

ST. JOHN' S WOOD, LONDON,  
1840

From within the depths of a restless dream, Evangeline heard a knocking. She opened her eyes. Silence. Then, more insistent: *rapraprap*.

Thin light from the small window high above her bed cut across the floor. She felt a surge of panic: she must have slept through the morning bell.

She never slept through the morning bell.

Sitting up, she felt woozy. She leaned back against her pillow. "Just a minute." Her mouth filled with saliva and she swallowed it.

"The children are waiting!" The scullery maid's voice rang with indignation.

"What time is it, Agnes?"

"Half nine!"

Sitting up again, Evangeline pushed back the covers. Bile rose in her throat, and this time she couldn't keep it down; she leaned over and vomited on the pine floor.

The knob turned and the door swung open. She looked up helplessly as Agnes twitched her nose and frowned at the



viscous yellow splatter at her feet. “Give me a minute. Please.”  
Evangeline wiped her mouth on her sleeve.

Agnes didn’t move. “Did ye eat something strange?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Feverish?”

Evangeline pressed her hand against her forehead. Cool and clammy. She shook her head.

“Been feeling poorly?”

“Not until this morning.”

“Hmm.” Agnes pursed her lips.

“I’m all right, I’m just—” Evangeline felt a roiling in her gut. She swallowed hard.

“Clearly you’re not. I’ll inform Mrs. Whitstone there’ll be no lessons today.” With a curt nod, Agnes turned to leave, then paused, narrowing her eyes in the direction of the chest of drawers.

Evangeline followed her gaze. On the top, beside an oval mirror, a ruby gemstone ring glowed in the sunlight, staining the white handkerchief it lay on a deep red.

Her heart clenched. She’d been admiring the ring by the light of a candle the night before and had stupidly forgotten to put it away.

“Where’d ye get that?” Agnes asked.

“It was . . . a gift.”

“Who from?”

“A family member.”

“*Your* family?” Agnes knew full well that Evangeline had





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no family. She'd only applied to be a governess because she had nowhere else to turn.

"It was . . . an heirloom."

"I've never seen ye wear it."

Evangeline put her feet on the floor. "For goodness' sake. I don't have much occasion, do I?" she said, attempting to sound brusque. "Now, will you leave me be? I'm perfectly fine. I'll meet the children in the library in a quarter of an hour."

Agnes gave her a steady look. Then she left the room, pulling the door shut behind her.

Later Evangeline would replay this moment in her head a dozen ways—what she might have said or done to throw Agnes off the trail. It probably wouldn't have mattered. Agnes had never liked her. Only a few years older than Evangeline, she'd been in service to the Whitstones for nearly a decade and lorded her institutional knowledge over Evangeline with supercilious condescension. She was always chiding her for not knowing the rules or grasping how things worked. When Evangeline confided in the assistant butler, her one ally in the household, that she didn't understand Agnes's palpable contempt, he shook his head. "Come now. Don't be naive. Until you arrived, she was the only eligible lass in the place. Now you're the one drawing all the attention—including from the young master himself. Who used to flirt with Agnes, or so she believed. And on top of that, your job is soft."

"It isn't!"

"It's not like hers, though, is it? Scrubbing linens with lye





and emptying chamberpots from dawn till dusk. You're paid for your brains, not your back. No surprise she's tetchy."

Evangeline rose from her bed, and, carefully stepping around the puddle, went to the chest of drawers. Picking up the ruby ring, she held it to the window, noting with dismay how it caught and refracted the light. She glanced around the room. Where could she hide it? Under the mattress? Inside her pillowcase? Opening the bottom drawer, she slipped the ring into the pocket of an old dress tucked beneath some newer ones.

At least Agnes hadn't noticed the white handkerchief under the ring, with Cecil's cursive initials—*C. F. W.* for Cecil Frederic Whitstone—and the distinctive family crest embroidered onto a corner. Evangeline tucked the handkerchief in the waistband of her undergarments and went about cleaning up the mess.

**Mrs. Whitstone materialized** in the library while the children were taking turns reading aloud from a primer. They looked up in surprise. It wasn't like their mother to show up unannounced during their lessons.

"Miss Stokes," she said in an unusually high-handed tone, "please conclude the lesson as expediently as you can and meet me in the drawing room. Ned, Beatrice—Mrs. Grimsby has prepared a special pudding. As soon as you are done you may make your way to the kitchen."

The children exchanged curious glances.

"But Miss Stokes always takes us downstairs for tea," Ned said.





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His mother gave him a thin smile. "I am quite sure you can find the way on your own."

"Are we being punished?" Ned asked.

"Certainly not."

"Is Miss Stokes?" Beatrice asked.

"What a ridiculous question."

Evangeline felt a tingle of dread.

"Did Mrs. Grimsby make a sponge cake?"

"You'll find out soon enough."

Mrs. Whitstone left the library. Evangeline took a deep breath. "Let's finish this section, shall we?" she said, but her heart wasn't in it, and anyway the children were distracted, thinking about the cake. When Ned reached the end of his singsongy recitation of a paragraph about boating, she smiled and said, "All right, children, that's enough. You may run along to your tea."

There it was: the ruby ring, sparkling in the glow of the whale-oil lamps in the gloomy drawing room. Mrs. Whitstone held it out in front of her like a treasure-hunt find. "Where did you get this?"

Evangeline twisted the corner of her apron, an old habit from childhood. "I didn't steal it, if that's your implication."

"I'm not implying anything. I'm asking a question."

Evangeline heard a noise behind her and turned, startled at the sight of a constable standing in the shadows behind a chair. His moustache drooped. He wore a black fitted waistcoat and





a truncheon in a holster; in his hands were a notebook and pencil.

“Sir,” she said, curtsying slightly. Her heart was beating so loudly she feared he could hear it.

He inclined his head, marking something in the notebook.

“This ring was found in your possession,” Mrs. Whitstone said.

“You—you went into my room.”

“You are in the employ of this household. It is not your room.”

Evangeline had no answer to that.

“Agnes spied it on the dresser when she went to check on you. As you know. And then you hid it.” Holding up the ring again, Mrs. Whitstone looked past Evangeline toward the constable. “This ring is my husband’s property.”

“It isn’t. It belongs to Cecil,” Evangeline blurted.

The constable looked back and forth between the two women. “Cecil?”

Mrs. Whitstone gave Evangeline a sharp look. “The younger Mr. Whitstone. My stepson.”

“Would you agree that this is your stepson’s ring?” His moustache twitched under his bulbous nose when he spoke.

With a pinched smile, Mrs. Whitstone said, “It belonged to my husband’s mother. There is a question, perhaps, about whether the ring now belongs to my husband or to his son. It most certainly does not belong to Miss Stokes.”

“He gave it to me,” Evangeline said.





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Only a few days earlier, Cecil had pulled a small blue velvet box from his pocket and rested it on her knee. “Open it.”

She’d looked at him in surprise. A ring box. Could it be? Impossible, of course, and yet . . . She allowed herself a small surge of hope. Wasn’t he always telling her that she was more beautiful, more charming, cleverer than any woman in his circle? Wasn’t he always saying that he didn’t give a fig about his family’s expectations for him or society’s silly moral judgments?

When she’d opened the lid, her breath caught in her throat: a band of gold, ornately filigreed, rose in four curved prongs to support a deep red stone.

“My grandmother’s ruby,” he told her. “She bequeathed it to me when she died.”

“Oh, Cecil. It’s stunning. But are you—”

“Oh, no, no! Let’s not get ahead of ourselves,” he’d said with a small laugh. “For now, just seeing it on your finger is enough.”

When he extracted the ring from its slot in the cushion and slipped it onto her finger, the gesture had felt both thrillingly intimate and strangely constricting. She’d never worn one before; her father, a vicar, did not believe in adornments. Gently Cecil bent his head to her hand and kissed it. Then he snapped shut the velvet box, slipped it back into the pocket of his waistcoat, and withdrew a white handkerchief. “Tuck the ring into this and hide it away until I return from holiday. It will be our secret.”

Now, in the drawing room with the constable, Mrs. Whitstone snorted. “That’s ridiculous. Why in the world would Cecil ever give you . . .” Her voice trailed off. She stared at Evangeline.





Evangeline realized that she had said too much. *It will be our secret.* But Cecil wasn't here. She felt desperate, trapped.

And now, in defending herself, she had given away the real secret.

"Where is the younger Mr. Whitstone now?" the constable asked.

"Abroad," said Mrs. Whitstone, at the same time that Evangeline said, "Venice."

"An attempt could be made to contact him," the constable said. "Do you have an address?"

Mrs. Whitstone shook her head. "That will not be necessary." Crossing her arms, she said, "It's obvious the girl is lying."

The constable raised an eyebrow. "Is there a history of lying?"

"I have no idea. Miss Stokes has only been with us a few months."

"Five," Evangeline said. Summoning her strength, she turned to face the constable. "I've done my best to educate Mrs. Whitstone's children and help shape their moral character. I've never been accused of anything."

Mrs. Whitstone gave a dry little laugh. "So she says."

"Easy enough to find out," the constable said.

"I did not steal the ring," Evangeline said. "I swear it."

The constable tapped the notebook with his pencil. "Noted."

Mrs. Whitstone gave Evangeline a cold, appraising look. "The truth is, I've had my suspicions about this girl for some time. She comes and goes at odd hours of the day and night. She's secretive. The housemaids find her aloof. And now we







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know why. She stole a family heirloom and thought she would get away with it.”

“Would you be willing to testify to that effect?”

“Certainly.”

Evangeline’s stomach dropped. “Please,” she begged the constable, “could we wait for Cecil’s return?”

Mrs. Whitstone turned on her with a scowl. “I will not tolerate this inappropriate familiarity. He is Mr. Whitstone to you.”

The constable twitched his moustache. “I believe I have what I need, Miss Stokes. You may go. I’ve a few more questions for the lady of the house.”

Evangeline looked from one to the other. Mrs. Whitstone raised her chin. “Wait in your room. I’ll send someone for you presently.”

