

Well Dressed Lies

A Novel

Carrie Hayes

HTPH
Press New
York

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For Tom, the best brother ever.

With love and gratitude.

Contents

The Players	viii
<i>I The Will to Believe</i>	1
1 Trompe l'oeil	3
<i>Five and a Half Years Earlier</i>	15
2 Discreet Persuasion	17
3 The Crossing	23
<i>II Attitudes</i>	53
4 Situating Oneself	55
5 In Company	69
<i>III Amusements</i>	91
6 In the Country	93
7 In Town	129
8 The Hunt	139
9 Connections	152
10 Appearances	159

<i>IV Assumptions</i>	179
11 A Passional Nature	181
12 Wishful Thinking	191
13 Honor	215
14 The Will to Deceive	225
15 Do You See Me?	234
<i>V Affection</i>	241
16 What Do You See?	243
17 What to Overlook	257
18 An Augury Divination	270
19 Mingled with Sadness	278
20 Deeply and Vitally Alive	283
21 Believe	286
Afterword	292
Author's Note – contains plot spoilers	293
Illustrations	295
Acknowledgements	296
Further Reading	298

The Players

The Americans

The Claflin Family

Victoria Woodhull a former political activist and rabble rouser
Tennessee Claflin a clairvoyant and Victoria's younger sister
Roxana Claflin their mother
Rueben Buckman (Buck) Claflin their father
Zula Woodhull Victoria's teen aged daughter
Byron Woodhull Victoria's adult son

Milton Burns a painter and Tennessee and Victoria's nephew

Dr. Paschal Beverly Randolph a deceased clairvoyant and spiritualistic healer

William Vanderbilt a newly minted American tycoon

James Gordon Bennett, Jr. owner and publisher of the New York Herald

Henry James novelist, brother of the philosopher William James

Kate Field journalist, dramatist and actor

The British

Roland Jaeger (Rolls) the Marquess of Hilden
Francis (Frank) Cook a very wealthy textile
merchant *Emily Lucas Cook* his wife

Honor, the Duchess of Ackleigh hostess to the Prince and
Princess of Wales

Cyril, the Duke of Ackleigh Honor's husband

His Royal Highness, Albert Edward the Prince of
Wales *Her Royal Highness, Alexandra*, the Princess
of Wales *Mrs. Lillie Langtry* favorite to the Prince
of Wales

John Biddulph Martin a banker, statistician and athlete

Mrs. Maryanne Biddulph Martin his mother

Richard Biddulph Martin his brother

Julia Martin his sister

Well Dressed

Part I

The Will to Believe

“Objective evidence and certitude
are doubtless very fine ideals to play
with, but where on this moonlit and
dream-visited planet are they found?”

—William James,
The Will to Believe, Human Immortality, and Other Essays



1883

London

Chapter 1

Trompe l'oeil

"I may as well be frank, for I ain't at all ashamed. I want to get into society. That's what I'm after!"

Henry James, *The Siege of London*

**Maida
Vale
TENNIE**

Hilden House is the final destination. It's not the grandest house on the crescent, but it is one of the oldest, where many a statesman have been known to spend the night. Your group stumbles inside, scarves and furs and cloaks steaming from the cold and knowing what will happen does nothing to change an event. As a clairvoyant, one simply knows, and there's little for it. Alas, *when* one simply knows is the question which is impossible to predict. Otherwise, you'd be rich as Midas, living it up with nary a heartache in sight.

Promptly, your host directs you to look out the window and everyone does as they're told. It's hours before sunrise and snowy twilight shimmers on the pavement. The canal sparkles in the moon- light, tranquil, pristine.

Oohs and aahs from the guests fill the room.

"Moonglow enhances every kind of illusion," says your host with a flourish. And he should know because he's a magician. He is also Roland Jaeger, the Marquess of Hilden. "It will change your way of seeing."

His friends call him Rolls and you'll soon realize it was he who placed the magazine beside you, turned to the offending page. You are shocked but you won't say a word. You're not hurt. You're not your sister.

It all has yet to happen.

Still, you chime in. "I know these things to be true." Indeed, you do, so you speak with tipsy conviction. "Because I once practiced spiritualism."

"Where was that?" someone asks.

"America, of course." And you tap your chest, failing to stifle the belch, which makes everyone laugh.

Your host chuckles and leads you to the settee. His man brings forth an elaborate hookah on a cart, then discreetly withdraws, collecting abandoned cloaks and scarves now scattered throughout.

Rolls takes a drag and offers you a pipe. "Poison, Miss Claflin?" "Don't mind if I do." You're a free woman, and you're nothing if not obliging.

"It's Dowam Meskh, which I believe you enjoy, do you not?"

The hashish rips your lungs apart. He waits for you to cough, but your exhale is slow, languid and you smile. Your dimples create the desired effect, as you glance at the cabinet in the corner. Formerly an altar, it now holds bottles, decanters, and such, standing at the ready. You know your nonchalance has grabbed Rolls Jaeger, because he goes to the cabinet and fills a glass, splashing Grand Marnier into a crystal tumbler.

On the wall, just above the booze, is a painting called *Salvator Mundi*, or *Savior of the World*. Christ raises one hand in benediction. His other hand holds a perfect sphere, an orb, refracted in the light. His face gazes out unseeing, even as He takes in all that surrounds you.

Christ, more than anyone, is the trickster. You study the painting and take another drag. Sweet piety one instant, stern judgment the next.

"You can't have my Jesus," Rolls Jaeger warns.

"But you can't stop me from wanting it." Every time you see it, you're overcome with a sense that all might be redeemed.

"Miss Claflin, I'd only part with him for a very large sum." Rolls gives you the drink, then makes a flamboyant gesture so that a sovereign appears in his palm. "Something to pay my gambling debt? Or, possibly to stave off the blackmailers." Christ is not the only rascal here.

"Have some more hash," he says. "As a lover of the divine, did you not find it thus?"

Someone observes, "Oh, la, such debauchery even in the face of Christ. Splendid!"

Rolls chides, "Don't mock our Lord."

The writer Henry James says, "Who's the artist?"

Well Dressed

You're surprised at this question. Henry James is a fellow Yank, with an all-knowing affectation, which you find insufferably superior. You open your mouth to speak, but nothing comes out. The hash is more potent than you realized.

"Bernardino Luini," Rolls says. "High Renaissance, what— much the way I like to think of myself."

You know for a fact that it isn't Luini. But you remain silent because the painting calms the space behind your heart, even as you drown in excess and pleasure.

A woman sits at the piano. She plays the opening bars of a popular show, and a man sits next to her, singing *sotto voce*.

*Oh, listen to the plaintiff's
case: Observe the features of her
face – The broken-hearted bride.
Condole with her distress of
mind: From bias free of every
kind.*

Ah, breach of promise, *Trial by Jury*. Your sister's unhappy romance comes to mind. A gulp of Grand Marnier smothers your sigh and delicious orange burns your throat. You lean against a skin which once was a leopard, draped on the back of your seat. Stroking it with your finger, you see it roam somewhere in Africa, now killed for decor here in London.

Everything in this room, everything around you, is something other than what it seems to be. You wonder if the same could be said about you.

The piano's pitter-patter calls. Truly, you do love Gilbert and Sullivan. Your lips are numb, but still, you climb upon your chair to gaily shout, "*Is this the Court of the Exchequer?*"

Someone shouts back, "*It is!*" You've only slurred a little bit.

Bolstered, you kneel upon the leopard skin. "*Be firm, be firm, my pecker!*"

Everyone laughs and you finish, "*Your evil star's in the ascendant.*" Glancing down, you see a wine stain from earlier in the evening.

Two men sing, "*Who are you?*"

And you reply, "*I'm the Defendant!*" Your frock is dark blue, and the stain is discreet, but still. The room spins a bit, so you sit back down. You spy the bottle of that tasty Grand Marnier Henry James now happens to have in his hand.

You hold out your glass and he obliges, "*Well sung!*" pouring you a mighty dose.

Sipping the drink, you study the room. It helps the walls

Well Dressed

to be- come still. Massive palms flank the fireplace which is carved from a dark green marble. The walls are covered in a heavy damask, the same color as the palms, as if one is lost in a jungle. Besides your exquisite *Salvator Mundi*, there are portraits of royalty and men on horseback, swords raised in battle. There is also a shelf filled with skulls of differing sizes. There is a horse and a gazelle, a fox and two humans, one of which is adult sized. The other is too small to even contemplate.

If the moment shifts, you won't think about the tiny skull's slip of a soul where there might have been a life and instead there was none. You chide yourself not to think of such things when wearing this blue frock to supper. How easily the dress slid up and over. No, you never think about that now.

Your stern hidden voice is scolding. Pull yourself together, Tennessee. That little skull on the shelf has nothing to do with you.

That's when you see the *Cornhill*, next to your glass on the table. It's the January issue, its pages marked by a large card. You open it. "*The Siege of London*," written by Henry James, the impeccable man of letters.

The voices beside you continue their sloppy singing. You begin to read, first one page and then another. The marquess watches you as he perches on the arm of a sofa.

When do you concede a character's attributes, so like your own, are the ones which are deemed not respectable? It's when you realize that *you* might be the source for Mrs. Headway. You skip over a few pages and keep reading. There's no mistake. Nancy Beck Headway might as well be you, or indeed, she might be your sister.

The words taunt you from the page and you imagine what you'll say when Vicky reads it. Random sentences leap forward while a tenor and soprano begin a duet. Henry James pretends not to stare as he observes your progress through his story. The Grand Marnier becomes chilled by a sobriety no amount of booze can sedate.

Carefully, you put the magazine down, then glance at your host who suddenly laughs, braying like an ass. He is quite overcome and wipes the tears from his eyes.

Henry James shrugs as if to ask, "What can I do?"

And the singing continues unabated.

Monster, dread our damages.

We're the Jury, Dread our fury . . .

"Why'd you do it, Harry?"

You never call Henry James Harry.

He responds with the gaze of a scoundrel, but his propriety is such that you will never call him thus. You both know this.

His little smile is tight. "Miss Claflin, your very question implies that it's your inebriation asking me this. Mrs. Headway is based on no one. She—like most of my characters—is merely a composite of sorts. Let me refill your glass." Which he does.

You don't want to seem ill tempered, so you shrug off being mortified and join in the chorus. You're too filled with song to notice, let alone realize, that Henry James isn't there. That he's actually in Boston.

A servant opens the humidior, and you accept the offer of a fine cigar.

8 Gilston Road, West Brompton TENNIE

The clock's chiming wreaks havoc. Gingerly, I stretch out my hand. I'm on the sofa. The floor is where it should be and I brace myself till the nausea passes. Relieved, I tuck my hand back under my chest and drift into sleep until—

Oh god. What was that? I press my hands to my ears. Knock, knock. Pause. Boom! A door slams shut. It happens thrice. I realize Vicky is mounting an offensive. The next door she comes to is going to be this one.

Moaning, I clench, roll over, shield my face with my arm. The knob clicks and turns on the strike. Three quick steps across the room. The scent means she's standing over me. Normally I love it. But in my current state it's so sweet it's sickening.

I lower my arm, squint, will myself to look at her.

She's holding the *Cornhill* and it's rolled up. She taps it in the other hand, as if she wants to hit me.

Her face is still, impassive. "Have you read it?"

I struggle to sit up, smoothing the ruined blue frock with my hand. Twelve months ago, she declared me reprehensible, then shrouded the house in silence. This is the first time she's spoken to me since. Parched, I run my tongue over my teeth. Orange and cigars bear gleeful witness to last night. But before I can speak, there's a crash from builders down the street, rattling my brain inside my skull.

Wordlessly, she goes to the brass cart and pours water from a pitcher into a tall glass. She hands it to me. "Well? Did you?"

I drink the water down. If I reveal I'd spent the evening with Henry James, she'll take it as treason. She must not know what transpired last night.

I summon my poker face, "Yes, I've seen it."

She nods and refills my glass. "When that villain Henry James comes back to England, I am going to give him such a piece of my mind."

Comes back to England? I need to be careful. "Where is he?" I ask this as casually as possible. No one can know that I saw him.

"He went home. I heard his father is dying, or something."

"I see." Is this chat a rapprochement? Should I even ask her? Better not. It might set her off again. My head is splitting beyond measure, but I thank God for Mr. James. His betrayal has created something else with which she can be aggrieved. She crosses to the window and I admire her elegant profile framed by the wide-brimmed homburg she's wearing. "Are you going somewhere?"

She sighs at this, then turns to face me. Her eyes have a graceful downward slope at the edges. "No." When she isn't on a rampage, she looks wistful, tender. "I just don't know if I should retire this hat or not."

For each of Vicky's misguided ideas, there have been nearly a dozen which I've known to be wonderful and brilliant. This last year has been very lonely.

I reach for her hand, "I think you should keep it. It suits you perfectly."

Her grasp is firm, steady. "What are we going to do about Mr. James?"

"Do you really care if people think Nancy Headway is based on you?"

Sadly, she asks, "Don't you?"

"She could be based on any American girl. She could be me. She might even be one of the Jerome sisters." Which is not inaccurate.

"Neither you nor they have had previous husbands."

"At least that no one is aware of."

We know what it is to be ostracized. It's worse than wretched, and we both know there's only one man we might trust to get us out of this mess. That he is a scoundrel with nary a scruple matters not.

I say, "You should discuss this with Buck." My headache seems to be fading. "After all, he's our father. He'll know what to do."

VICKY

Tennie's way of thinking is quite right. As expected, I find Buck in the dining room, stretched out on a divan near the window. Daylight seeps through the closed drapes on to the carpet and I lean over him. He seems to be sleeping.

Whenever I see him thus, I'd be a liar if I didn't admit to that flutter which tempts me to help him along and have him be done with it. But I don't do that. I gently pull the cashmere over his shoulder instead.

Buck's hand jerks out. He grabs my arm. "Now don't go killing me just yet!" His grip is tight. "I've a mind to have you girls earn your keep."

"We've earned our keep, Buck."

"I'll work you like a well-oiled machine."

"That's what we were."

He shouts, "What's that?"

"It's all right, Pa." With my free hand, I pat his and he releases my arm. "Don't fret. I'm right here." I pull up a chair and begin placing my hat pins in a row upon the table.

He opens his eyes, staring at me with his good one. Apropos of nothing, he says, "I didn't want to part with you. You're the smartest. Most like me, I suppose." He pulls his eye patch over his bad eye.

Eventually, I clear my throat. "Pa, I'm going to need your counsel."

He squints and says, "What about?"

"Something's been written, Pa. I feel as though—"

He chuckles. "Ha. It's about that story, ain't it?" He pulls his own copy of the *Cornhill* from under the blanket. "Tennie gave me this before you were up." He licks his thumb and finds the opening page. "Well, it seems to me, as always, it's a question of pedigree."

He carefully swings his legs out onto the floor. "Yes, indeedy. Our English cousins are just as snooty as our American ones. We'll fix that."

He leans on me, and I help him to stand. "We'll just have to get 'em at their own game." He gives me a little squeeze. "We'll cook up something." We make our way toward the rest of the house. "Yes, indeedy. That's what we'll do."

Quincy Street, Cambridge, Mass. HENRY

IDEAS: a plain woman courted by a rogue—if she goes with him, she forgoes her inheritance/ an American girl witnesses the demise of her sister's marriage to a Lord/ a conservative southerner and his suffragist cousin vie for the affections of a young free thinker. THEMES: what will you sacrifice for love/ who has the right to your affection/ is honesty a greater virtue than trust NAMES: Savage, Wareham, Bonner, Grindall, Laud, Sandys, Henchman

My quotidian practice is to jot down ideas pertaining to any possible material inside a small goatskin notebook which my jacket pockets conceal perfectly. It also has a small loop for a favored pen whose bladder holds my preferred blue-black ink. The pages are onion-skin and my blotting paper is trimmed to size so that these random thoughts might be recorded anywhere I should find myself. The notebook was a gift from my father. He was a complex man. A chaser of ghosts, prone to depression, lover of all things Swedenborg. Of course, the *Times* obituary got it wrong. The four of us were not at his bedside. William was staying at my place in London, while I

was *en route* returning here. It occurs to me that this is somehow in keeping with the irony which has colored our lives as a family.

The rooms here at William's house are chilly. I wear fingerless gloves, just as I do in London. I put down my notebook and pour the oolong tea from the silver pot over its strainer into the Wedgwood cup. I always drink my first cup neat, sans milk, sans sugar, which guarantees the timeliness of the morning blast. As one ages, such banalities can become the most tiresome preoccupations. Sipping my tea, I open the *Cornhill*, which the publisher has kindly sent from England.

I have had no occupation save that of writer. Even now, years into it, there is still a palpable chord of affirmation when seeing my work as it appears in print. Opening the volume, magazine, what have you, one turns to the section in question and presses the surrounding pages flat to take in the words as a whole, as a piece. Every time, I must confess, I meet my efforts thus. And every time, no matter what extenuating conflicts may arise with an editor or publication, every time, there is, within, a most sonorous chord. This issue of the *Cornhill* is no different.

There have been times throughout my career when I've been accused of appropriation. And I confess, there have been times when I've employed it. I shall hasten to add, however, it exists on a level wherein only those possessed of a preternatural skill for discernment recognize it as such. Because in truth, fiction is an orchestration of fragments and legend and myth. Only a *souçon* of fact binds the elements of a story together. Truly.

Creating such a brew, one must be open, always, like a sponge one observes in the sea, absorbing particulates of narrative, sifting through nonsense and gossip, heartache, and tragedy. It's how we catch the ideas.

I put the magazine down and prepare my second cup, pouring in a spoonful of milk, followed by the tea, still hot, thanks to the heavy cozy. Finally, I add the transformative vice, which is a half spoon of sugar, and a sigh of contentment escapes me. Delicious.

Scanning *The Siege of London*, I think about the sisters. As singular and striking as they may be, they are no different from any of the others. They do not preclude being mined as a source. Certainly not!

Once, they'd been lauded and were seen everywhere and with everyone. But then came that obscenity charge with an outlandish libel suit, not to mention Mrs. Woodhull's ill-fated run for president. After that, they weren't seen in company, not for years. One only knew them from their notoriety. That, and the jail time, of course.

But that summer onboard ship, the writer Kate Field sat next to me at supper. She had been a great favorite of my father's, so I took pains to be solicitous.

When Miss Field said, "They're at the table behind you," I turned around and she hissed, "No, don't look!" placing her hand on my arm. "Or they'll know we see them."

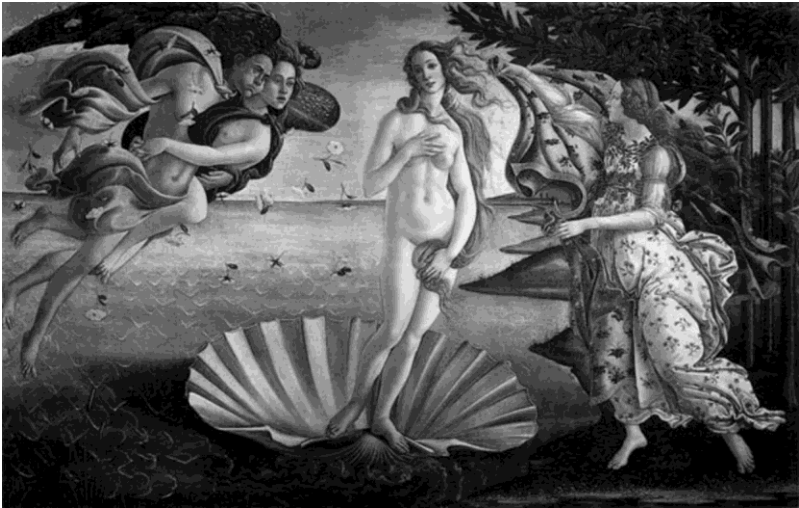
So, I dropped a fork. Large potted palms concealed my foray into espionage. I recognized them as soon as I saw them. Such hardened, scrappy survivors are rarely exceptional, much less unique. Yet, they were still beautiful, albeit certainly past their youth.

Satisfied, I sat back up, wondering how they had the funds to make this journey, particularly in first class. There was something about Miss Claflin and Mrs. Woodhull; they'd cast a shadow in any story one might compose. One would have to be blind not to see it! They were seasoned opportunists who presented a risk, a hazard of the unsavory, yet something irresistible. Something I surely would not want to be known as having been associated with! At least not in life. As a source of fiction perhaps. A waiter bowed and handed me a clean fork. I glanced over my shoulder to look at them again.

Yes, as a source of fiction perhaps. But that would be an altogether different matter. A different matter entirely.

Well Dressed

Five and a Half Years Earlier



1877

New York

Chapter 2

Discreet Persuasion

“I know not whether it is owing to the tenderness of early associations, but this portion of New York appears to many persons the most delectable. It has a kind of established repose which is not of frequent occurrence in other quarters of the long, shrill city; it has a riper, richer, more honorable look than any of the upper ramifications of the great longitudinal thoroughfare.”

— Henry James, *Washington Square*

10 Washington Square TENNIE

Certain neighborhoods are empty in August. Those with the funds escape to the seashore or the mountains, and New York in summer is still as a tomb. It was just before noon, and the brougham pulled up through a fetid wave of manure laced with garbage.

That I knew the coachman mattered little. They're trained to avert their gaze when you climb in. But I recognized him. He'd brought me to the Vanderbilts' when I'd been little more than a girl. And then he'd driven me to the ferry, after my aged lover ended our affair. Nearly a decade had passed since then. Cornelius had been

laid to rest months ago. But as requested, there I was, on my way to see his heir, who was also my nemesis.

A small drape muffled the rank smell outside. I closed my eyes. What on earth would I say to William Vanderbilt? He may have been the richest man in America, but I didn't think I needed any favors.

We arrived at the house, and the air was clear, rarified. Lest my reputation sully it, I pulled the black veil over my face and left the carriage.

Inside, Number Ten was unchanged. I followed the servant up the marble stairs to where William sat waiting at his late father's desk. Sunlight poured through enormous windows much as it had on the first day I'd stood in this room, wearing nothing but my boots. It was the day that changed my life and my sister's life forever.

William did not bid me to sit down. So, I remained standing, as if a humble supplicant seeking whatever charity he deemed worthy. But I was not there to seek William Henry Vanderbilt's munificence. Far from it. My circumstances were changed, but there was no mistake. If Billy had reached out to me, then he was the one in need of assistance.

He made the first move. "My siblings, as you may have heard, are up in arms." That William alone had been willed ninety-five of Cornelius's hundred million dollars, with the rest of the family to share the remaining five, had set all of New York abuzz.

I pushed my veil back. "I'm sure your father had his reasons." Unsurprisingly, William's siblings were going to contest the will.

The lace curtains moved in the warm air. I sought Cornelius's spirit, but he wasn't there. Once Cornelius and I had been more than lovers. We had been friends. Alas, we hadn't left things that way. We quarreled and then I became an outcast. But that was another story. "The argument is that your very presence in his life proved my father's insanity." William moved a piece of paper on the desk. "By way of a rather pesky case of the pox."

How rich that William should air such thoughts about my person, when he had made advances toward me himself.

"And you?" My purr held details we both knew William's wife would rather not learn.

"And I?" He leaned back, afraid of what I'd say next. William Vanderbilt was nearly twice my age. Once he'd thought nothing of grabbing me in his father's carriage, declaring that my sole function was to see to a man's comfort. At the time, he was angling for it to be his.

I wondered what Cornelius's spirit would have made of William talking to me thus. "Would it have mattered had you known, in your effort to further our acquaintance?"

William didn't answer. Instead, he gazed somewhere on the level of my bosom. My jacket was so worn that it shone. I cared little for pretense, but I did wish I'd worn something smarter. Behind William was the tall frame of a painting I'd once given to Cornelius. Someone had turned it to face the wall, which brought a smile to my lips. "Your father's widow does not object to my visiting here?" She was only forty years his junior, whereas I had been a full fifty years younger than he.

"Very much to the contrary. But she is in Newport this month, so..."

"I don't know why you've called me here, Billy, but since I'm in the neighborhood, I might as well tell you, that Cornelius invested ten thousand dollars for me in '69 which I should like to recoup." Cornelius had instructed me in finance and found me an eager pupil. Of course, he had been a most ardent tutor.

William raised his eyebrows. "In 69?"

"Yes, just after the *Icicle* race."

"But you have enjoyed extraordinarily robust returns, Miss Claflin. Have you not?"

"That was compounded interest. After the summer of '71, I no longer drew upon the returns."

"I see." Tugging at his lambchop whiskers, he looked at me thoughtfully. "Please, have a seat, Miss Claflin."

"Billy." I did so, smiling as if I hadn't a care in the world. I daresay it was quite the performance. My health was very challenging but not as salacious as this particular Vanderbilt would have liked.

He clasped his hands on the desk. "You and your sister made quite the mark did you not?" He then leant forward, giving me what is called "the once-over."

I slowly removed my gloves while he continued. "Two women, wading into politics and investment, when really neither of you had any business in so doing."

I wondered where Cornelius was. Surely, he was in the room with us.

"But your sister's presidential campaign, while thrilling in its fear- lessness, did set the suffragists back a few years, did it not?"

I repeated myself. "How do I make application for the return of my initial capital?"

"Your initial capital will become a mere bagatelle in light of the arrangement I am proposing. To you and Mrs. Woodhull, that is." He waited for a reaction, which I chose not to give him. Finally, he asked, "What do you have in the way of letters?"

"I have none. Vicky has several. Mostly to do with bookkeeping. And your late mother."

"My mother?"

"Your father was much concerned with the serenity of her spirit." "My sister will make the claim that your services . . ."

I held up my hand. "For your edification, Billy, it wasn't the pox. His trouble was with passing water. But you know that."

My time as Commodore Cornelius Vanderbilt's lover had ended long ago. In those days, I'd been a medium and clairvoyant magnetic practitioner, just a scrappy young thing, really. Until then, everything I'd ever done was for my family. My father and my sister Victoria were convinced that my liaison with Cornelius would help her career. So, I liaised, not knowing I'd grow to love him. Somewhere a clock chimed the hour.

"Miss Claflin." William was still speaking. "Were you called upon to testify, the hearings would assume a character, which for my

purposes, and undoubtedly those of the Commodore, would not suit. Would not suit at all. Do you understand my meaning?"

"I do."

Finally, he spoke. "Passage." Billy's voice was so tentative, I closed my eyes to keep from laughing, then blinked, my face expressionless. "Passage to England," he said.

So, it was clear now. He intended to be rid of me.

A come-hither smile pulled at my lips. "What should I do in England?" I'd let him spell it out.

"You would be, well, you should be . . ."

Had it come to this? He would be rid of me, in exchange for some paltry coin.

I finished his thought for him. "I should be spirited away? Your siblings receive a fraction of your father's wealth, and you keep the lion's share?" He clearly underestimated the depth of my attachment to the Commodore. Indeed, the Commodore's attachment to me.

William tried again. "I shall be very generous. To them and to you."

Years before, William's intentions were only too clear. I had been his father's plaything, and William wanted me for himself. I placed my finger on the top of the desk and moved it, slowly so he might imagine his appendage stroked thus. Then I murmured, softly enough that he had to strain to hear what men of his ilk flutter and dream about. I watched him watching me, watching my lips move. "Gets you hard, don't it? This claptrap rigamarole bribery."

He gulped but had the next move. "You'll have the resources to set up your home and housekeeping for yourself and your sister and her children."

I added, "And my parents?"

"Yes, and your parents."

I loved to play cards. Euchre, whist—the higher the stakes, the keener the thrill. And I also knew that power only respects power. The aforementioned vulgarity was a power few men were strong enough to resist.

"How much, William? How much do you estimate that should be, to set me up in England?" How much, indeed? It would have to be a sum that was very, very good. After all, the Commodore's accounts still held my ten thousand dollars. Our eyes met, locked in a contest of wills.

I dropped my voice again, "It's how you tickle your gizzard in Greene Street, ain't it?"

My clairvoyance recognized that these were words William Vanderbilt wanted to hear. I fluttered my eyelashes, slowly, parting my lips, watching, waiting for him to either answer, or to climb across the desk and aggress me with a wet, forced kiss.

Once again, he cleared his throat and licked his lips. "One hundred thousand," he said. "One hundred thousand dollars will be in Lloyd's of London."

I didn't answer.

"It should set you up." But that wasn't William who spoke. It was the Commodore. Cornelius was there after all. He had just witnessed that vulgar display with his son.

Whispering, I concurred, "Yes. It should set me up." Oh, Cornelius.

He sat in a chair by the window, his massive hands resting on his knees. Behind him stood another spirit. My dear confidant, Paschal. PB Randolph, spiritualist, doctor, magical practitioner.

I saw William notice how the curtain moved as Paschal's spirit peered out the window.

William turned back to me, "Do we have an understanding?"

I breathed in Cornelius's sandalwood soap and whispered, "Yes, yes. You have an understanding."

At this, Paschal smiled broadly.

Despite the heat, William shivered and sighed. "Well, all we can do is try, if we are to be happy in this world."

This was a phrase Paschal often said when called upon to do so.

I pulled my veil down over my face, masking the tears in my eyes.

William handed me an envelope. Its weight indicated several thousand dollars. "For incidentals," he said, "until you reach London. Good day, Miss Claflin."

Chapter 3

The Crossing

“Behold, I will do a new thing; now it shall spring forth; shall ye not know it?”

— *Isaiah 43:19*

SS Lafayette, New York Harbor TENNIE

“No thank you!” I hollered through the closed door of my cabin. “No, thank you.”

The knocking stopped. Finally, I was quite alone. I unwrapped my hat’s veil and leant against the door. William Vanderbilt’s subsidy had indeed provided every comfort. First-class staterooms for my mother, sister, and niece. Steerage for the servants. The walls glowed with an understated luster. The tang of polish made my nose twitch. A plastered ceiling carved with foliage framed the bed’s elaborate canopy. Across the room were gilded mirrors and an armoire. Painted garlands crawled up the side of the sink which graced the corner. It was so grand it was impossible not to cheer. But it was so, so hot.

I tossed the hat and veil on a chair and opened the porthole. Traces of dead fish and soot wafted past. Foghorns drowned out the

cries of "All ashore!" amongst a cacophony of gulls and throngs of people saying goodbye. New York Harbor was a very noisy place.

I studied the dressing table. Ivory-handled tweezers, tortoise-shell brushes, silver combs and such were at the ready. Removing my gloves, I assessed the woman in the mirror. Dark circles were under my eyes. My color was off. But no one cared about this, not now. I was thirty-two years old, and an old, old maid.

Still, while recent events had come at a cost, starting over was nothing. Besides, William Vanderbilt's hundred thousand in Lloyd's of London would do much to assist in my new life. It would assist very nicely, indeed.

Rifling through the grooming gadgets, I seized upon a button hook. With fierce precision, I began the endless business of undressing. Boots, jacket, skirt. Petticoats, bustle, bloomers, garters, stockings, corset, camisole. Finally nude, I examined the source of my discomfort.

A psoriasis plaque bloomed along my inner arm just above my elbow. It was an itching circle, the size of a silver dollar, its remedy easily found in the top drawer of my steamer trunk. Mug wort liniment soothed the mad urge to scratch. I wrapped a muslin strip over it as a shield from any clothing.

The knock on my door resumed.

A steward's voice said, "Ice for madame!"

Ice to cool the water pitcher. Ice to place inside a cloth to put on the back of my neck. Ice melting through my skin from his fingers. But the touch had not belonged to Cornelius. It was when everything felt lost and someone else cooled the fire on my skin. *Woodhull and Claflin's Weekly* had folded; Vicky's campaign had faltered.

"You will do it," James Gordon Bennett had said, cooling my neck, the ice melting through his fingers. He had meant I would prevail, that we'd get the paper going again, and I had told him that I loved him. But that had been five years ago.

My Chinese robe was inside the armoire. I fastened it round me and opened the door. The steward was my height. Beside him was a man who was much taller. The creases of his suit were cool, flawless. Bennett. The steward handed him the ice bucket.

Should I have snatched it myself then slammed the door in his face? I will never know, because I did not do that.

Instead, Bennett said, "Miss Claflin, I presume,"

I murmured even as my heart hammered, "How kind. Thank you," granting him entry.

He placed the ice on the sideboard and we stood wonderfully close. The sensation of our hearts beating in tandem was in truth the echo of my pulse moving through my body, as it was on the day that we met nearly ten years before, a brief, innocent lifetime ago.

He took a cloth from the ice bucket's handle and wrapped some ice inside it.

He whispered, "You will do it," just as he had years before. He placed the cloth on the back of my neck. The memory of before vanished in the ferocity of our embrace, crushing the creases of his white linen suit. Everything was still.

"Mr. Bennett." I looked up at him. "If I permit you to remain here, you know what will happen."

He met this warning with a kiss. Its tenderness smothered grief and smoothed away sorrow, belying his hubris, his arrogance, his supercilious, objectionable—

Somehow, I willed myself to pull away. "What are you doing here, Bennett?"

"I am on my way to buy a ship." He bowed his head and then looked at me again, still standing, waiting for what would happen next. "Tennie." He moved a lock of my hair and tucked it behind my ear. "Seeing how we left things..." He stopped, and then began again. "Seeing how we left things..."

"Do you mean how *you* left things with Miss May?" "Yes, yes, I do, and also—"

"How I left things with Billy Vanderbilt?" I had no idea whether he was aware of Billy's gift. They moved in the same circles, and there must have been rumors.

After a moment, he answered, "Yes, that too."