

CHAPTER 1



*L*ondon 1896

IT WAS a bright morning in Belgrave Square, where the houses were massively imposing and flanked by equally imposing Doric pillars. Behind the balcony filled with potted plants, two young women were conversing.

“So, how’s our mighty suffragist?” the blonde young woman asked the auburn-haired one.

A couple of days ago, Caroline’s stepsister Edwina had found not only several pamphlets but also old copies of the *Women’s Penny Paper* and new ones of *The Woman’s Signal*. And now Edwina knew Caroline had dealings with a women’s society. Closing her eyes tiredly, Caro recalled the venom in her father’s voice whenever he’d spoken of women who fought for their cause.

“A crowd made of trollops, busybodies, withered spinsters, and hysterical females who have nothing better to do than traipse around the city instead of minding their children and their homes,” he was fond of pointing out.

And every time he uttered these words, Caroline's stepmother Annabelle, and Annabelle's daughter by her first husband, Miss Edwina Crowley, felt bound to heartily agree.

For a year now, Caroline had been involved with the London National Society for Women's Suffrage, although her involvement hadn't been as deep as she wished. She'd had to hide her actions because she still lived in her father's house, and her father's political views and career had made her reluctant to reveal to him her support of the women who fervently wished for suffrage. But now Edwina had gotten wind of Caroline's involvement.

"I thought of something," Edwina now told her, with a smile which made her look like the cat who'd gotten the cream.

Caroline sighed in deep frustration. She knew Edwina only too well. Her stepsister was utterly mischievous and would keep relying upon the information she possessed in order to blackmail her. Already, Edwina had employed this to her advantage by making Caroline lie about her whereabouts to their father. Caroline had begrudgingly complied, although she'd had no notion of Edwina's true whereabouts and had wondered who her younger sister might be seeing on that appointment. Still, she had fulfilled Edwina's demands and had lied to their father. It had been on the tip of her tongue to tell Edwina she would have shielded her even if Edwina hadn't resorted to blackmail. But it seemed even now Edwina wasn't satisfied with the extent of her blackmail.

"What is it this time?" Caroline asked wearily.

She half resolved to come clean to her father right away. As it was, she was painfully aware she would never be able to persuade him that the cause in which she believed was just. And she would have to leave this house forever if she decided to pursue her own interests despite her family's wishes. Caroline well expected she would soon have to do so. But at this moment she felt quite unprepared for it. She needed a little bit more time to concoct her escape.

"Remember how last year you used to moon over Doctor Morrissey, whenever he came to attend to father's gout? You

haven't done that in a while. In fact, you've been avoiding the times he calls upon the house. I wonder why?" Edwina now chirped, a malicious twinkle in her pretty blue eyes.

Clever Edwina! She had most certainly perceived Caroline was quite attracted to their serious, handsome doctor. For a year now, Caroline had attempted to avoid Doctor Morrissey, because she'd come to see her attraction for him was quite deep and powerful. It was also unadvisable. Caroline had no intention to form a romantic attachment. And besides, Doctor Morrissey was barely aware of her existence.

"I cannot blame you," Edwina said with a sigh. "He is so handsome! And he seems like such a stern, no-nonsense man. In fact, he is too serious at times. But do you know what I did a week ago, upon a fancy? Remember that time I claimed I had a frightful, horrendous headache and had to have the doctor summoned?"

Caroline nodded. She did recall. At the time she'd suspected Edwina was feigning her symptoms. It turned out it was indeed as she'd thought. Edwina had summoned the doctor for nothing, only because she loved fuss and attention, and Doctor Morrissey was an attractive young man.

"Oh, it was such fun to be examined by him! And, you know what? I think you'd also have tremendous fun if you call him."

"What? No! Have you lost your senses?"

Edwina smiled impudently.

"I already told Mama you're in a bad way. On the brink of death, nearly. She said to check on you. And tell her if you need to call the doctor."

"This is ridiculous."

"Oh, not at all. And now I'll go tell her you wish to be examined by Doctor Morrissey."

"But I don't!"

Edwina gave a wicked laugh.

"But you do. Unless you want me to tell Papa what I know. You don't want that, do you?"

Caroline began to feel genuinely ill. She knew she'd have to face her father soon. But she didn't feel quite ready to do so at this particular time.

"Right," Edwina chimed in. "I'll tell her you have a pain in... What shall we think of? A pain in the... chest? Yes, that is it. You have a pain in your chest."

"What?" Caroline muttered dubiously, still stunned by what Edwina thought to do.

Surely, Edwina would not really make her mother summon the doctor. It was ridiculous.

"Excellent," Edwina beamed as if Caroline had readily given her assent, then she rushed out of the room.

"No! Wait! I.."

But Caroline didn't have time to make her protests. Edwina already hurried to speak to her mother, and she soon returned with a triumphant grin on her face, informing her that Doctor Morrissey had been summoned. It was an urgent call, and they expected him to come as soon as he could manage it, if he was not presently attending to another patient.

It was more than ridiculous. And, throwing all caution to the wind, Caroline went downstairs to speak to her stepmother to reveal there was nothing wrong with her. She was aware that, in doing so, she risked a great deal. Edwina would probably inform their father of what she threatened. But perhaps it could not be helped.

Annabelle Northampton glanced at Caroline in wide-eyed surprise when Caroline ventured into the downstairs parlour.

"You should be in bed! What business do you have traipsing around?"

"Yes, about that. I am perfectly fine. Edwina... well, you do know she's prone to exaggerate at times. There's no need for a doctor whatsoever."

"Nonsense," Annabelle chimed in brightly. "He has already been summoned and he will do well to attend to you. Just as you should

do well to let yourself be attended to. One can never be too careful when one feels ill."

"But I am not ill!"

Annabelle's bright countenance suddenly turned severe.

"Well, that's for the doctor to decide, isn't it? Now off you go, try to lie down until he gets here."

Her tone was implacable, and Caroline knew from previous experience there was no further room for argument. Silently, she vowed she would soon be done with this house. Once back upstairs, she spent the next hour in sheer chagrin. Doctor Morrissey was the last person she wanted to set eyes upon. He unnerved her. And she supposed it was so because she fancied him far too much, like a silly schoolgirl. But he was just the kind of man who would turn a woman's head in the street. A man possessed of dark good looks and penetrating eyes, sparkling with sharp intelligence. And Caroline was well aware he was quite well-regarded as a doctor, and that they were more than fortunate to have him on call. He was most certainly a busy man, and now she'd irresponsibly ended up calling him to their house for nothing.

She groaned in sheer misery when a maid came to let her know Doctor Morrissey had arrived at last, and she braced herself for the encounter. The maid ushered the doctor in, and she soon excused herself. Caroline supposed she'd never felt so embarrassed. And Doctor Morrissey looked every bit as attractive as she recalled him to be, in that cool, detached way of his.

"Miss Northampton," he said, with an incline of his head.

"Doctor," she muttered in return, colouring at just the sound of his voice and understanding only too well how foolish she'd been to fall for Edwina's ploy.

"I have been told you have a pain in your chest and require my assistance," he said in that deep voice which she found enticing as he strode to her bed.

Caroline sat up, completely flustered.

"I... The pain is gone. Yes. Gone. You need no longer concern

yourself with me, Doctor," she hurried to say in tones which she made overly cheerful. "I am healthy. Completely healthy. Strong as an ox, I would say. So there you have it."

"You said the pain was in your chest?" the doctor inquired, apparently unimpressed by her dismissal of the symptoms.

"A pain – er – chest – you see, I..." Caroline muttered in sheer misery, pointing to herself, and only belatedly realizing she'd indicated her lower abdomen.

Mortified, she paused, flustered, not knowing what to say, as Doctor Morrissey cast her an assessing look.

"It's gone. Now. Completely!" she assured him in utter panic.

He dismissed her words.

"Nevertheless, from what your mother tells me, you were in considerable pain earlier and in dire need of a doctor's assistance. I'd better see what might have been amiss."

Caroline found herself unwittingly nodding, loath to reveal to him what she'd been coerced to do. Even at this time she could not believe she was doing this—wasting a busy man's time with a feigned complaint. Suppressing a sigh, she cursed Edwina in her mind.

"If you would be so kind as to remove your top for me, Miss Northampton," Doctor Morrissey said, as he was setting down his black bag on the chair by the bed. "I shall examine you."

Caroline mentally berated herself. Of all the complaints, why had she faked a chest pain? But then she reasoned that, whatever pain she might have faked, the doctor was bound to touch her and see exposed parts of her body. Biting her lip, she began to undo the pearly button of her top, and then she peeled it away with a fierce blush of her cheeks, to reveal her bust bodice, painfully aware of the large bosom overflowing it.

Doctor Morrissey flicked her a dispassionate glance.

"It would be best to undo your bodice and also loosen the corset. I do not want it to compress your thorax and abdomen

during the exam," he told her calmly as he was opening his valise to take out a stethoscope.

Caroline's blush deepened, but she valiantly told herself she was a modern woman, who meant to fight for women's rights. Modern women, who sought their freedom, did not behave like frightened ninnies. This man was a doctor. And he'd come to examine her.

However, as she undid the back hooks of her bodice, and then valiantly attended to some of the front strings of her corset, she became once again painfully aware how exceedingly handsome this doctor was. And she recalled only too well this was not a true exam. She'd called Devlin Morrissey on Edwina's taunt.

Doctor Morrissey bent over her and handled the black stethoscope, placing the cold end of it on her bare skin, then briskly instructing her when to cough and when to breathe. Caroline told herself that her heart rate must now be highly accelerated and that he could certainly tell. But the doctor's manner betrayed nothing during the exam.

"Are you still in pain?" he asked, when he was finally done.

Caroline's eyes had desperately tried to avoid his face, and they'd unwittingly settled on his hands. But it did not seem to help her heart rate. He had long-fingered, graceful hands. She bit into her lip because she pictured those hands caressing every inch of her body.

"Miss Northampton, are you still in any kind of pain?" Doctor Morrissey repeated.

"N-no."

Caroline shook her head vehemently, knowing this charade had to end. She was not a liar, but Edwina's blackmail had been most effective. This man had been called for nothing. And now she had to make it appear that her complaint was miraculously gone. It would be certainly deceitful, but it was the only choice she had left.

"As I said, it's all gone. The chest pain," she blurted out artlessly. "I am perfectly fine... now."

Doctor Morrissey put his stethoscope away. As if he had not

heard her, he then methodically began to ask her questions. The first question had to do with the breakfast she'd had and the contents of her meal the day before. This was a question Caroline had no trouble answering. But then there were intimate questions that made her cheeks flush even deeper and made her repeat to herself she was a modern woman. Although she did not feel at all modern when she had to answer one last question.

"You pointed to your lower abdomen when I first asked. When was the last time you had your menses – your monthly flow, I mean?" he asked.

"I do know what *menses* means," Caroline found herself retorting in an irritated voice.

Doctor Morrissey said nothing, just glancing at her in a dispassionate way and indicating he was still waiting for her to answer his question.

"A week ago," she muttered, feeling mortified and cursing Edwina to Hell.

"Would you say your menses are regular?"

"What has that got to do with anything?" Caroline found herself muttering.

"I am assessing your general health. Could you please answer my question?" he replied, and his voice was steady and calm.

"Yes. Once a month. Every twenty-seven days," Caroline answered in a small, dejected voice.

When was this ordeal going to end?

"I feel fine now, Doctor. It must have been something that came and went. So you needn't concern yourself with—"

"Nevertheless, as your doctor, this is my concern," Doctor Morrissey cut her off in a firm manner.

Caroline frowned, but she had to admit to herself the man was only doing his job. She was already aware he was a thorough man. A most attentive doctor – from what the members of her family were saying. And her family were snobbish enough to recall that Doctor Morrissey was not a member of their class. They would not

have allowed themselves to be examined by a man of his background, unless he was one of the best doctors to be had.

“Could you lie down for me?” he now asked, in that brisk, dispassionate way of his.

“Why?” Caroline found herself asking in sheer alarm.

“If you please, Miss Northampton,” he told her, but his voice was brisk, and it held no pleading in it.

Caroline had no choice but to comply, and she had occasion to feel the doctor’s hands upon her person at this time. He palpated her chest and stomach, asking her from time to time if there was any pain where he touched her. Caroline had always been a bad liar, and she didn’t want to deceive this man more than she already had, so she answered his questions earnestly.

She felt relieved when he finally asked her to sit up.

“Thank you so much, Miss Northampton. You can get dressed now,” he further instructed.

Caroline hastily fastened her corset and bodice, as he turned his back on her and began attending to his valise. He spun to face her only when she was fully dressed. His eyes roamed briefly upon her figure, and then they came to settle upon her face. They were fine, very dark eyes, and thick lashed. At this time, they bored into her, and Caroline perceived at once that Dr Morrissey was now able to tell her complaint had been feigned.

“Well...” she stammered. “I am perfectly fine now. It *must* have been something that came and went.”

“If you say so, Miss Northampton,” Doctor Morrissey uttered with an incline of his head, now taking hold of his valise.

He turned to leave without adding anything further, and Caroline breathed deep in sheer relief, which was suddenly replaced by alarm when he unexpectedly spun to face her, just as his hand was resting on the doorknob.

His face was no longer composed and dispassionate, and his fine dark eyes flashed as he spoke to her. “Still, since you felt bound to call upon me, I feel bound to give you a piece of advice,” he said,

and unlike his eyes, which seemed to burn with anger, his voice was calm and cold as he spoke.

"Yes?" Caroline forced herself to say, trying hard to keep her voice from trembling.

"When you and your sister find yourselves in need of entertainment, perhaps you should consider pursuing a different object of your amusement."

Caroline gulped, and she lowered her eyes under his stare. It was plain he had been able to tell a week ago that Edwina's complaint had been feigned, just as he'd been able to tell Caroline had called him here for nothing.

"You see, what happened is..."

In vain, Caroline searched for words of apology. She reasoned he would be within his rights to complain to her family of what she'd done. She had been wrong to give in to Edwina's blackmail. Her father was bound to be angered with her anyway. Sooner or later, she would have to reveal to him she'd become involved in the Women's Cause. It was not a thing she could hide from anyone for much longer.

"Let me make this perfectly plain to you, Miss Northampton," Doctor Morrissey now spoke in his firm, steady voice. "If you ever call upon me again with a feigned complaint, I might feel bound to administer a cure for it. Can you guess what that cure might be?"

Caroline stared at him as he went on drily, "To give you a hint, it involves you lying face down across my knee."

And Caroline pictured the scene in her head. Lying across Doctor Morrissey's lap and receiving the good spanking it was plain he thought she deserved. The trouble was she found this naughty picture strangely alluring. She bit hard into her lip, now striving to stare away from him, but unable to do so.

Doctor Morrissey gave a small, polite incline of his head, quite at odds with his earlier words.

"Miss Northampton," he said, before he turned on his heel and strode to the door.

As soon as the doctor closed the door behind him, Caroline collapsed on the bed with a groan. She supposed Doctor Morrissey could very well reveal to the others she'd called him for nothing. And she expected her father would be none too pleased about it. However, that was the least of her worries now. She reasoned yet again it was high time to come clean about her aspirations, and forever sever the ties with her family. Because her father would never allow her to live her life as she pleased.

Strangely though, her thoughts did not linger on her pressing troubles, but, in a peculiar fashion, upon Doctor Morrissey's threat. And yet again, the naughty, brazen picture came back into her head, this time even more vivid than before. Blushing scarlet, she pictured the doctor spanking her bare bottom, with his large, long-fingered hand. And then she strived to feel ashamed of her thoughts.



DEVLIN WENT DOWN THE STAIRS, trying to still the red-hot anger in his blood. He'd barely restrained himself from taking the impertinent chit over his knee to blister her shapely behind. And he was well aware he'd nearly destroyed, in a moment of sheer madness, everything he had worked so hard to accomplish. His career and his reputation. His livelihood. Because there was no doubt in his mind what would have happened if he'd given in to the impulse of giving Caroline Northampton the spanking she deserved. He took a deep breath, trying to still his turmoil. It was odd. When Caroline's stepsister, Miss Edwina Crowley, had behaved in a similar manner, calling upon him with a feigned complaint, he'd felt only mild exasperation over her behaviour. He reasoned his present rage had to do with the fact that he'd been summoned for nothing for the second time in a row. It was plain the two young women meant to have fun at his expense.

He attempted to school his face into a mask of indifference, as

the parlour maid downstairs led him to see Mr. Northampton and his wife. And once he faced them, he attempted to make nothing of the fact that they didn't invite him to take a seat and looked upon him as if he was one of the footmen. Certainly, in their eyes he was no higher than a footman, and he should do well never to forget that. After all, his mother had been the family's housekeeper for more than twenty years.

"And how is dear Caro? Resting?" Mrs. Northampton asked as she was sipping her tea from a dainty bone cup.

"Anything wrong with my daughter, Morrissey?" Mr. Northampton rushed to inquire with a raised eyebrow.

"Miss Northampton is presently resting. She is much improved. I'm persuaded it was a fleeting, minor complaint caused by indigestion. A lighter diet and plenty of rest are all it will take for her to get better. I have advised her to that effect," Devlin said, knowing it was the second time in his medical career he'd been forced to lie about the state of a patient.

He'd not revealed Edwina's deceit and he had no intention of exposing Caroline. It would do more harm than good to do so. Questions would be asked. And Devlin had no illusion about the kind of people he was dealing with. Somehow, they would persuade themselves their daughters were not to blame for their deceitful behaviour. They would resolve it was something in Devlin's own behaviour which had prompted them to behave so. The Northamptons held much power and influence. It would only take one word from them to ruin the career he'd painstakingly built for himself.

Mr. Northampton seemed relieved to hear Devlin's smooth lie.

"Jolly good. Go see Sykes. He'll sort out your bill," he spoke in a cheerfully dismissive voice.

Mr. Sykes was the family's butler, and Devlin had been well acquainted with him for many years. Even if Mr. Northampton had not suggested it, Devlin had intended to go and see the butler. His

mother would never forgive him if he called upon the house without inquiring after Mr. Sykes' health.

"There is no charge for the visit. It was my pleasure to assist Miss Northampton," Devlin now said, knowing not only that he could not take money for seeing to a feigned complaint, but also that his mother would box his ears if he ever as much as attempted to charge anyone in the Northampton family for his services.

"So kind of you, Doctor," Mrs. Northampton interjected, as Mr. Northampton gave an indifferent shrug.

Devlin took that as his dismissal and he soon removed himself from the parlour, to go downstairs to Mr. Sykes' quarters.

As always, Mr. Sykes inquired after his mother, and made a grudging show of letting Devlin examine him. Devlin was well acquainted with the elderly butler's heart complaint, but he already knew, no matter his medical advice, Mr. Sykes would not consider leaving his position with the Northamptons in order to retire.

"At least think of delegating some of your duties to members of the staff," Devlin said with a sigh and a shake of his head, as he handed Mr. Sykes a piece of paper with the prescribed treatment.

"Good, capable staff is so hard to find today," the butler countered with a sigh of his own and a wave of his hand.

It then seemed his own complaint was forgotten, as he hastily inquired of Caroline Northampton's health. Striving hard not to betray his irritation, Devlin assured Mr. Sykes the young woman fared better than expected. And in his head, he resolved she would have fared even better if he'd thrown all caution to the wind and given her the spanking she was asking for. It would have done the impertinent little chit a world of good to have had her bottom reddened for her irresponsible behaviour. As for him... brazen pictures came into his head, and he realized they were unseemly. He strived to suppress them because he had a long day ahead of him, and several patients in genuine need of his help, to call upon.

"So glad to hear of it! She's a good sort, Miss Caro. Quite unlike

most young women these days. And quite unlike her sister, if I may say," Mr. Sykes told him.

Devlin soon took his leave, musing upon what the elderly man had said. Certainly, Sykes had a point, and he himself had perceived a difference between Edwina Crowley and Caroline Northampton. For one thing, Caroline Northampton was ten times more infuriating than Edwina Crowley. While he supposed both sisters deserved to have their bottom smacked for how they'd behaved, it was only Miss Caroline's bottom his hand itched to smack. He resolved within himself that, of the two young women he'd examined, she must be the instigator of what had occurred. Compared to her stepsister, Edwina seemed bland and insignificant. So, it must be Miss Caroline Northampton who'd concocted the joke at his expense.

The rest of the day, Devlin strived hard to put Miss Caroline Northampton away from his mind. He was usually calm and focussed whenever he attended to his work. But oddly, his thoughts kept drifting to her. And it seemed to him it was the first time he'd examined a patient and had paused to take note of the voluptuous curves of her body. He reasoned he was indeed to blame for such unprofessional thoughts, but maybe not entirely, since Miss Caroline Northampton had probably meant for him to take due note of those curves.

His mother soon noticed he was out of sorts when he visited her place before going to his own quarters. She remarked upon it, and he attempted to reassure her, but she soon asked him about his day, and he felt bound to convey Mr. Sykes' good wishes to her.

"They summoned you to Belgravia?" Sarah Morrissey asked, and Devlin suppressed a sigh at the word *summon*.

He supposed that, just like the Northamptons, his mother also assumed he was part of the family's serving staff. He'd attempted to tell her many times that her long loyal service had paid the Northamptons in full for the assistance they'd once lent in his schooling, but his mother had been adamant.

"Had it not been for old Mr. Northampton's reference, you would have never gotten into that school," she often reminded him.

But, in return, Devlin was keen on reminding her that the reference in question had been the only assistance the Northamptons had ever given, and even that assistance had been, Devlin knew only too well, begrudgingly offered when his mother had begged for it. The schooling had been all painstakingly paid due to his mother's hard work and, as years went by, due to his own labours. He felt at peace he'd never taken a cent of the Northamptons' money, but he distinctly recalled the sacrifices his mother had made in order for him to have an education and then go on to become a doctor.

His mother soon inquired why he'd been summoned, and he stiltedly told her of Miss Caroline Northampton's complaint, reassuring her it had been only a minor ailment. He hated to lie to his mother, but he thought it best not to reveal to anyone what had occurred.

"Miss Caro's fine then?" his mother inquired, and Devlin supposed he also resented Miss Caroline Northampton because his mother always spoke so highly of her.

"As well as can be expected," he answered tersely, picturing in his mind the long years his mother had been in the Northamptons' quarters, tending to each and every one of their needs.

He recalled his own childhood, and the lonely evenings he'd spent when his mother was seeing to her many duties. And he recalled how the Northamptons had always frowned upon their housekeeper having a child, and how, upon his mother's stern admonishments, he'd mostly strived to be unseen and unheard by them. It had been a relief to her when he'd gone to boarding school, on Mr. Northampton's reference.

"Such a dear girl!" his mother enthused now, obviously referring to Miss Caroline Northampton.

Devlin's hand painfully tingled, and he realized it was, yet again, itching to smack Miss Caroline's bottom. As always, he turned a

deaf ear when his mother began to recite Miss Caroline's accomplishments. He'd never cared to listen to them. And he'd never held any interest in Miss Caroline Northampton, who was some seven years his junior and who'd been only a toddler when he'd been sent to boarding school.

But the image of Caroline Northampton's overflowing bosom lingered with him through the night. And he began to fantasize of it and of how scrumptious Miss Northampton's bottom would look after a good session spent over his lap. His night was mostly sleepless, and when he was at last able to fall into slumber, it was plagued with lustful dreams.