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FALLEN WOMEN

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## ABSTRACT

Many know of Florence Nightingale as The Lady with the Lamp, a heroic nurse who took care of wounded soldiers during the Crimean War in the 1850s. Nightingale was not only lauded for her hospital reform but also coined the founder of modern nursing. However, what is not widely known is Nightingale's fight against the Contagious Diseases Act of 1864. The Contagious Diseases Act was passed by Parliament in England in 1864 and had alterations and editions in 1866 and 1869. This Act allowed police officers to arrest women believed to be prostitutes without any form of evidence or testimony. Officers took women off the streets in the name of public health, believing that their actions would address the outbreak of venereal diseases spreading throughout the country. Once arrested, the women underwent a compulsory examination by medical professionals, a process likened to instrumental rape. If determined to be infected, the women either were forced to be kept in lock hospitals (institutions meant solely for treating venereal diseases) or, if they refused to be hospitalized, were jailed. Florence Nightingale fought against the unjust nature of the legislation, believing that it unfairly targeted and treated women. Nightingale joined forces with other Victorian feminists, including Josephine Butler and Harriet Martineau, who also argued that women were not given a voice as to whether they should be treated or not. This novella tells the story of Nightingale's struggle against the Contagious Diseases Act, its proponents, and the strict society that disapproved of her association with England's fallen women.

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Finally, I dedicate this novella to Florence Nightingale, Josephine Butler, Harriet Martineau and all the feminists who fought against this legislation. I also dedicate this to the "fallen women" who were ignored, mistreated, and abused throughout Victorian England. I sincerely hope this novella succeeds in telling the story of their struggle.

## Part 1

London 1864

I stare at their unblinking eyes. I notice their fingernails caked with mud and grime. I notice their hair filled with lice and encrusted with dust. I notice their feet bleeding and calloused. I notice many things about these girls.

But their eyes do not glisten in the candlelight. They do not flit from one item to the next with curiosity. They are not bright like children's but dull and lifeless. They are downcast, their lids barely open. The eyes stare at their muddy, frostbitten feet as if they can only focus on what they know, what is familiar. The eyes burst with despair, revealing wild and desperate souls.

I stand in the corner of the lock hospital around midnight. The night shift sleepily moves forward. The nurses do not scurry but shift their feet noiselessly. I follow patients with my eyes, waiting for something to happen. I hear the eerie sound of the wind rattling the windows and it puts me on edge like no amount of blood or bone can.

Then I hear the door open, creaking slowly. A girl trudges in staggering, filthy, swaying gently as if hearing imaginary music. My head snaps to attention. I watch her try to catch herself against the wall before her legs fail her. Before I can reach her, she falls to the floor, whimpering softly upon feeling the cold floor on her cheek.

"I need assistance," I order, feeling my voice echo against the walls. Women in beds strain to see, and nurses drop the sheets, water, and clothes they are carrying.

Upon seeing me, the young woman takes my hand. Her eyes are faint blue, bloodshot. I feel her hot and sweaty hand in mine, and I see large bald patches on her scalp. She tries to speak but can only croak in pain and fever.

“We’re going to help you,” I whisper, turning to a nurse near me. “Get her to a bed.”

A frail nurse with a gaping mouth flits over to me with a panicked expression. She helps me pick up the young woman but with shaking hands and wide eyes. She has never handled a woman of this kind. My eyes narrow, and I hiss,

“Help me get her to a bed *now*.”

We clasp the girl to our sides, ignoring the fierce stench that attacks our nostrils. The girl’s feet drag across the floor, toenails scraping against the wood.

“Lay her down. Gently. Gently now.”

The girl sighs as we lower her head gently onto a pillow. I look her up and down and decide she can’t be more than sixteen. Her matted blonde hair clings to her neck and back. I appraise her clothes, which are sullied beyond repair and feel grimy to the touch. I feel her forehead and quickly withdraw my hand.

“What is your name, child?” I whisper, sitting on the edge of the bed.

She doesn’t answer but whimpers, shrinks away from my hand, and draws herself into a ball like a dying stray on the side of the road. I grab a towel on the bedside table and dab her forehead gently.

“I need you to tell me where it hurts,” I whisper, lowering myself closely to her ear.

She peers at me with eyes encrusted with yellow. She appraises me, wondering if I can be trusted. Then she shows me her hands, extending them up to my face as if I can heal them with the grace of God. They are swollen, covered in a rash I have seen too many times on these girls.

“I’m going to undress you,” I whisper soothingly.

She flinches as I take the bottom of her dress and lift it to reveal her bare feet. I cover my mouth as I look at swollen feet covered in throbbing ulcers. The ulcers have spread down her legs from her groin. My eyes skim over the tree limb ankles and bony knees that are dotted with little red splotches. I turn to the nurse beside me who is cowering in fear from the girl.

“Get the iodine,” I whisper to her. “It’s syphilis.”

The nurse stares at the girl’s legs with wide eyes but soon darts down the corridor. No one wants to handle these girls. No one. I place the girl’s dress down over her feet and cover her shaking body with a blanket. Muscle spasms and joint pain have set in.

After a short while, the girl shifts toward me, propping herself up with a shaking arm. I lean toward her, pick her up in my arms, and hold her as if she is my own child. She strains to speak, croaking softly.

“What do you need, child?”

Her croaking turns into sobbing and I realize that she knows.

“I will stay with you,” I whisper. “I promise. Until the end.”

She stares into my eyes and, with quivering lips, groans, “Pray to God that you will never be in this much pain.”

She falls, shaking in my arms, and gives some muffled sobs, burying her dirty face into my bosom. I glance around at the other girls who are staring at her with hollowed eyes and blank faces. They could easily have the same fate. They cry for their children at home and for themselves. They shudder at their past deeds underneath wool blankets and dirty clothes. They sink into restless sleep on our cots. And I can do nothing for them but hold them in my arms and pray.

I glance down at the poor creature in my arms. I am shaking as well.

“Oh, my girl,” I whisper. “God is far more merciful than any human creature ever was or can ever imagine.”

Soon the girl sinks into feverish sleep, and I stay with her for precisely four hours. I watch as her eyelids flutter before she gives a quiet sigh, sinking into my arms. She’s gone.

*“Florence, don’t do this to your family. Don’t do this to me. To us.”*

*I sank into my grandmother’s armchair, feeling my resolve drip from me slowly with each utterance from my mother. But I had to make them understand.*

*“You’re abandoning everything. There is no place for a woman in work. Your place is in the home. Your place is with a husband. You cannot leave. Your father and I forbid it.”*

*My hands gripped the fine red fabric underneath my short, neat nails.*

*“Be reasonable, Flo,” Parthenope states. “A woman in your position cannot be a nurse. A woman such as you cannot be expected to mingle with the kinds of people in those hospitals.”*

*She also did not understand.*

*“How will you raise your children?” my mother continued. “How will you serve Him?”*

*I suddenly felt a wave of courage compel me to look into my mother’s eyes.*

*“I intend to serve with all my heart. But I will serve Him how I feel I am being led to serve Him,” I whispered.*

*Parthenope looked away, unable to understand what I meant. My mother gasped and looked near faint.*

*“How?” she stammered. “How will you do that?”*

*At her indignation, I could not remain paralyzed. Without realizing, my legs carried me from the chair and stood strong, knees locked, unwavering in their support.*

*“I will serve Him by helping others. I will help soldiers and children and...”*

*I paused and observed my mother’s burning cheeks and my sister’s pale complexion. I looked at my father who stood gazing into the fireplace with his hand on the mantel as if using it to support his faltering spirit. He could not even look at me. I breathed in deeply for support, willing God to give me the strength to speak the truth.*

*“Women. I will serve Him by helping women.”*

Young couples scurry across the flooding streets, clutching black umbrellas to shield them from the pounding rain. I stare at what looks to be a sea of floating black clouds from the second floor of my hotel. I exhale slowly, watching my breath make obscure shapes on the window. Harriet Martineau sits at a table, sipping her tea quietly, waiting for me. Her graying hair rests perfectly on her head. She sits with such impeccable posture that it is as if she hasn’t suffered from cancer.

“Thank you for coming to visit me, Harriet.”

She smiles warmly.

“I have been quite worried about you, dear. You sounded very forlorn in your last letter.”

I nod curtly, impatient to mention my work.

“I’ve been working in Middlesex Hospital,” I admit.

“The lock hospital?”

I step away from the window and lower myself into a chair with a heavy sigh.

“It is difficult to say the least.”

“You’re doing the Lord’s work, my dear.”

I feel uncomfortable looking into Harriet’s eyes, uncertain whether to continue talking or not. I try desperately to think of a way to describe my patients in a favorable light, how best to introduce these women to her.

“What can you do for them?” she asks.

I look away quickly. The air is heavy with silence. I feel her unwavering gaze on my face. She knows the answer to her own question.

“It depends how far along they are in the disease,” I begin after a while. “They are expected to stay in the lock hospital until they’re cured. And they cannot leave under any circumstances.”

“Do men stay in the lock hospital?” she asks.

“Rarely. But men are not asked to stay in the asylum.”

“I thought that was the case.”

She takes a small sip of her tea.

“And how long do the women stay in the asylum?” she continues.

“The minimum amount of time for the asylum is two years,” I explain. “They must follow a strict regimen of moral reformation. But some women cannot stay away from their children for that long. Some girls are even found to be with child and are not accepted into the hospital or the asylum at all.”

“Then no one is helped.”

I glance at her with a smile.

“I merely meant...if they are forced into the asylum for moral reasons but they’re leaving their children to starve....”

“I completely agree, Harriet. I completely agree.”

Harriet coughs delicately.

“There’s some news I would like to discuss with you,” she announces. “It involves a bill that has recently been printed and is being prepared to enter the House.”

I raise my eyebrows. I have never been particularly interested in politics and neither has Harriet.

“A bill?”

“A most ridiculous set of proposals.”

“Regarding?”

Harriet takes a collection of papers from her purse and slowly pushes them across the table toward me. I pick them up gingerly and read the title.

“A Bill for the Prevention of Contagious Diseases?” I whisper, confused.

“I suggest you read it.”

*I sat across from my sister in her home. She glared at me with a face fierce with rage. She had demanded to see me once she heard I was working in the hospital.*

*“I know how people see them,” I continued. “I know people think they are dirty, sinful creatures.”*

*“And they are right,” my sister snapped.*

*My eyes narrowed at her.*

*“They might be sinful. But they are women. They are human beings such as we are.”*

*“Florence.”*

*She paused and sipped her tea loudly, filling the silence with noise instead of engaging in conversation. After a moment, she stopped and stared at me coldly.*

*“They are fallen women,” she stated firmly. “They are beyond your help.”*

*“I know what they are,” I snapped back. “But trying to save the victims of venereal diseases both morally and physically is not open to discussion.”*

*Parthenope merely shook her head. She did not understand. She had married, raised children, engaged with society, done what was expected of her. She did not live with the grime and the filth of the streets. With iodine solutions, ulcers, and turpentine bandages. With crying eyes and dying mothers.*

*She sighed heavily before continuing.*

*“I understand, Florence. I understand ever since you came back from the war that you’ve been dedicated to helping the poor. But why must you work with those kinds of women?”*

*“Because they are the women who need me most. They are the ones working in the mud. They are the ones who are lost. They need me,” I seethed.*

*Parthenope sighed and refused to discuss the topic further. She knew I was beyond persuasion. We sat across from one another, contemplating the other’s life and wondering how the other person could possibly enjoy such a trapped, miserable existence.*

*“This is outrageous.”*

*“Miss Nightingale...”*

*“Simply outrageous.”*

*“You must calm yourself.”*

*I turn to face Colonel Verney, knowing I must describe the issue at hand.*

“Colonel Verney, you don’t understand. This proposed Act is simply ridiculous. The whole female population of the towns at the mercy of the police, and with nothing but a pecuniary compensation for a mistake,” I spit. “I’m disgusted that the House would even suggest such a thing.”

“What exactly is the Act meant to do?” he calmly asks, seating himself in an armchair. “Explain simply.”

“It concerns the port towns of Portsmouth, Chatham, Plymouth, Aldershot, Devonport, Woolwich, and Sheerness.”

“And the legislation only affects those locations?”

“Currently, yes. It is meant to be a preventative measure against venereal diseases.”

He raises his greying eyebrows.

“But?”

I grip the edge of the armchair across from him.

“The Act explicitly states that any woman thought to be a prostitute can be brought before the justice of the peace and forced to undergo a medical exam for venereal diseases against her will.”

He stares at the papers at the table with a perplexed look.

“It states they can simply take young women off the streets?”

“Yes.”

“And then what?”

“A physician is meant to do the examination and if the woman is found to be diseased she is forced to remain in a lock hospital until cured. If she refuses, she is forced to go to jail for a number of months.”

The colonel stares at the Act, fingering its thin pages with his thumb in a lifeless motion. He seems to be transfixed by the texture and not my words.

“It sounds like it is simply meant to take diseased women off the street,” he states plainly.

I stand erect, eyes narrowed.

“And what of the woman’s children if she has any?” I demand. “What of the family she has waiting for her? Waiting for her to provide for them? What of them if she is forced to stay in a hospital or worse thrown into prison?”

“The state...”

“Will not take care of them, Colonel Verney. And what if she is not a prostitute?” I demand.

“Pardon?”

“This Act is meant for prostitutes but it does not discriminate against the common woman who might be on the street during their searches. Any woman could be thought to be a common prostitute and subjected to these tests against her will. The fact of the matter is that these women are not allowed under the law to say no. They are not given the privilege of refusing to be violated by a stranger’s hands, looking for signs of sin.”

I step toward the window, staring out onto the London streets. Rainy and busy as always with beggar children scurrying under wagons to stay dry and policemen walking with an air of importance.

“I will not even begin to discuss the startling fact that men are never subjected to this kind of humiliation,” I whisper to myself.

It is obvious to me. It is obvious that these women could be beaten, dragged, and forced off the streets like common strays because of their occupation. Better yet, because of their sex.

“Miss Nightingale. I will help you with your cause,” Colonel Verney announces, slamming the papers on the table and rising to stand. “However, I will not make a public announcement.”

“I welcome any help I can.”

I sigh in relief, allowing my temper to simmer.

“Harriet and I are at a loss for how to gather support.”

“I understand.”

I glance at the man in front of me, suddenly aware that he’s become a Baron.

“I’m sorry for your loss, Colonel. I’m very sorry I didn’t say anything before. I was too preoccupied with my own affairs.”

He smiles kindly.

“Thank you for your concern. My father was a good man. And I will miss him dearly. He would, of course, want me to support this kind of legislation. But, I’m afraid I shall disappoint him yet again. Even when he’s safe in his grave.”

I sense a gnawing feeling in my chest, recognizing the familiar and persistent feeling of disappointing others.

“I hope you know how much your support means to me.”

The Colonel bows slightly.

“Of course, Miss Nightingale. Anything for my sister-in-law. You know, ever since you came back from Crimea, you’ve been the talk of London. The people admire you. They call you a war hero.”

“I don’t particularly agree with them,” I admit curtly, reaching for my teacup.

“No. No, of course you don’t.”

*The hospital tent smelled of dried blood, sweat, and diarrhea. Groans and whimpers could be heard throughout the tent even when the rain drummed outside loudly. Men were lying on the hard ground, on cots, against each others' backs, trying to rest in vain. I rushed around with the other nurses aware of how the soldiers' eyes would follow us, urgently waiting for assistance. There were so many of them who needed water, clean clothes, a bed, food, and comfort.*

*I remember looking into their eyes, filled with pain and homesickness. They longed to depart from the Crimean peninsula and forget this war. Forget they were even fighting in it. Run to their mothers or wives and rest until they could forget that they had killed other beings.*

*Some men had bullet holes on limbs that would inevitably be amputated. There were some with bodies bruised from running from the enemy or crawling on the frostbitten ground. But many of them had contracted syphilis. They were curling into balls on the ground and making themselves smaller as if doing so would make the pain not viciously attack them. They had ulcers covering their body, attacking their mouth, eyes, and noses, but wanting no one to look at them to inspect the most severe areas. They had all been to the local whorehouses, desperate for warmth and affection. They were bored and desperate for smiling faces that they then could pretend to love. But then they came back with these rashes and obvious signs of sin, ignoring the inevitable future that awaited them.*

*"Ma'am."*

*I turned from my post near the door to face one of the nurses I had brought with me to the peninsula. Annie was her name.*

*"Yes, what is it?"*

*“It’s Miss Abigail, Ma’am.”*

*I followed her outside to the nurses’ tent. Ten nurses were huddled outside, ignoring the pouring rain that soaked their shoes and uniforms.*

*“Move aside, ladies,” I ordered.*

*They stared at me with frightened eyes and slack jaws. I brushed some of them aside to reveal Abigail Dobson, lying on the ground smiling in an intoxicated stupor.*

*“Miss Nightingale...psssss....so good...so good to pssss...see you....out and about,” she slurred.*

*She tried to raise herself to a seated position but her weak arms could not support her, and she sank into the mud pitifully. Her clothes were soaked through and there was mud dripping from her entire left side, assaulting her hair and face. She had no shoes or socks.*

*“Get her up,” I snapped.*

*The other nurses hurriedly took her arms and picked her up from the ground.*

*“Abigail Dobson,” I hissed.*

*She laughed loudly, suddenly unaware of my presence or of the arms holding her.*

*“Miss Dobson, you are hereby released from your position. You will be sent back to England immediately, along with the other nurses.”*

*Again, she laughed and remained blissfully unaware of her situation.*

*“Get her to her tent. And pack her belongings. She leaves in two days.”*

*I turned away and marched through the mud, feeling the water invade my boots and sully the only pair of warm stockings I had in my possession. I returned to the sick tent as Annie followed me, tugging at my uniform.*

*“Ma’am.”*

*I snapped my head around to glare at her.*

*“Ma’am,” she whimpered. “Will Abigail really be sent ‘ome, Ma’am?”*

*“She and the other nurses. This is the last time. I now have to dismiss twelve out of the original sixty-eight nurses for this cursed habit.”*

*“Ma’am, it can’t be ‘er fault, ma’am. She just misses ‘ome is all.”*

*“I don’t care if she hasn’t seen her family in the past ten years let alone the last nine months,” I snapped. “There are soldiers dying from bullet wounds and saber cuts and diseases of all kinds. I cannot have innocent lives being ignored and forced to suffer because a nurse can’t stay away from the drink.”*

*I ran into the tent, again surveying the soldiers in front of me. Night was falling and a working nurse quickly gave me a lamp.*

*“Time for rounds, ma’am.”*

*I walked between the rows of cots, looking at the suffering who were awake in their beds. As I tugged at blankets and reassured desperate souls, I felt a familiar flame. I felt it heat my palms and reassure my legs to stay strong throughout the night. It seeped into my head, fueled my stride, and reinforced my importance to these suffering men.*

## Part 2

London, 1866

“A second Act has been proposed. An extension of the already existing legislation.”

Mist caresses our faces as we tread down the London streets. Our unprotected hands become chilled and our cheeks burn from the roaring winds. Expanding puddles penetrate our boots and infest our socks with dampness and cold. Harriet looks to me with eyes narrowed and nose wrinkled as if she smells something foul lingering on the streets.

“An extension?” she asks. “Into London?”

“It was enacted months ago.”

I hurry ahead of her, yearning to get off the streets and into the hospital.

“So now women can be taken off the street here as well?” she demands.

“It would seem so.”

As we walk underneath a painfully grey sky, I know we have seen little to no progress concerning the Contagious Diseases Act. I know I have also grown tired, angry, and spiteful in my old age. A cough ravages my lungs, forcing me to stay home rather than venture out and see my patients. My bones creak like brittle twigs beneath my sagging skin and layered clothes. I can no longer ignore the raspy breaths that escape my mouth or the chest pains that disturb my sleep. Illness waited for me, relishing its capacity to shrink my drive and ability.

“We need people to understand what this means,” I cough.

“Maybe people will begin to care now that it has spread to London.”

“One can only hope.”

“I must thank you again, Florence. I’ve always been keen to see the kind of work you do in the ward.”

“I’m more than happy to allow you into the hospital. Girls come in here frequently. Very sick girls. We examine them and try to comfort them as best we can.”

Harriet mutters under her breath as water begins to pool in her boots and creep up her skirts.

“What of the police?” she asks, pulling her shawl closer to her face.

“We do not turn them into the authorities. I refuse to punish them for their sins in any way.”

We arrive at the hospital as soon as the mist turns into spitting rain, spattering our faces and forcing us to wrap our shawls tighter around our hunched shoulders. As we step through the doorway, frantic hands reach for my clothes, pulling me into the ward. I do not see people but rather screaming mouths with fast lips and clicking tongues. Eyes white with desperation stare at me, pleading for my assistance. Indistinguishable shouting and hysterical shrieks drown any calm voices or sensible explanations. Then a strong nurse pushes through the mass, grabbing my wrist with a firm grip. Her name is Mary, and I see her burning red hair float toward me before I even hear her shrill, Birmingham accent.

“Ma’am, you’re needed in the ward,” she yells. “A girl has been attacked.”

I turn toward Harriet, her face white. I grab her hand, pulling her with me through the crowd of fearful faces and frantic hands. We hurry through the ward as curious patients cautiously peer from beneath bed sheets. Nurses scurry to get work done amongst the

commotion, ignoring the gaggle forming around a single bed in the corner. Ladies curiously mutter amongst themselves, surveying whatever lies in the bed beneath them. Howls and wails come from the cot and I see a frail creature burying her face in her white, frostbitten fingers. She is curling into a ball as if trying to disappear from the nurses' gaze. She screams whenever someone tries to touch her as if their fingers are hot prongs. The more the nurses try to console her, the louder her wailing becomes. Her voice rises and falls with each failed attempt at soothing her as if she is warning us that her shame and pain are infectious. Some nurses begin to leave her bed, covering their ears and shaking their heads.

“What happened?” I shout against her screaming.

Mary is at my side immediately.

“She said she was attacked, ma'am. She won't let anybody touch her though. I think she's in shock.”

“Do we know who attacked her?”

“She said a doctor did.”

“A doctor?”

I see a stream of red coming down her legs and feet, clinging to her body like bloody vines, staining the white sheet beneath her. I push the nurses away.

“Everyone, away this instant. Busy yourself with other duties. Mary, get her some water and a towel. Everyone else step aside.”

I sit down on the side of the bed, ignoring the poor thing's wails and shrieks. Harriet stands by my side, probably disturbed by the sight. I wait for the girl's cries and moans to die down. I do not touch her but let her lungs carry her sorrow throughout the ward. After about an hour, she starts moaning quietly to herself, shaking her head in her hands and letting her tears

paint splotches onto the sullied sheet beneath her. Her body begins to shake. When her wails die down, her moaning becomes hushed. I place my hand on her shoulder slowly. She shudders at my touch but does not move away.

“Child,” I whisper. “I’m here to help you. In order to see if you’re well, I need to examine you.”

She does not reply but continues to whimper and shake. She refuses to open her eyes. Her strong lungs that have made echoing sobs down the corridor now seem weary.

I gently lift her skirt. The dried and cracked blood on her clothes breaks into red flecks that dot the sheet, and I instinctively hold my breath as I smell her body.

“I lost it,” she whispers. “I lost it. I lost it. I lost it.”

The flesh between her thighs is bloody and mutilated as if someone inexpertly inserted something sharp inside of her. She has no undergarments but I can see scrapes and cuts on her inner thighs. I lower her skirts slowly.

“Harriet, please get me the constable,” I whisper, turning around to face her.

“Of course, Florence. Of course.”

Harriet scurries away with shaking palms and a white face.

The girl repeats the same words underneath her breath quietly to herself. I sit down on the bed, rubbing her back gently. Her watering, brown eyes peer at me from underneath hands smeared with grease and coal dust.

“A man wid tools. ‘E say ‘e was a doctor,” she whispers.

“What kind of doctor?”

She shakes her head.

“A constable took me off the street. Pulled me ‘air. Told me I be thrown in a cell if I din listen to ‘im and do what ‘e say,” she sniffles. “I went to a ‘ospital. And they ‘eld down me ankles.”

She wails again, newly resurfacing anguish flooding her.

“I fainted, miss,” she cries. “I fainted as soon as it ‘appened. An’ now is gone.”

*I was running down Baker Street, feeling curious gazes follow me. Children wailed and mothers shouted. Faces black with soot stared at me from puddles and gaping doorways. Drunken bodies sagged against walls to steady themselves. Women with open corsets pulled at men with ripped jackets, and bare feet carrying starved bodies fled from crumbling, broken houses. The lives of the barely living.*

*I ran to the end of the lane, looking for the right house. I scurried around crawling toddlers, went to the corner home, and rammed my fist on the door.*

*“Did someone call for a nurse?” I yelled at the door.*

*I paused.*

*“I was told a young woman was in labor.*

*A grim face with curly straw hair opened the door and spat at my feet before surveying me, lingering on my well-made boots.*

*“Look missus we don’ need a nurse. We need a midwife that we do,” the woman snarled.*

*I could hear crying coming from the barely lit hovel just beyond her shoulder.*

*“I am a certified midwife,” I assured her. “Please let me through. The young lad that retrieved me said that I was to arrive immediately.”*

*The women sneered, revealing green, black, and yellow teeth.*

*“You could say dat.”*

*She wrapped her tattered shawl around her shoulders and let me slide by, slamming the door behind me and spitting on the ground once more. I felt my shoes squish underneath a wet floor made out of mud and straw. I saw a single candle beckoning me to a corner. A young girl of maybe thirteen gazed at me with a face sweating and contorted from pain.*

*“You a nun?” she stammered.*

*“No, child. I’m a nurse and a midwife.”*

*I slid by an elderly woman kneeling by the bed, whispering over a crucifix and rubbing it between her hands. I looked up the young woman’s skirt. Breached delivery.*

*“Can you save da baby, missus?” the spitting woman snapped.*

*I did not answer her but looked at the girl and smiled.*

*“What is your name?”*

*“Beth,” she sniveled.*

*“I’m going to help you, Beth. There’s nothing to fear.”*

*I opened my nursing kit and gingerly took out the forceps, making sure that Beth didn’t see them from the bed.*

*“What are you going to call the baby?” I asked.*

*“Samuel if a boy. Anna if a girl.”*

*“Good names,” I nodded firmly, closing my kit with a gentle snap. “When did the contractions start?”*

*“Dis evening. I reckon’ I wasn’t due till end of dis month.”*

*Beth breathed heavily, squirming with the waves of pain shaking her body. She gritted her teeth and moaned as she began rocking back and forth on the bed, holding the sheet beneath her that resembled an old kitchen tablecloth.*

*“Early births are perfectly natural if you’re as far along as you are.”*

*Beth gave a cry and reached for the spitting woman’s hand. She didn’t move.*

*“Auntie. Where is Danny? Where is he? I swear if that filthy dog don’t get his arse - ”*

*“Danny ain’t comin’ and you knows it,” she snapped.*

*Tears spread down Beth’s red and puffy cheeks.*

*“Beth this baby is coming whether you want it to or not.”*

*The woman stepped closer to Beth and peered at her like she was an exhibit.*

*“I have to wait for Danny,” Beth pleaded. “Please, just a little while longer.”*

*A contraction left her howling, a sound I had heard before from many other young girls.*

*“You don’t need anyone but yourself. You’re going to have to push.”*

*“We need your help, Miss Nightingale.”*

I lie in bed, drumming my fingers on the public letter Josephine Butler has handed to me. Josephine sits by my bed with pursed lips and a scowling brow, turning to Harriet to make sure she is nodding approvingly at her suggestions.

“The Act will not prevent a single case of disease,” she continues, slamming her hands onto her lap.

“I’m well aware of this, Miss Butler.”

“The Act is an unjustifiable and outrageous violation of women. The surgical and instrumental violation of women is essentially a form of *rape*. There is such a thing as the

‘legislative lust’ of ruling those kinds of women with an iron hand for the purpose of gratifying vicious propensities - ”

“Please, Miss Butler. I agree with you. But what you’re proposing...”

“A coalition of women.”

I eye her warily.

“Yes, a coalition. We must make sure our stance and our words are heralding the facts. I will not have our attempts at devaluing this legislation be dismissed because of lack of scrutiny. Facts should be relied on more than word of mouth or street gossip.”

Josephine’s lips quivered and she straightened her back, leaning forward ever so slightly.

“Are you suggesting that I have spun tales about this Act? That women aren’t being humiliated, mutilated, and abused every day? That women aren’t being pulled off the streets like common criminals while they leave the real problem, the *men*, to roam?”

I inhale sharply, lowering her papers onto my lap and trying desperately not to close my eyes. I feel my eyelids waver, warning me of the inevitable fatigue.

“Of course not,” I mutter. “I have seen the irrevocable damage done to these girls. One girl came into the hospital just this week. A doctor had maimed her.”

“And why was she taken off the streets?” Josephine demands.

“A man...an acquaintance told the police that she was a worker.”

“Did she deny it?”

“They didn’t ask. They ordered her to be examined and when she signed the paperwork they assumed it was an admission of guilt.”

Josephine snorts.

“They’re vicious creatures.”

“Please, Miss Butler.”

“No. I will not stand for it.”

Josephine raises her chin in a defiant manner.

“I will also not stand to have my words and credibility doubted,” she declares.

“I do not...”

A coughing fit suddenly attacks me, as I knew it would, and sends me bending into my pillow, smothering raspy breaths. Harriet moves toward me and pours some more tea, shaking her head.

“I’m fine. Please, I’m fine,” I croak finally.

I straighten myself, preparing to speak again.

“I am not doubting your credibility,” I rasp. “I also do not doubt your dedication to this cause. I know you are aware of the importance of reciting verified accounts and not falsified tales. But let me be clear.”

I peer at Josephine sternly.

“If you really want me to be a public figure for your coalition, I want to know everything you’re going to give to the men who are going to fight against us,” I continue. “Our opponents will be relentless and volatile. I agree there are moral injustices occurring on our streets. But we must be sure they understand we want their cooperation, not their submission.”

Josephine sighs, sitting back in her chair.

“What was your girl’s name? The one who was attacked,” she asks after a moment of silence.

I watch Josephine’s face soften and her shoulders drop to reveal an exhausted creature with black and purple bags hanging from her eyes.

“Her name was Margaret. She had a miscarriage.”

Josephine shakes her head slowly, looking out the window with an apparent lack of concentration. We sit in silence, letting our spirits calm. Finally, Josephine mutters,

“I must tell you another consequence of the Act that has reached my ears. Women who are being taken off the streets are being forced to leave their children with baby farmers.”

Harriet inhales sharply.

“With those abhorrent women in the East End?” she demands. “Surely not.”

“It has become a common practice,” Josephine continues. “And the women will only gain more business if the Act remains.”

“Children starve with those criminals,” Harriet stammers. “The children are not treated lovingly or given proper attention - ”

“What choice do the women have?” Josephine snaps.

I remain silent. Josephine’s passion and drive have exhausted me to the point of closing my eyes. I feel my lungs crack with each breath. My breathing has grown shallow, faltering occasionally by a penetrating cough that shakes my frame.

“I will think about what you said,” Josephine promises, turning to me.

I look down at her letter with raised eyebrows.

“You wish to publish this?”

“Yes. Along with a young woman’s account of her attack?”

“Yes, I remember Harriet mentioning her. What is her name?”

Josephine stands, straightening her skirts with crisp white gloves.

“Her anonymity should be protected,” she states firmly.

“Of course. I apologize.”

I peer at the end of her letter, reading the girl's account:

“It is men, only men, from the first to the last that we have to do with. To please a man, I did wrong at first. Then, I was flung about from man to man. Men police lay hands on us. By men we are examined, handled, doctored. In the hospital, it is a man again who makes prayer and reads the Bible for us. We are had up before magistrates who are men, and we never get out of the hands of men till we die.”

“True is it not?” Josephine asks, watching my flitting eyes.

“I do not disagree with her. Do you think it is wise to include a young woman in her position?”

“She is just as deserving of respect as any man in that room.”

“And what shall we call this coalition of ours?”

Josephine's eyes gleam before me. For a moment, I see the young Josephine, the woman who refused to marry and left her family just as I did.

“The Ladies National Association for the Repeal of the Contagious Diseases Act.”

*I sighed with burning lungs as I looked down at my hands, coated with hot blood. The soldier lying on the ground in front of me had a gash across his neck. Blood leaked onto the damp soil around me. I knew he had bled out before I arrived but I couldn't stop myself from seeing if he was truly gone. He was an attractive man with a strong jaw and thick eyebrows. His eyes were wide and turned away from me. I breathed heavily, holding my trembling hands out in front of me while rain continued to pour down. I couldn't move. I couldn't stop kneeling by his soaked and freezing corpse.*

*There was grief; immense grief that shattered my body and left me sobbing, knowing that no one could hear or see me. I sank my nails into the soft, soaked earth and I let my head tip back, letting tears mingle with rain. I let myself feel even though I had taught myself years ago that feeling was unnecessary. Showing emotion as a nurse allowed lives to be lost. I felt the doubt leak in with each breath. Could a woman survive the putrid stench of war? Could a woman stomach the chaos of combat, smothering her with its hateful grip?*

*I felt a hand on my shoulder shaking me violently.*

*“Miss. Miss, men are dying. Men are...”*

*“Women are dying.”*

Benjamin Jowett sits next to me on a bench in Hyde Park, twirling his cane with his right hand. He looks old now, with greying eyebrows and sunken eyes. His teeth have grown yellow and spit collects in the corners of his mouth when he speaks. Being at Balliol College has given him a nervous tick on the right side of his face. Whenever he speaks, his right eye squints then relaxes then squints again like a curtain opening and closing.

“Women are dying, Mr. Jowett,” I repeat. “You’ve been my friend for many years and so I am imploring you to consider helping me and Miss Josephine Butler fight against - ”

“Please, Miss. Nightingale. Do not continue.”

Benjamin slams the tip of his cane into the sidewalk, forcing the tip into a crack with sprouting weeds. He wiggles it into the dirt, pausing to consider how best to approach the topic.

“Are women dying because doctors are doing their duty by examining them? Or are they dying because of their lives of sin?” he demands.

I do not look at him but stare blankly ahead into the fog, seeing it constrict the trees and lampposts around us. I can see children scurrying in the fog, their figures like faint ghosts in the distance. My eyesight was fading from me just as quickly as my strength.

“Mr. Jowett...” I began.

“You care for them. I understand. Well, not really understand. I sympathize is what I meant to say. I understand that as a nurse you must be sympathetic toward all manner of creatures. But who is at fault here?”

I let his question linger in the air before continuing.

“Do you believe it to be the women?” I ask plainly.

“They chose to live a life of sin.”

I refuse to look him in the eye.

“And what of the men that visit them?” I whisper. “Perpetuating the existence of the women’s occupation?”

Benjamin waves his hand in front of his face, sighing heavily.

“You sound like one of those housewives who concerns herself with social issues and politics. Please, do not excite yourself.”

I turn toward him with a face writhing with disgust.

“Some ladies are getting much too excited about this Act,” he continues.

“You mean Miss Butler and Miss Martineau?”

Benjamin nods.

“I hope that you have nothing to do with them, for they are doing a disservice to their sex,” he sighs solemnly. “Elizabeth Garrett’s letter about the legislation, on the other hand, was

written with great tact and propriety. You ladies should try to strive toward something similar. Something more sensible, I think.”

“Miss Garrett’s letter?” I snap. “What letter?”

Mr. Jowett opens the newspaper in his pocket and points at a printed letter. I scan the writing, eyes skimming hurriedly, attempting to register what I was reading:

“To a woman thus circumstanced, the Act provides a hospital to which admission is given without delay...though liable to periodic inspection, if she forsakes her evil pursuit, the surgeon is empowered to release her. It would be indeed no exaggeration to say that the Act is beneficial in its moral bearing on the women it concerns and in its physical bearing on the health of the community....”

“You see, Miss Nightingale,” Benjamin interjects. “For Miss Garrett, the compulsory examination and treatment of those women signals a positive intervention into the management of venereal disease. An important step in improving both the public health and moral well-being of women working with that kind of loose profession.”

I rise from the bench, knocking his cane from his hand, but hardly noticing. I stare out into the fog, clutching the newspaper against my chest. My world fades, and my surroundings turn into watercolors around me. I only feel the wet air and the damp newspaper between my fingers. I begin to walk away, my feet carrying me faster and faster against my will. I strut down the sidewalk, feeling the hard pavement against my determined legs.

“Miss Nightingale,” Mr. Jowett calls out to me. “Please do not excite yourself. Your stubbornness will only make this movement worse. A woman, even one such as yourself, cannot possibly go up against the House of Lords.”

I stop in my tracks. For a moment, I hear similar sentiments echo in my head.

*Your stubbornness will be the death of you.*

*You must do your duty. You cannot go against the moral institution of our society.*

I turn to face him and I see his eyes widen with surprise at my flushed cheeks and narrowed eyes.

“The freedom of my sex from personal violation is so sacred,” I declare. “I will never give up attacking that strongly fortified citadel.”

*“That’s a horrid idea, Flo.”*

*Parthenope’s sharp and venomous sentiment left me reeling.*

*“Why in the world would you want to do that?”*

*I paused before continuing. After several moments, I attempted again.*

*“I want to leave home, Parthenope,” I repeated.*

*“Stop saying that,” she hissed, slamming her sewing down on her lap. “I don’t understand you. You were perfectly fine just months ago. Perfectly fine. Perfectly normal.”*

*“I’m unhappy,” I repeated.*

*Parthenope refused to listen. She merely prattled on about how much of a child I was. How I had expectations to fill.*

*“Father will disown you, you know,” she muttered casually, continuing on with her sewing. “Just imagine his shame. And mother. Her nerves would get the best of her, surely. She wouldn’t live long if you chose to - ”*

*I was packing a bag, slowly and carefully. My hands are trembling but my heart felt surprisingly assured of itself.*

*“So you’re leaving then?”*

*Parthenope stood behind me and I can feel her cold eyes glowering into my back.*

*“Yes.”*

*I continued packing, ignoring her unvoiced disapproval. Her distress hovered in the air, stifling my ability to breathe normally.*

*“Why are you doing this, Flo?” she shouted suddenly.*

*I turned toward her. Her arms had dropped down from their guarded stance and now she stood in front of me, vulnerable and unprotected.*

*“Is it mother?”*

*She paused. Then, continuing with wide eyes,*

*“Is it me?” she begged. “Am I the one making you unhappy?”*

*I walked over to her and clasped her hands.*

*“You have done nothing wrong,” I reassured her, squeezing her hands gently.*

*“Then why? Why leave?”*

*She tore her hands away from mine and quickly wiped her tears away.*

*“I think you are being horribly selfish. You are not behaving like you ought to behave.”*

*“That is why I’m leaving.”*

*She stared at me, agape.*

*“I am unhappy, Parthenope. I have been unhappy for quite some time,” I whispered.*

*“And I know now that it is because expectations have ruled my life for far too long. I may be unhappy when I leave here. I know this.”*

*I turned away from her, steeling myself against her imploring eyes.*

*“But, if I am unhappy, at least it will be my own decision.”*

### Part 3

London, 1869

“Harriet has published four anonymous letters in the *Daily News* outlining the case against the Act and announcing the launching of our public campaign. The last letter includes a petition with your signature and Harriet’s at the top. My signature is also included,” Josephine informs me.

I slam the newspaper on my bedside table, feeling faint but excited.

“But you know what Elizabeth Garrett will say about this?” I mention.

“She has striven to justify a thoroughly unjustifiable and outrageous violation of women for the sake of *men* who are subjected to no kind of personal inspection - ”

“I am not threatened by her,” I reassure her. “But I am outraged that her stance reflects not only confusion over factual details but also a larger flaw in reasoning. Her letter states that she believes that men and women receive equal treatment under the law.”

Josephine frowns at the thought.

“That is why the Ladies National Association will be established. We will gain branches, as well as members. Pamphlets will be written and distributed.”

“And we have a detailed description of why we’ve assembled this association?”

Josephine reaches within her handbag and takes out a folio of papers, reading aloud,

“The Act removes every guarantee of personal security, which the law has established and held sacred. The Act also puts women’s reputation, freedom, and persons absolutely in the power of the police.”

“And?”

“And...it is unjust to punish the sex who are the victims of a vice, and leave unpunished the sex who are the main cause. Finally, we consider that liability to arrest, forced medical treatment, and imprisonment are punishment of the most degrading kind.”

Josephine lowers the pamphlet, waiting for my response. I smile encouragingly.

“You have a terrific hand, Josephine.”

“I’m glad you approve. Elizabeth Wolstenhome will also help with the Association. She has promised to help write articles and newsletters.”

I hear a gentle knock on my bedroom door.

“Flo?”

Parthenope walks in with a grim look.

“I’m sorry to bother you. I know I promised I wouldn’t interrupt when you had company. A woman is here to see you. She says it’s rather urgent.”

“I’m not well enough to have another visitor. Please tell whoever it is - ”

“That is what I told her but she is most insistent,” Parthenope interrupts. “She says her name is Garrett? Elizabeth Garrett?”

My eyes slowly look toward Josephine’s face, which has become as white as mine.

“You shall not speak to her,” she hisses. “She is the one who is trying to undermine our efforts - ”

“Send her in, Parthenope.”

Parthenope nods and closes the door slowly as I look into Josephine's shocked face.

"I want to speak with her."

*"Do other women disagree with your work?"*

*I looked up. A large-eyed nurse had come into the laundry room. She peered at me from underneath a folded handkerchief she held to her mouth, waiting patiently for my response.*

*"Because you're a lady," she explained, hissing into the fabric.*

*"Some, yes," I murmured, ignoring her probing eyes and looking back down at my folding.*

*The other nurses observed me as if I was a science experiment, an exhibit.*

*"What do you do?"*

*"I ignore them."*

*"Doesn't it bother you? That they don't understand?"*

*She had begun to slowly lower her handkerchief, revealing a cut lip that was dripping blood. I recall a senile patient had hit her this morning.*

*"Understand what?" I snapped, losing my patience.*

*"That you're helping people."*

*It had been months since I came to the Lutheran Hospital in Düsseldorf. But everyone's reactions had been the same. I heard whispers throughout the day that I had left my family without permission and without a future. I heard girls relish the fact that they belonged in the hospital. They themselves had come from working families; decent families who expected them to find jobs and support their siblings, parents, and husbands. I observed wicked smiles and judgmental scowls, assuring me that I was not one of them.*

*“As long as I am convinced I am helping people,” I muttered, continuing folding sheets.*

*“It does not matter what others think.”*

Elizabeth Garrett walks in, standing proud with strong shoulders and an elongated neck. She strides into my bedroom without even looking at Josephine, who has gone red in the face. She steps next to my bedside and smiles slowly.

“It is an honor to finally meet you, Miss Nightingale. I have heard so much about your work in the war and you are famous throughout England, of course. I can assure you that I - ”

“Please sit down, Miss Garrett,” I interrupt her, not wanting her to prattle on.

She looks startled.

“Of course,” she whispers, looking toward Josephine.

Josephine stands in front of the only chair in the room. But she does not move. Her eyes have become wide with passion.

“This is Miss Josephine Butler. A dear friend of mine. Josephine, would you kindly leave us?”

Elizabeth Garret stares at Josephine, daring her to speak. But Josephine strides out, slamming the door behind her.

“I would like to discuss a rumor I have heard throughout town,” Elizabeth begins, smiling at me with tight lips as she sits down.

“What rumor?”

Elizabeth places her gloved hands in her lap with a snide smile.

“I hear that you have joined The Ladies National Association for the Repeal of the Contagious Diseases Act. I have heard that, despite your better judgement and your position in

society, you have fought against the Contagious Diseases Act, a perfectly logical and useful piece of legislation.”

“This is no rumor,” I state firmly.

Elizabeth stares at me, still smiling, and begins to strum her fingers on her lap.

“May I ask why?”

“I shall ask a better question. Why do you publicly support the Act?” I demand.

“I beg your pardon?”

“I have read your letter,” I smirk. “It is well written, to be sure. But I have scrutinized it thoroughly and have declared you to be misinformed and misguided in your efforts.”

Elizabeth immediately loses her smile. She becomes flushed and begins stammering an explanation:

“I believe that the compulsory examination and treatment of those women signals a positive intervention into the management of venereal disease. It is an important step in improving both the public health and moral well being of women living in sin. Every member of the medical profession knows only too well how terrible this class is suffering, how difficult it is for them to leave their life of vice. Hospitals do not admit them and dispensaries cannot cure them. They are without health, without habits of industry, without self-control, and without character.”

She stops abruptly, her lips trembling. She was not prepared for my criticism.

“I have joined the Association for Promoting the Extension of the Contagious Diseases Act,” she announces. “Not because I am ill-informed or ignorant but because I believe the Act will do good for society. How can you possibly disapprove of our cause?”

“You are forgetting about the victims.”

She stares blankly at me.

“You are forgetting about the stark mistreatment and unequal appraisal of women,” I smirk, unable to shield my disgust at her ignorance. “You view those women as less than.”

“Of course I do,” she snaps back. “They live in in vice. They can only be saved by legislation and government intervention. Many men agree with me.”

“Many men do not understand the implications of taking innocent women off the streets and mutilating them. You are letting children starve and women be subjected to degrading and harmful treatment,” I roar back.

I rise from my pillow with surprising strength, leaning toward her, eyes blazing.

“You are betraying women who are born into poverty and have no means of escaping. I know these women. I know their cries, their fears, their shame, their anger. I know of their self-loathing and their inability to grasp the tentativeness of their lives or the severity of their mistakes. You know nothing of their lives or their suffering. You know nothing.”

Blackness engulfs my world and I suddenly fall back onto my pillow. I cannot hear the gasp from my bedside or the hands that rush to feel my face. I cannot hear Parthenope’s cries or feel the doctor’s cold fingers prodding my neck. I fall deeper and deeper until my own body is foreign to me. I am slipping.

Voices hover above me, their words swimming in the air. I begin to comprehend small fragments of conversation, and I force myself to pay attention despite exhaustion lulling me toward unconsciousness.

“She is so very ill, Harry. She’s only gotten worse since I arrived. And she refused to come home to get better.”

“She’ll be all right, my dear. She has a strong soul.”

The voices become muddled and I cannot fight off sleep. Hours later, I awake, hearing more voices. They’re hushed and persistent.

“Harriet, did you see what Dr. Preston wrote about us in the paper?”

“I did. His sentiments were very unforgiving.”

“He called me ignorant. He said that I was indelicate to discuss such things in public. He said it was not our place to fight against the Act.”

“But you must remember, Josephine. We are not only fighting against the House but against society, as well. There will be men, like Dr. Preston, who do not approve of our sex having opinions about politics. We’ve prepared for this.”

“It does not make it any less insulting.”

I’m staring at the sun filtering into my room, making flickering shapes on the wooden floorboards. The curtains are pulled back to reveal a sky dotted with clouds. I try moving in my bed, frowning as I feel my stiff and heavy body. I try to cough but am met with lungs shaking and tears flowing down my cheeks. The truth dawns on me slowly, burdening me with sadness. I will never recover from this.

Parthenope rushes in and begins to pour some water immediately.

“Flo. Flo, my goodness. Are you all right?”

I lie back down on the bed, finding it difficult to keep my eyes open.

“I’m fine,” I mutter languidly.

Parthenope tries to bring the water to my lips but I sputter when I try to swallow, unable to repress my cough. She sits by me for a while, patiently waiting.

“Do you need anything?” she asks.

“Yes,” I croak. “Could you retrieve me a pen and some paper.”

“You must rest,” she snaps.

“I need to write a letter.”

“Whatever for?”

I look at her, eyelids barely open.

“There’s been some disapproval of my attempts to address a piece of legislation. I should like to address their grievances.”

Harriet stands by my bedside, nodding her head sympathetically as she reads my article in the newspaper.

“Justina?” she asks, raising her eyebrows.

“My pseudonym.”

She begins to read the article aloud, whispering:

“The Act would be the national despair of moral and social progress. It would pronounce the inevitable and continuous degradation—generation after generation—of a large proportion of my sex. It would stifle all aspirations of a higher state of social existence and would contaminate, corrupt, and deaden the moral life of our community.”

Harriet smiles at me.

“Miss Butler will rejoice in reading this,” she assures me.

“I’m glad.”

She sighs heavily and places the newspaper on the bedside table with a delicate hand.

“I’m sorry to say, my dear friend, that the resistance has grown stronger.”

“Because of Elizabeth Garrett?”

“No. There are men who are actually encouraging their wives to fight against us. Other women are being told to defend the so called morals of our society.”

I sigh, shaking my head.

“Many doctors and legislators have told their wives to talk to me. The wife of Dr. Rumsey of Cheltenham wrote me a day or two ago with a violent declamation against my signature on the petition against the Act. I answered calmly, with statistics of course, which I knew she was quite incapable of understanding.”

“Florence, this is quite serious,” Harriet whispers, sounding exasperated over my calm tone. “If we cannot convince our own sex to support us, then how can we convince our legislators?”

“Because the women we are defending have inalienable personal rights, which none but such idiots as our social legislators would dare interfere with.”

“Florence.”

I turn my head to face Harriet, startled to see tears.

“We might lose.”

I wait for her to continue, stunned.

“We have promised those women who have been attacked that we would prevent anything more from happening to them,” she continues. “But we might fail in our mission. And I hear people say we are disrupting the social structure, that we should remain in our place. They say we have no business - ”

“People are wrong.”

Harriet begins to smooth down her dress hurriedly, not looking me in the eye.

“I know you have always been obstinate. But I have grown weary. People are questioning my role as a wife, as a woman. People accuse me of encouraging sin and vice.”

“You must not listen to them, Harriet,” I encourage her.

Harriet stands up suddenly, scraping her chair against the floor loudly.

“I care about my reputation, Florence,” she retorts. “You have never cared about such things. So I don’t expect you to understand.”

As Harriet hurries out of the room, I see her shawl glide off her shoulders. She slams the door, catching half of her shawl in its frame and leaving it to remain trapped in its grip.

## Part 4

London, 1886

I tap my cane gently against the side of my boot as I examine the nurses' training. Nervous hands attached to flustered pupils begin to cut bandages into long strips. A rotund pupil drops her scissors, squeaking loudly as the metal clangs with the hard floor. Another girl nervously glances at her neighbors, trying to imitate their movements.

"You must cut the bandages more efficiently," I order, pointing my cane at a blonde girl's hands. "Don't use too much of our supplies."

My voice wheezes and croaks now, inspiring fear in my pupils. I shift my weight in the chair uncomfortably and cough loudly. The trainings at St. Thomas have become a hindrance. These girls have never worked a day in their lives, never made sacrifices for others. Yet they come to me with sparkling eyes and obvious ambition, begging me to show them the glory of my profession.

"Remember," I snap, rising slowly. "Nursing is an art. It requires as exclusive a devotion, as hard a preparation, as any painter's or sculptor's work."

I glare at my pupils and see a collection of wide, admiring eyes staring back at me.

"Would anyone like to accompany me to the hospital? I need to see to a patient."

All thirty pairs of feet scurry behind me, catching my heels with baited breath.

*I was holding my breath. Richard stood next to me, gazing outside onto my mother's garden. He tapped his cane on the cobbled walkway, holding his hat by his side. My parents observed us from the second story window.*

*"Miss Nightingale."*

*He paused, waiting for me to turn towards him. But I didn't. I stared at the Italian fountain in front of me, focusing on each bead of water hitting the stone edge.*

*"Miss Nightingale."*

*Richard paused. Then, sighing heavily, he whispered,*

*"Florence...."*

*Again, I said nothing.*

*"You know what I'm going to ask," he whispered, exasperated. "I have been asking for months. Please. Please reconsider -"*

*I turned away from him, my head high and proud, and muttered,*

*"Please, stop."*

*My voice throbbed. After months of sleepless nights, doubt had convinced me this moment was not a blessing but a cage. And I knew that I had to fight to remain free.*

*"I have loved you for months," Richard confessed, sounding more and more desperate. "Your ministering to the ill and poor in the village inspired me. Your dedication to others, your selfless behavior."*

*"Please, do not continue," I snapped.*

*He stopped. His shock made the air seem heavy.*

*"I am sorry. I am sorry but I must say no."*

*"Does your family approve of this decision?" he snapped back.*

*The warmth and patience in his voice had left, leaving in its wake a venomous derision. I did not answer but strode away quickly, keeping my eyes fixed on the bright, red door leading me inside. My stride quickened and I prayed that doubt would not seize me before I was safely inside.*

I march into the ward and immediately look for Lizzie. After scanning the ward quickly, I notice her sitting in a corner, sewing and mindlessly humming to herself. I turn toward the girls and order them to make themselves useful. Some scurry quickly away to look for nurses on duty. Some stare at me, aghast at my indifference toward their progress. I approach Lizzie with a smile, hobbling slowly until she looks up at me.

“Miss Nightingale! Oh, please. Please sit down.”

She hastily grabs another chair and I sit down with a heavy sigh.

“How are you, Lizzie?”

“I’m well, Miss. Very well.”

She continues sewing. After some moments of silence, she casually mentions,

“James came to visit me. Told me he wanted to have the baby and me live with him once I got out.”

I remain silent.

“I thought about that vocational training you mentioned. Sounded like a good idea.”

She waits for me to say something. Then she looks at me, frowning slightly.

“I don’t want to stay here much longer, Miss. I’m not even diseased. You said so yourself. You know my arrest was because of James. Saying all those things about me being a working woman.”

I nodded.

“Been here for three months now. I need to get my baby girl back from my mother. She’s missing me. I know she is.”

She fumbles with a stitch, pricking her finger but quickly putting it in her mouth.

“That’s what I wanted to discuss with you,” I assure her.

Lizzie looks up with her thumb still in her mouth, eyes wide and imploring.

“You may stay in the ward longer, if you wish,” I begin. “But you can leave anytime you like. The law that has forced you to stay here was repealed. Just yesterday.”

Lizzie looks at me with disbelief.

“I can leave?”

“I just received word from Miss Butler this morning. I was quite surprised to hear from her. I haven’t been involved with her organization for years.”

Lizzie drops her head and begins to snivel. Soon she’s burying her face in her skirts, sobbing loudly. I stand up, ignoring my cracking knees, and put my arm around her shoulder. Her sewing falls to the ground but she ignores it. She wraps her arms around my waist and hugs me tightly, burying her face in my skirts. She begins to thank me in between sobs but I shush her, rubbing her back gently just as I’ve done with so many others.

*I stood immobile in the rain, letting water drip from my bonnet down to my nose. A girl no more than sixteen, my age, was crouching in the mud in front of me while holding a child to her breast. She cradled it protectively, swaying to and fro. I heard her humming to the child urgently as its cries cut the air with shrill pleas for food. Mud soaked her skirts and the growing puddle surrounding her hid her bare feet. I knew my sister was behind me, watching me watch*

*this creature. She was probably furious, shaking her head disapprovingly. Her mouth would contort into a large frown. Her eyebrows would furrow as if my actions were confusing and unwarranted.*

*I dug into my basket and pulled out a loaf of bread. It was cold now, hard and barely edible. I walked forward slowly, not knowing if what I was doing was an act of service or an act of guilt. When I came closer, the creature's eyes widened and hovered over the bread. She clutched her baby to her chest. I stopped, bent down slowly, and offered her the bread. She looked at it, hesitating. I tried to smile encouragingly, feeling uncomfortable. Then, without saying a word, the girl snarled suspiciously and ran off down the lane. The baby's cries became more and more distant as the girl's feet dashed through the puddles.*

*Parthenope scoffed and tugged at my sleeve.*

*"Come now, Flo. You shouldn't concern yourselves with women of that kind."*

*Do not concern yourselves with such people.*

*You are a lady and are not meant to speak with them.*

*Don't mind the beggars.*

*I twisted my head around to face her and glared, feeling rage grow within me. I didn't know where this feeling had come from. But it burned fiercely. Parthenope looked startled and took a few steps back. Before she could say anything else, I stomped down the lane and headed back to the house. I couldn't help thinking that the girl and I were the same; fearful, hesitant, and desperate to get away.*

*Late that night, I sat by my window, staring out onto the garden. I watched the moon make a trembling reflection on the glass surface of our fountain. My face was blank. But in my mind, I was knowingly peeling back layers of myself. I reflected on the girl within me paralyzed*

*by fear, burdened with expectation. As a tear slid down my cheek, I could feel doubt rising in my chest, fueled by the realization that I was not in control but under control. I sat there for hours, searching for courage beneath the layers.*

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## ACADEMIC VITA

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### Academic Vita of Kimberly Ann Jurczyk

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#### Education

The Pennsylvania State University, Schreyer Honors College, University Park, PA      May 2016

Bachelor of Arts in English and Bachelor of Arts in Communication Arts and Sciences

University of Leeds, Leeds, England      Spring 2015

#### Honors

Paterno Fellows Program, College of Liberal Arts

- Honors program including advanced academic coursework, honors thesis, study abroad and/or internship, ethics study, and leadership/service commitment

Lambda Pi Eta Honors Society, College of Liberal Arts

- National honors society that promotes outstanding academic achievement in the communication discipline

#### Experience

Communications Intern, Haffert Group, Washington D.C.

- Organized and edited website and social media content to establish a better online presence for the company
- Researched content concerning the issue of gender equality and women's economic, political, and social empowerment, which concluded in the organizing and editing of a grant for the Center for International Private Enterprise

Research and Production Manager, Malini Foundation, Colombo, Sri Lanka

- Supervised six junior interns and managed graphic designers and EFL volunteers who created promotional materials for the Foundation's social media pages and website
- Planned and executed four promotional videos for the Malini Foundation, a women's rights non-profit based in Sri Lanka
- Organized and headed the #Give2Malini crowd funding fundraiser campaign which raised nearly \$2500 for the Malini Foundation's Home for Gifted Orphaned Girls

Communications Intern, Chesapeake Bay Foundation, Richmond, VA

- Edited press releases and created promotional materials for the organization

#### Volunteer Experience

Peer Tutor, Penn State Undergraduate Speaking Center, University Park, PA

- Assist undergraduate students at Penn State by training them in communication and public speaking

Adult Tutor, Central Pennsylvania Institute of Technology

- Tutored adults to acquire their GED certificate by organizing lesson plans and outlining session goals

Malini Foundation Summer Fellow

- Travelled to Sri Lanka with the Foundation and met with non-profit founders and community leaders in order to learn about social entrepreneurship and gender equality
- Led two creative arts workshops in a Sri Lankan school and orphanage with roughly 100 children in order to understand the educational system established in Sri Lanka