’t think none of them are.’

This only justifies Josephine’s reservations.

Sometimes she allows herself a fantasy: they are sitting either side of a fire on a wintry afternoon. The sky is darkening at the window, and Annie’s feet rest on Josephine’s lap as she hums tunelessly. The cottage they inhabit is a vague approximation of all the ones she has lived in, only this one is warm and well lit, with evidence of their life together all around it.

Annie waits in stillness, and finally, Josephine sighs.

‘Tell him yes.’

‘Really?’ Annie’s smile spreads through the darkness.

‘Yes. We’ll do it. We’ll go.’



As soon as they tell Tracey, everything happens quickly. There is a meeting at the governor’s house, an incongruous dwelling in the centre of the prison grounds, with winter pansies colouring the sills and a brass door-knocker that shines like a flame amid



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all the bleakness. Their first meeting, which they take together, is with Tracey and one of the founders of Urania Cottage, a slim and lively man named Mr Dickens. The second is a more intensive session alone with the same man.

Josephine answers his questions honestly. She is taken aback slightly at how interested he is in her past; her calm, dark gaze meets his levelly, though his eyes flick now and again to her scar. He writes everything she says on blue paper, and by the end of their session, his fingers are stained with ink. He speaks at length of the house, and it is as though he has dropped a picture into her mind, because she finds she is able to carry it from the room and examine it almost like a memory.

They are measured for new dresses and are told they will be met outside the prison on the day of their release. They are asked not to speak with anybody they might recognise at the gates or to tell anybody where they are going. At once, the days shorten; the hours spent working, in chapel, exercising, hurtle towards the unknowable. Josephine is more nervous than she cares to admit. There is a blank space in her mind where the future lies, and though she has little to keep her in England and everything to leave for, the finality of it all frightens her.

She is absorbed in her thoughts one morning in the oakum room, a few days before their release. By now, her hands work independently, though her skin weeps where the sores open day after day, and little blistery rashes come and go. Another thing she hasn't told Annie is that she has no desire to be a servant, no wish to make beds and cook meals all day long.

The benches in the oakum room have no backs and force the women's spines to curl like ammonites. Even at midday, the light is poor, clinging to the high and narrow windows as though clamouring to get back out. The air is thick

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with dust and tow from the ropes, floating in a haze before them. The new girls often cry when their necks hurt and their eyes sting. Most are there a week or two, then vanish; some are on their sixth, seventh, eighth term, as though Tothill Fields is a hotel they return to at leisure. Above the platform, a painted sign declares PRISONERS ARE NOT TO SPEAK TO EACH OTHER. The room is quiet but never silent, punctuated every few seconds with a sigh, a sneeze, a cough. Now it is November, the infirmary is full, and the morgue waits below like a baby bird with its beak open.

At the edge of Josephine's vision is a disturbance. A superintendent enters the room and speaks with a warden, who gets down from the wooden viewing platform and strides through the benches. Josephine returns to the junk gathered in her apron and is rearranging the hook tied above her knee when something makes her look up.

Blinking as dust settles in her eyes, she watches Annie rise from the bench behind, a dozen places to the left, and follow the warden to the front of the room. The brick floor is coated with fibres, and Josephine notices how they stir five, ten, fifteen yards in Annie's wake, whirring and pooling before her own feet. The superintendent is speaking in a low voice to Annie, who is nodding.

'Eyes down,' another matron barks in her direction, prowling the platform like a mastiff.

Josephine picks again at the junk in her lap, but her fingers look strange, as though they don't belong to her. She lowers her cap and sees Annie follow the warden to the large double doors leading to the corridor.

'I said eyes down.'

But Josephine is not listening, because at that moment

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Annie looks quickly back into the crowd of hunched women, indistinguishable in their blue and white dresses and mobcaps, and her eyes find Josephine's. Later, Josephine will replay this scene over and over, because she thinks she has seen uncertainty, even fear, in Annie's glance.

It is only much later that Josephine will realise it was neither of those, and that she didn't in fact know Annie Ledbury, prisoner 847, at all.



When the second pale-blue letter arrives at Stratton Street, Angela knows she must go to Shepherd's Bush. She has been home almost a week, and in that time has attended the theatre, an assembly, a dinner and a ball. Her sister Sophia has visited and she has paid a call on another sister, Clara. The bulk of the correspondence that missed her in Paris has been dealt with, friends' books she borrowed while travelling returned, and gifts distributed. When she is at home, she cannot sit for long; in bed, with the sheets warmed by the bed-pan, sleep eludes her.

She has let the cottage, with which she was so absorbed before her departure, sink into the silt of her mind. The girls have already begun arriving, and she has not seen the house in its full ensemble, with the windows dressed and the sheets pressed and on the beds. She has been putting it off and is too busy to examine why, though she knows that part of it is that, now it is finished, she does not really know what role she is to play there, other than as a sort of visitor. Behind the scenes, off stage, her contribution is clear: she pays for the groceries and medicine and linen and soap and all the other things

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that must be found in a household. She has no wish for the girls to feel awkward in her presence or for them to stop their duties in order to sit and drink tea with her. She does not know what topics they will discuss, cannot imagine what they could have in common. Far easier to sign a banker's draft and be done with it.

But of course, she cannot say any of this to her friend Charles without seeming unfeeling and ungracious, and so, go she must.

Angela and Mrs Brown bid good morning to Constable Ballard, who occupies his usual station atop the flight of stairs leading to the street door, and will accompany them to Middlesex. Ballard is a civil, ginger-whiskered man in his late forties; short in height, mild-mannered and with an air of gentility, though he was born a cobbler's son in Leicestershire. He has protected Angela at intervals over the years; bittersweet intervals, for she regrets the need of him but feels better when he is there.

In return for his protection she shows an interest in his life, and remembers to ask after his wife and three daughters, and even his two old cats, which were kittens when they met. It has been some time since he was here last, but the kitchen staff at Stratton Street remember how he likes his cocoa, and Mrs Wild the cook sends up warm bags of sand for his pockets. Ballard knows Dunn in every guise, and as long as he is here, Angela knows she is safe, though he does draw more attention to her home. Occasionally, passers-by ask what his business is at Stratton Street, imagining a scandalous crime has taken place.

It is a cold, pink morning when Angela sets out in the carriage with Mrs Brown and Ballard for Shepherd's Bush. The

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laurels in Kensington Gardens steam in the winter sunshine, and she finds herself sitting forwards, looking through the window at the torrent of faces passing by. Mrs Brown has brought a bag of nuts to crack and suck as they travel. When the carriage reaches the south side of Hyde Park and passes the cavalry barracks, where her father used to take her as a girl, Angela finally exhales.

When her father was alive, the whole unpleasant business with Dunn was nightmarish and yet bearable. He dealt with the lawyers; he squared with Dunn in the street; he kept the worst from her mother. It was he who accompanied her to the private chapel on Albemarle Street after Dunn followed her to St George's. It was he who insisted she have a senior footman shadow her wherever she went. At first she resisted, because it meant having to give up her walks in Kensington Gardens, where servants were not allowed. But her father was a force even Angela was occasionally intimidated by. For her twenty-sixth birthday, her parents took her to a hotel in Surrey, where on the Sunday morning, the footman recognised Dunn in the congregation. Wearing his Sunday best, her father pursued him down the aisle and away through parkland, returning to his wife and daughter breathless but victorious. They managed to laugh about it, and even Angela saw the humorous side when they recounted the tale to their friends. Her father somehow made Dunn seem more of a pest than a threat, like a fly or a roach he was more than capable of squashing.

For a long time, her parents were there to rouse her from the clammy, suffocating darkness that often descended upon her as easily as if she were a child writhing in her bedclothes, dreaming of monsters. Dunn's intrusion in her life was horrid,

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but they were there, stationed in the house on St James's Place, not five minutes' walk from her home.

Then, just as suddenly, they were not. Her mother went first, her father a little over a week later. On the day of their joint funeral, St James turned black, as if a snowstorm of soot had landed on every brim and collar. The loss of her mother had been dreadful, but her father going so soon afterwards was a shock she has still not come to terms with. She wishes she had told him how badly she needed him to stay alive for her. She wishes he could know that she has not married, because it would be like settling for a tin necklace, when diamonds is all she has known. Part of her still feels to blame for not sitting every minute at his bedside as he slowly starved himself through grief over her mother, for not trying hard enough with the porridge and cream. He could never resist her tantrums; if she had shown him one, he might have been sitting in his chair by the fire instead of hanging above it, wearing a distant smile.

Since her protector deserted her, Dunn has loomed larger than ever, and now she must face him alone.

The carriage finally gathers speed on Kensington Gore, and Angela settles back in her seat, finding a stray nut shell beneath her heel and grinding it into the floor.



Her first impression of Urania Cottage is that it is a rather dull suburban villa. Its size is adequate for a modest family, but Angela cannot see how a dozen girls plus a matron will live here. A low-pitched, hipped roof sits beneath a flat, grey sky, and above the front door a semicircular fan-light sends a dim glow into the pale morning. The flower-beds beneath the downstairs

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windows lie bare and lifeless, and there are no friendly lamps or faces at the windows. One of the upstairs sashes is open, and she gazes up for a moment as smoke unwinds from a chimney. A more ordinary home it could not be, but she supposes this was a considered choice by her friend Charles, who is the most thorough and deliberate man she has ever met.

‘Good morning, Miss Coutts, Mrs Brown,’ says Mrs Holdsworth, opening the street door wide. ‘And who is this?’

Angela blinks. ‘This is Constable Ballard. He is accompanying me on a business matter. He will remain outside the house, if that is agreeable to you.’

Mrs Holdsworth frowns. ‘I’m afraid it isn’t,’ she says. ‘A constable standing on the doorstep will attract the wrong attention. You may come inside, sir.’

‘But surely nobody comes down this lane?’

Mrs Holdsworth says nothing, and Angela sighs.

‘Very well. Ballard, could you wait in the carriage? I shan’t be too long.’

The man gives a single nod and goes back through the gate.

Mrs Holdsworth lets them in, already weary, as though she might ask Angela and Mrs Brown to mind the girls while she does something more valuable with her time. There are three of them in the house now, and Angela is introduced to them in the kitchen as they prepare the tea-tray to take into the parlour. They, too, are pinched-looking and tired, smudged with coal and smeared with flour. They barely greet her, glancing at where she stands in the doorway before resuming their task, as though she is only the knife-grinder. There is an unmistakeable tension in the air.

Mrs Holdsworth asks her to lead the way back to the parlour and tells her in the gloomy passage that a girl left them that

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morning after breakfast. She had arrived only two nights ago and said that she found the house too quiet, the work too dull.

Angela is astonished. 'Too dull? Did she not know what she would find here?'

'I believe she did,' Mrs Holdsworth replies, directing Angela to a chair before the hearth. 'And of course, she did not really give it any time at all. She was on laundry duty yesterday, and I did explain to her that she wouldn't be doing it every day and that work is done on a rota, but of course she wasn't interested and went on her merry way.'

'Where did she go?' Angela asks as the other girls drift in with the tea things.

'She said she has an aunt in Lee Green.'

'How very concerning,' says Mrs Brown.

Angela finds herself a little in awe of Mrs Holdsworth, who she knows has worked in men's prisons as well as women's. She reminds Angela of a governess her sisters used to have, who was too formidable for them to even complain about in private.

Mrs Holdsworth pours the tea, and the girls arrange themselves. Their posture is poor, their gazes direct, even brazen, like cats, Angela thinks. After a moment or two of silence, Angela realises she is expected to speak.

'I hope you are all settling in well,' she says, but it comes out flat and insincere. She notices how unafraid they are. They are unafraid to assess every inch of her, from her rabbit-fur boots to the patches of eczema that have stained her neck most of her life. Angela puts a hand to it automatically and withdraws it again.

She has not asked a question, and so nobody speaks. One of the girls appears brighter and more alert than the others, who



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seem rather squalid, particularly the small girl with the bandaged wrists and violet shadows beneath her eyes. All of them share a wariness that Angela doubts will ever leave them, no matter how skilled they become at baking soufflés and getting stains out of tablecloths.

‘How do you like life at Urania Cottage?’ She directs the question at the bright one, who is regarding her with warm grey eyes.

‘I like it very much, miss,’ she replies.

‘And what is your name?’

‘Martha.’

‘You were the first to arrive?’

‘Yes, miss.’

Mrs Holdsworth stifles a yawn, catches Mrs Brown’s eye and gives an appeasing smile. The house, Angela notices, is spotless.

‘Mrs Holdsworth, you used to work at a prison,’ Angela says.

‘I did.’

Interest stirs among the girls.

‘My father was a passionate reformer of the prisons. You must find it very different here.’

‘I am familiar with your father’s admirable work,’ Mrs Holdsworth replies. ‘I confess that I—’

A distinct hammering at the door. A beat of silence as all the women in the room, in an unguarded moment of curiosity, look at one another.

Mrs Holdsworth gets quickly to her feet, and they all wait for voices in the hall. Within seconds, there is a squawk of protest, Martha’s name is called, and into the room bursts a young woman.

She is two- or three-and-twenty, plainly dressed, with Martha’s nose. Her cheeks burn red with cold. Martha leaps

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from her chair. In a blur of skirts and arms, the two women are embracing with such urgency and passion the women seated cannot help but be moved by it.

‘Mary! Oh, Mary.’ Martha wipes her face and embraces the other girl again.

‘Oh, Martha! You – oh, I could turn the air blue. Where have you *been*? Oh, you *goose*.’ She holds Martha before her at arm’s length and crushes her once more. ‘I could strike you. I ought to strike you.’

The newcomer is entirely unaware of present company; it is as though she and Martha are the only two in the room. Mrs Holdsworth has followed Mary into the parlour like a storm-cloud and closes the door firmly, as though to avoid disturbing the rest of the empty house.

‘Who on earth do you call yourself, and what on earth do you make of barging in here?’ she demands, barely concealing her rage.

‘Oh,’ says Mary, noticing for the first time the astonished little group assembled on chairs. ‘Have I come at a bad time? I’m Martha’s sister. I got her letter, and so I came.’

‘I shouldn’t care if you were the Queen of Sheba. You’ll not come marching in here without an invitation.’

‘But I was invited. At least, Martha told me where she was. Oh, Martha, I thought it couldn’t be real. Let me look at you.’

‘I am sorry, Miss Coutts,’ Mrs Holdsworth says, though Angela is amused, and Mrs Brown appears delighted.

‘A happy reunion!’ Mrs Brown brings her hands together. ‘Have the two of you been apart for long?’

‘More than a year,’ says Martha.

The older girl cannot remove her eyes or her hands from her sister. ‘I thought you were dead, Martha, I really did.’

## THE HOUSEHOLD

‘No, only – well,’ says Martha, ‘never mind all that. I’m here now.’

‘I’m so glad you wrote. There’s so much to tell you. Well, only one thing that matters, really – sorry, would you mind if I sat a moment? Thank you, thank you.’ She takes the seat Mrs Holdsworth has vacated, unties the strings of her bonnet and throws it back as the others look on in astonishment.

Mrs Holdsworth is incredulous. ‘Well, if you are staying, I suppose I’ll fetch further refreshment. Miss Coutts, I apologise sincerely for the—’

Angela puts up a gloved hand. ‘We must make the young lady comfortable.’

Oblivious to them both, Mary reaches again for Martha’s hands. ‘Oh, Martha, it’s really you.’

‘It is really me. I wrote to Emily as well,’ Martha goes on. ‘Is she well, do you know?’

‘Oh, Martha, I don’t know how to say it.’

There is the faintest tinkle of china as Angela sets down her saucer. Martha’s features transform from joy to alarm. ‘What is it, Mary?’

Mary places her elbows on her knees and her face in her hands. Just as quickly, she recovers herself and sits up straight, rearranging her expression and looking determinedly at Martha.

‘She disappeared, too. At the start of this year, she just—’ Mary holds up her hands. ‘She left the house she was working at, gave no address, told no one where she was going. She didn’t write to me, and we didn’t know where you were, so she couldn’t have told you either. I haven’t heard from her since February.’

There is a heavy silence, broken only by the pop and click of the fire, which is struggling in Martha’s neglect.

## STACEY HALLS

‘Well, where could she be?’ Martha asks.

The others turn in unison to Mary, like faces in a broken mirror.

‘I don’t know,’ says Mary, pained. ‘She’s vanished. I can’t tell you how dreadful it’s been for me this year, with both of you gone and me not knowing where to find you.’

‘I’m sorry, Mary.’

‘It’s a good thing Mama isn’t here. I never thought I’d say it, but it’s true. She’d skin me for not looking after you two.’

‘How can you say such a thing? You mustn’t blame yourself, especially not on my account. What happened was no one’s fault.’

‘Well, I do. I ought to have kept the family together. Besides, what did happen? Thank you,’ Mary says, accepting a cup of tea from Mrs Holdsworth, who appears to have warmed slightly towards her. ‘What is this place?’ She looks about at the room, the other girls.

‘It’s a home for girls who have fallen on hard times,’ says Mrs Holdsworth.

Mary looks at her sister with true compassion and takes her hand. ‘And where were you before?’

‘One of our rules at Urania Cottage is to never disclose personal histories,’ Mrs Holdsworth cuts in. ‘The rule does not extend to family members; however, I’ll thank you not to talk about it in front of the others. You’ll have many things to discuss, I’m sure, and I can loan you the use of the dining room next door for the purpose, if Miss Coutts has no objection.’ She glances at Angela in the easy chair.

‘Of course not, Mrs Holdsworth.’

Mrs Holdsworth nods, then turns to the sisters. ‘I’ll remind you, though, Martha, that private conversations with family

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members are not permitted at Urania Cottage, and I'm obliged to chaperone. You may have half an hour, and then I'm afraid I must get on. Mary, you're welcome to stay for dinner. Lucinda is making a warm white soup. Miss Coutts, Mrs Brown, perhaps you would do the honour of joining us? Or might you prefer to dine when the girls are more established in their culinary skills?'

Angela smiles. 'Thank you, Mrs Holdsworth. We'd like very much to stay.'