

CHAPTER 4

Late on Sunday morning John heard the children's voices and came downstairs to find his mother in the kitchen preparing a meal. She looked up as he came in.

'How is she, son?' Hannah enquired about his wife. 'Shall I go up to see her?'

'Not yet, mother. She's sleeping now and the baby is too.' He explained that Sarah had had a bad night

Hannah put a plate of bread and butter on the table. 'Set the table, Lizzie. There's a good girl—ask your sister to help you.'

The girls brought plates from the cupboard.

Jack was standing by the door with a frown on his face.

'What's wrong?' John asked his son.

'I should have stayed here last night with Mother,' the boy said. 'I should have waited until you came home. But Mother said I must go and Annie said I was not to upset her.' His young face was pale with worry.

'You were right to go, Jack. Grandma needed you to help with the others.'

Still downcast, Jack moved towards the table.

Hannah brought some cheese and a jar of jam from the pantry. 'There's not much food in the house, John. This is poor fare for a Sunday.'

'I'll get something sent up from the shop tomorrow, mother. I've had other things on my mind.'

Hannah poured some tea for him and he remained standing while he drank it. He observed the children as they sat together at the table. Except for the difference in their ages—Jack was twelve and William almost nine—the brothers looked alike. The girls too, Lizzie, Nan and Sally, all had the even features and the dark hair and eyes that were characteristic of the Herrington children. Lizzie at ten was plump and pretty while Nan, three years younger, was tall and spindly. Jack had reached a stage where he was untidy, unmindful of his appearance but at the same time he was thoughtful and serious. In contrast William was mischievous and full of energy. Sally, the youngest of his children before the latest arrival, hadn't yet cast away all the charms of her own babyhood. Sally was four-years-old.

Hannah poured out another cup of tea. 'It's for Sarah,' she said. 'She might be awake now.'

Anxious to avoid friction between his wife and his mother he said. 'I'll take it up, mother. Save your legs'.

Afterwards he came down to tell the children that their mother was awake and looking much better.

Sally ran to him. 'Dada,' she said, 'Can I see her now?'

John lifted her up and held her in his arms, 'Not just now, pet,' he said. 'She still needs to rest for a while.' He kissed her on the cheek as he put her down.

Hannah was reaching for her cloak. 'I may as well go home if there's nothing I can do here.'

He took the cloak from her and put it around her shoulders. 'You've had the children all night, mother. You've done enough.' He turned to the children, 'Say thank you to your grandma.'

A chorus of thanks followed Hannah out of the kitchen.

In the afternoon Sarah slept after feeding the baby. John thought she looked a little better and sitting in the easy chair by the fireplace, he let himself drift into sleep. He awakened later to find the daylight had almost gone and through the window he saw a thin layer of mist drifting in the street below. In the distance he heard the intermittent drone of the foghorn. The melancholy sound, coming from the mouth of the river, gave him a feeling of uncertainty. By the light of the fire he saw that his wife had become restless and flushed. She opened her eyes but seemed not to know him. There were noises outside the bedroom door and he heard a loud thump as if someone, he guessed William, had jumped from the attic stairs on to the landing. The baby stirred in her crib and began to cry as he went to open the door.

In the half-light all the children were gathered near the door, looking up at him, staring as if waiting for him to vent his anger. He was conscious of his untidy appearance. He'd removed his jacket and taken out his collar studs. His throat was bare and sweating and his braces had slipped from his shoulders and dangled around his buttocks. The children stood very still.

He spoke gently to Jack. 'Put your coat on, son, and go for Mrs Atkinson. Tell her your mother is not well. Ask her to come quickly.'

The colour drained from Jack's face but he hurried down the stairs, the sound of his feet deadened by the new turkey runner that lay over the tiles in the hall.

The baby was still crying and John went to lift her from her crib. 'Lizzie,' he said. 'Take the others downstairs. Give them a drink of milk and something to eat.' Still holding the child he followed the others downstairs to put the light on for them.

Upstairs again he rocked the baby until she was quiet then put her down and turned his attention to Sarah. Her face was burning and he fetched a cloth dampened with cool water from the washstand. As he wiped her brow, incoherent words came from her parched lips and he knew the fever had returned.

He heard voices below and opened the bedroom door to see Mrs Atkinson coming up the stairs. The baby began to whimper again.

'I've asked Jack to put the kettle on,' the woman said, lifting the child from the crib. 'I'll see to the

bairn first, Mr Herrington, and then to your poor missus.' She carried the child out.

John went on bathing Sarah's face. The fever made her look young and defenceless, like the girl he'd married. He thought how simple life had seemed then when she'd first come, as his bride, to live with him over the shop in Lowcarr. But the mirage of those first days had vanished quickly, to be replaced by a more tangible reality. Of course there had still been moments of joy. In those rooms, Sarah had given birth to their firstborn and John's need to provide for them had spurred him on. Two years later, when their daughter Elizabeth was only a few weeks old, his livelihood was threatened by the news of Mr Logan's death.

'I'll have to go to Tynemouth to pay my last respects,' he said to Sarah. 'He's been a fair employer and a good friend.'

'Well, you'd better go then. I'll watch the shop for the afternoon,' she said.

He was doubtful about her ability to cope with the business. But in the end, having no other option, he'd gone to the funeral and left her in charge.

After the burial, he'd spoken to Mr Logan's widow. The formal words of comfort offered after bereavement felt strange on his lips, and once they were spoken he'd gone quickly to a different subject.

'What have you in mind for the shop?' The words felt like ashes in his mouth.

Mrs Logan replied coldly, that the matter hadn't entered her head.

'I could take it off your hands, if you weren't asking too much.'

'I'll give it some thought,' she said.

He'd returned to Lowcarr worried and uncertain about the future, but within a few months a deal had been struck. John was amazed at how easily and quickly the matter was settled. The price of the transaction was favourable to him and due to his money lending business, raising the purchase price had presented no problems.

Some time before that he'd started a money-lending scheme for a few of the shipyard workers. Drawn into the venture by chance, when one of his regular customers had asked to borrow some money, he'd agreed to a small loan. It had worried him at first that he'd used money from the takings to finance the loan, but with a little careful planning he'd managed to hide the discrepancy from Mr Logan until the money was repaid. That first deal, at a fairly high rate of interest, had set him up and word that he was in business had spread quickly. Within a few months he was in a position to employ two young men to collect the payments. The lads, as he called them, were well built, able to look after themselves and willing to work evenings or weekends as required. At the time of Mr Logan's funeral the balance in John's bank was quite substantial.

Perhaps because of the need for confidentiality when dealing with other people's debt, John never

discussed the lending side of the business with Sarah, and when he broached the subject of buying the grocery business, she'd shown no interest at all. He'd pointed out the benefits that would come her way.

'As the wife of the local grocer you'll be looked up to, Sarah.'

'Fancy that!' she'd replied, with a straight face that made him think he'd imagined the mockery of her tone.

Mrs Atkinson interrupted his daydreaming when she came in with the baby.

'I've given her some sugar water,' she said. 'She should settle for a while.' She put the child down. 'The other children are going to bed. The gas is lit in their bedroom. I said you'd turn it off for them later.'

'What about my wife?' John said, standing up and stretching. 'She's still very feverish. Perhaps I should fetch the doctor.'

At the mention of the doctor Mrs Atkinson sniffed. 'Bring me clean towels and a bowl of tepid water, and then help me to uncover her. If we can get the fever down tonight she should be better tomorrow.'

Together they bathed Sarah's body with cool water. Time after time they bathed her, wringing the water from the flannels, rolling her gently on to her side to bathe her back. Once Mrs Atkinson asked for dry towels, and John took the sodden ones down to dry on the kitchen fireguard, returning with clean towels and fresh water. More than once he doubted Sarah's recovery and wished he'd sent for the doctor. Mrs Atkinson had come well recommended as a woman of great experience but he knew she wasn't a trained nurse.

Towards midnight the fever began to abate and Sarah's brow became cooler. Mrs Atkinson thought the worst was over. 'Keep her warm now. Have you clean bedding and nightwear?'

He sighed with relief when his wife opened her eyes. 'Oh, thank God. Lie still Sarah, I'll bring you a clean nightgown.'

They made her comfortable and after a warm drink she slept.

'When the bairn wakes up, let your wife feed her if she can. That would be good for both of them,' Mrs Atkinson said.

She reached for her shawl. 'I may as well go now. Will you walk down the road with me? She'll be all right until you get back.'

Mrs Atkinson's house was nearby and John stayed with her in the cold, misty darkness until she turned the key in the lock. But before entering she looked at him, her expression grave.

'Mr Herrington,' she said. 'Don't hesitate to call me again. I mean during the night, if needs be.'

CHAPTER 5

On Sunday evening, as she came home through the misty streets after the service at Lowcarr Methodist Church, Hannah passed the end of Grange Terrace and saw lights in the bedrooms of her son's house. For a moment she considered calling to inquire after Sarah but the evening was chill and Hannah wanted to get home quickly.

Since moving to Sandwell, some years ago, she'd kept up her membership at the Lowcarr Church but there were times, especially now the nights were drawing in that she questioned the wisdom of walking home in the dark.

Glad to reach her own house she turned the key in the lock. Inside the fire was burning low but a few lumps of coal soon had it blazing and within minutes she was setting the kettle on the hob, reaching up to the mantelshelf for the wooden tea caddy.

Warm in her chair by the fire Hannah took stock of the situation at John's house. It was quite clear that Sarah, her daughter-in-law was ill but Hannah had offered her assistance more than once, only to have it turned down. Last night when girl Annie brought the children to spend the night here, Hannah knew it must have been a last resort for Sarah.

At sixty-eight, Hannah didn't consider herself to be old. Reflected in the long mirror of her wardrobe she saw a woman who was straight and strong. Granted her hair was now iron grey, but the eyes that looked back at her were bright and she had no need for eyeglasses. She believed that her brain was as sharp as it had ever been and, in comparison to some people of her age, her memory was good. In fact, she could recall, in detail, events that had occurred long ago.

Two years had passed since James had died. She'd not expected that. He was two years younger than she was and she'd always assumed she would be the first to go. It was at times such as this she missed James most. He could always be relied upon to see things clearly, to know instinctively which was the best course to take.

James had come to England across the Irish Sea to find work. He'd found it in the coalmines of the North East, hewing coal that was the making of the steamship industry and the railways. She could still picture his slight, wiry body that, he claimed, was equal to the strain of the hard work and the long hours expected of pitmen.

It had been summertime when Hannah first met James. He told her he was attracted by her dark, laughing eyes. They were married at Lowcarr Methodist Church the following spring and their first son, born in October 1842, was named Charles after Hannah's Scottish father.

'He'll not work down the pit.' Hannah was adamant about that. Her eyes lingered on the tiny face. 'I want better for him.' She knew of the changes that were taking place in the coal mining industry.

Women and young children were not allowed to work underground and the older children's hours had been cut, but conditions remained much the same for the likes of James.

'Aye—it's not fit work for women, but it puts bread on the table and gives us somewhere to live,' James had said.

They'd lived in relative comfort in a miner's cottage. The kitchen was their living room; the place where they cooked, ate and kept themselves clean with water from a pump in the yard. A small bedroom led off from the back of the kitchen and above that was a spacious loft, reached by a ladder. The kitchen range, where Hannah cooked their meals, kept the house warm and heated water for James to wash away the black grime of the coalmine in a bathtub by the fire. A dry midden, a few yards from their back door, was kept sweet with the daily ashes from the fire.

In spite of the coal dust that settled everywhere, Hannah kept the little house spotlessly clean. Their one luxury was a leather armchair, old and well worn, where Hannah sat to nurse the baby, her feet resting on the rag-rug in front of the fire, and where James dozed at the end of each long, hard day.

John was born in May 1844. Hannah's labour was prolonged and painful, and when it became too much to bear, the woman attending her asked for the local doctor to be called in. Hannah was ill for some days after the birth, and later that week, when Dr McKenzie called to see his patient, he had some serious words for her.

'There'll be no more bairns, Mrs Herrington.' He went to look at the babe, asleep in his crib. 'He's a fine wee boy and you can be thankful that you've both pulled through.'

She'd looked upon her two small sons as precious gifts from God, and planned their future with that in mind.

When the lid on the kettle began to rattle, Hannah put her thoughts to one side. She made the tea and waited for it to brew. She tried to concentrate her mind on the present situation but the comfort of her memories lured her back to the time when her children were young and their father not always what she wanted him to be.

James Herrington was a man of few words. Unless he'd been to the *Blink Bonny* he never had much to say. He seemed to find it easier to communicate with those around him through music. Sometimes, especially on Fridays with a full pay packet in his pocket, he'd go straight from work to the public house with his mates. Hannah would stand outside, hoping that if he knew she was there he'd not stay too long. Now and then, she'd venture into the place and, disregarding the minister's teaching on the evils of drink, bring a large jug to be filled with ale.

'Haway!' she'd say to James. 'Fetch your marrers. Ah've made a bit o' supper.'

If she were lucky he'd follow her, bringing two or three of his mates with him and the men,

relaxing in the warmth of the room, would eat the bread, cheese and pickle she'd provided. She could recall the scene clearly.

'Give us a tune on the old fiddle, Jim,' somebody would ask, and James, taking his precious instrument lovingly from its worn case, would lift it gently to his shoulder.

'Right lads, what'll it be?'

But the men, knowing it was useless to request a tune, for James always played whatever came first into his head, would just sit back and listen. Then the music would flow—jigs and dances to set your feet tapping, sweet ballads to bring a tear to your eye and *come all yers* that would persuade even the quietest to join in.

Charles and John looking down from their loft bedroom would clap their hands with delight as the music floated up to them.

Hannah let the warm memories of those days flow over her. She'd always done the best she could for her sons. Charles, apprenticed to a printing works in Newcastle had inherited his father's talent for music and she'd taken in washing to pay for his violin lessons. Then later he'd become interested in amateur dramatics and she could recall the time when, in his early twenties, handsome and fancy free, he was in great demand both as a talented actor and musician. At that time, not fully approving of his theatrical interests, she had expressed her doubts to John.

'Acting is all Charles ever thinks about,' she'd said. 'It wouldn't surprise me if he gave up his good job to go on the stage.'

'Would that worry you, Mother?' John asked.

'Well, it's no sort of life for a Christian. Is it?'

Within months, Charles had been offered work with a touring company and had left home. She tried to make the best of it but when, some time later, his company performed at a theatre in Newcastle, she'd drawn a line and refused to attend the performance.

She had no such worries about John. What a fine upstanding man he'd turned out to be. Hannah was sure, that had John married a woman who could have grown with him, someone prepared to move up in society alongside her husband, his achievements would have been even greater. Perhaps if they'd married in the Methodist Church things might have been different, but Sarah had insisted on the Parish Church, claiming her family were members there.

The sound of someone rattling the back door sneck brought Hannah back to the present. Through the window she recognized the woman who waited there.

'Can ah come in?' the woman said when Hannah opened the door.

'Aye—come on, Mrs Gillis.' Hannah made room for her to pass.

Mrs Gillis removed her shawl to reveal an untidy mop of fair hair. 'Ah've just seen Mrs Atkinson go

in along by. Ah'd been to see me sister in Douglas Street and I saw your grandson Jack going in with the nurse.'

Hannah knew that *along by* meant John's house. Jenny Gillis was the mother of Annie who was John's daily servant.

'Wor Annie said the children stayed with you last night, so ah knew that your daughter-in-law wasn't well. But when you see Mrs Atkinson going in it makes you think that things are serious.'

'Mrs Atkinson!' Hannah was interested. 'Sarah must be bad if she's been sent for. Mind, I haven't seen Sarah myself. I expect you know we don't always get on.'

'It must be difficult for you, Mrs Herrington.' Mrs Gillis patted Hannah's bony knuckles with a plump hand. 'Annie told me how worried you were.'

'Do you think I ought to go along there now?' Hannah said.

'Oh no, I wouldn't go. It's cold and damp out and it's dark now. Your son would soon let you know if he needed you.' She pulled her shawl up over her head. 'I just called to tell you about the nurse.' She went to the back door. 'I'll have to get off home. It's time the bairns were in bed and ah have the little one to see to.'

CHAPTER 6

In the darkness of the morning Sally awakened to see her sisters dressing in the dim light of a single candle. They were whispering.

'I think he's gone now.'

'He wouldn't go unless she was better, would he?'

'Listen!— somebody's talking. Maybe he's still here.'

'Who's here?' Sally shouted, her words muffled by the blankets.

'Hush.' Lizzie moved towards the bed, raising a finger to her lips. 'The doctor was here during the night.'

Sally recollected a disturbed night. She'd heard footsteps on the stairs and voices on the landing. Once she heard her new baby sister crying—her cries mingling with the voice of a woman singing. Pushing the bedclothes away she rolled over to the edge of the bed, slid down until her feet touched the wooden floor then padded to the window to part the curtains and look out. It was dark outside, the remains of last night's fog still hanging in the street below.

'It's too soon to get up,' she said. She was going back to bed when the door opened and Mrs Atkinson came in carrying the baby wrapped tightly in a shawl. Edging Sally to one side she laid the baby down on the crumpled sheets.

'Keep an eye on the bairn, Lizzie,' she said.

The baby was making little snorting noises and her skin had a yellow tinge.

'She'll not wake,' she said. 'She's had a drop of Godfrey's mixture.'

'Is Mam better?' Nan asked bravely.

Mrs Atkinson was arranging pillows around the baby, fussing with the bedclothes. 'The doctor's been here all night. He's just gone.' She hurried to the door but stopped to look back. 'Er—get dressed, Sally pet—it's cold in here. Help her, Lizzie. I have another job to do.' She went out closing the door behind her.

Lizzie was doing up the buttons on the back of Nan's pinafore and while they were so occupied Sally decided on a plan of her own. Unnoticed she moved quietly to the door, opened it and slipped out. She stopped outside her parent's room intending to go in and climb into their bed. The catch on the bedroom door was faulty, sometimes springing open after it was closed, and now it stood slightly ajar, a thin column of light escaping into the shadows on the landing. Hearing someone moving inside the room, Sally pushed gently on the door until it opened wide enough for her to edge in.

Mrs Atkinson was busy at the washstand with a bowl of water and Sally, standing at the foot of the bed, went unseen. She was breathing gently so as not to be discovered when she noticed a sweet

perfume filling her nostrils. She recognised it as *Lily of the Valley*, the unforgettable scent of her mother's favourite soap.

Her mother lay naked on the bed, her dark hair spread over the white pillow. The skin, tautly stretched across her face, accentuated the prominence of her nose. She lay quite still, as though sleeping, but Sally was quite sure that her mother was not asleep. The nurse, still unaware of the child's presence, was wringing out a flannel cloth. Sally reached out to touch her mother's cool skin, and the nurse, startled by the sudden movement, turned quickly.

'Oh, my poor pet,' she gasped. 'You shouldn't be in here.' She came close and drew the child to her. 'Your father ought to be the one to tell you about this.' She knelt on the floor and held the child's taut shoulders with two hands. Sally could hardly feel the woman's arms around her, she was ice cold and shivering. Questions teemed in her mind, questions that seemed to circle slowly like fish in a half frozen pond.

Mrs Atkinson spoke softly. 'Your poor mother has died, Sally. She left this world little more than an hour ago.'

Annie Gillis hung her shawl on a hook behind the kitchen door. It was half-past-six and she'd plenty of time to light the fire in the kitchen range and get some water heated before the family put in an appearance. But kneeling to clean out the grate she heard movements in the rooms above her.

'They're up early this morning,' she muttered to herself, brushing a tendril of hair from her eyes. 'They don't give a lassie time to get anything done.'

She worked faster, only stopping to wait until the wood caught and bright flames licked the coals before she placed the black kettle close to the heat. She needed hot water to take upstairs for the girls and their mother to have their morning wash.

A noise behind her made her turn and she saw Mrs Atkinson coming into the kitchen. The sight of the nurse filled Annie with dread. 'Oh, Mrs Atkinson, you made me jump. What are you doing here?'

Along with most others in the neighbourhood, Annie associated the woman with birth, death and tragedy. Mrs Atkinson was usually the first on the scene at any family crisis.

'I've no time to break the news gently, Annie. I'm sorry to tell you that Mrs Herrington died early this morning.'

Annie began to tremble. 'Died this morning?' She repeated the words as if questioning their validity. Stunned by the news she felt numb but seconds later when the truth flooded over her, her eyes filled with tears.

'Sit down, lassie and dry your eyes.' Mrs Atkinson spoke firmly. 'Now listen. I want to talk to you.' She waited until Annie had wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. 'Think of the bairn. Only four days old and no mother.'

Annie, not sure of what to say, shook her head sadly.

'When did your mother have the last one, Annie?'

Wondering where this was leading, the girl was slow to reply. 'Well—he's four months old, Mrs Atkinson.'

'D'ye think she might nurse this bairn along with her own? Mr Herrington would pay.'

Beginning to understand Annie said. 'Oh! I see what you mean. She might—I could ask her.'

'Is she in this morning?' Mrs Atkinson said. 'There's really no time to lose. I could call on my way home. Likely she'll be glad of the extra money.'

Approaching the house in the darkness of the morning Hannah thought it looked formidable and gloomy and remembering Sarah's obstinacy over moving there she dreaded going inside. Was it possible that Sarah had had some sort of inkling, a foresight into what this place had in store for her?

John had wakened her before seven to tell her that Sarah had died. He'd waited while she dressed and then they'd walked in silence, through the cold streets. As they entered through the front door Hannah tried to put her own fears behind her and turned her mind towards the organising and running of her son's house. She understood that was to be her role now. That was why her son had come to fetch her. In the kitchen the children were huddled around the table, the infant, in a crib at one side of the range, slept restlessly.

'What's wrong with the bairn?' Hannah had spotted the child's strange pallor.

'She's asleep,' Lizzie whispered. 'Mrs Atkinson gave her some Godfrey's mixture to settle her.'

'God help us—does she want two deaths in this house? Does your father know?' she said. 'I mean about the Godfrey's Mixture. It's made of laudanum, you know.'

Lizzie and Nan turned tear stained faces towards her. 'We've not seen Dada yet, Grandma,' Lizzie replied.

Hannah looked at her grandchildren. Lizzie and Nan sat close together holding hands, their faces swollen and wet with tears. The boys were pale and bravely trying not to cry, blowing their noses into crumpled wet handkerchiefs. It was what she expected—a genuine show of emotion. In time they would come to terms with their grief. But Hannah was concerned for Sally. The four year old sat alone on a chair at the far end of the table and Hannah noticed she was still in her nightwear. Her round, babyish face was pale, her eyes dry and distant, her small hands with their chubby fingers clasping and unclasping mindlessly over the fringe of the tablecloth. She took Sally by the hand and led her gently to the drawing room where Annie had lit a fire. John was already there; slumped in a chair, his long legs stretched out. He straightened up as Hannah lifted Sally into his lap and without speaking wrapped his arms around his daughter. The child laid her small head, hair uncombed and tousled, on his shoulder, her pale lips touched his neck just above his collar and he bent his head

towards hers in a gesture of closeness and comfort.

During the day the house became a place of mourning. The heavy curtains were drawn closely across every window and from the outside it looked as if it were sleeping. Neighbouring windows similarly screened showed the householders' respect for the dead.

Hannah was in the hall when Annie came through with a scuttle heavy with coal.

'I could do with a bit of help here, Annie,' Hannah said. 'We should cover the mirrors and pictures as quickly as possible.'

Annie stood still, holding the scuttle with two hands. 'I have to see to the fire in the drawing room, Mrs Herrington.'

'Well, when that's done, come and help me here.' She looked up. 'Better wash your face first. It's as black as the kitchen grate. If anybody came to the front door and you answered it looking like that, what would they think?'

Annie's response was sharp. 'I'd never hear it, Mrs Herrington. The doorknocker's wrapped in flannel.'

Hannah came to take the scuttle from the girl. 'Go on, Annie. Get your face washed.' Her words were kindly. 'I'll see to the fire.'

Annie wiped a dirty hand across her wet face making it even worse. 'I can't believe she's dead,' she wept. 'Only yesterday I was speaking to her.'

'I know you were fond of her, Annie.' Hannah laid her hand on the girl's shoulder. 'But it's God's will.'

CHAPTER 7

London

The late morning sun, shining through the bay window, made a pool of light, brightening the colours of the patterned carpet. The sunbeam lay, like a silk shawl, across the seat and over the back of the sofa creating a patch of warmth. Elvira, still in her rose-pink satin wrap, reclined there making the most of the comfort on this cool October morning. She sipped her steaming coffee and looked over the rim of the cup to where Charles was gazing out of the window into the street below.

‘What is it you find so interesting, my darling?’ The words, spoken with precision, carried the slightest hint of a European accent.

Charles laughed. ‘If I lean forward and stretch my neck I can just see the tips of the trees in Kensington Gardens.’

As he turned to look at his wife, a wave of tender desire swept over him. The feeling surprised him as it always did. After almost three years of marriage his love and need for her remained as strong as when they had first become lovers. When they were apart, as they so often were, he longed for her presence and during the long, empty nights he ached for the touch of her. He came to sit next to her on the sofa and she put her coffee cup down to take his hand in hers.

Elvira Zabatini was Italian. A talented actress, singer and musician she presented a striking, almost flamboyant, personality. Younger than Charles by more than ten years, she carried herself well, showing off her tall, slim figure to full advantage. Her fair hair and golden toned skin set off to perfection her lovely grey-blue eyes colouring inherited from her own people in Northern Italy.

Charles and Elvira had first met in Edinburgh while on tour with Newcombe’s company. Charles, fairly new to the theatre then, was playing juvenile leads, one of which meant playing opposite Elvira. He’d loved her from their first meeting, and she’d quickly responded to his advances. One night, after a late performance, they’d gone together to her lodgings. There they made love all night, at first urgently and passionately, and later tenderly and lovingly. Afterwards their careers had taken them in different directions but they kept in touch by letter and met whenever they could.

Three years ago, when Charles was making his first London appearance playing ‘de Mauprat’ in a production of ‘Richelieu’, Elvira too was in the city. He’d asked her to marry him and she’d accepted at once. Within weeks they were married and living in the rented house in Kensington that they used whenever either of them were *resting*.

The house, one of several arranged in a small square, closely resembled those around it but inside the mode of living was quite unique. Elvira and Charles occupied the first floor rooms. The front

room, usually cold and draughty, was sparsely furnished with a sofa, two hard chairs, a dresser and a large upright piano placed at an angle across one corner. The carpet, threadbare in places, covered the centre of the floor leaving large areas of varnished floorboards surrounding it.

In their bedroom there was a half-tester bed, hung with lace and covered in pink damask. Often it was cluttered with discarded clothes, books, newspapers and scripts to be read. The dressing table, near the window to make the most of the light, was crammed with perfume bottles, jars of cream, boxes of powder and rouge. Its mirrors were festooned with strings of pearls and beads. Gold and silver chains spilled from open jewellery boxes. In amongst the litter were framed and signed photographs of actors and actresses posing in all manner of stances, covering the whole gamut of human emotions. Charles loved this room; it epitomised theatre life; set him apart from the humdrum conventions that he'd followed before becoming an actor.

The ground floor rooms, used as a repository for suitcases and trunks, contained a variety of theatrical properties such as swords and daggers, fans and parasols. Racks of costumes, cloaks and mantles vied with each other for space. The attics were crammed too, except for one that was reserved for Maude. Maude was once an actress but it was some years since she'd been offered a part and now, only too pleased to retain her links with the theatre, she was proud to be 'Miss Zabatini's' dresser.

The rest of the house was a haven for unemployed actors and actresses who were relatives, friends or acquaintances of Mr and Mrs Herrington. It was a rare occasion when Charles and Elvira had only each other for company.

Charles raised Elvira's hand and kissed her fingertips. He held a letter in his other hand, already opened.

'You look worried, Charles,' she said. 'Does your letter bring bad news?'

'Yes,' he replied. 'It's from my brother telling me his wife has died.'

'Oh, my dear.' Her voice was full of sadness. 'Tell me how it happened.'

He gave her the letter and she began to read, slowly turning the pages and when she looked up her eyes were brimming with tears.

'Charles—can we go to them? We have time to spare before the American tour.'

He nodded. 'We could go tomorrow. The funeral is to take place on Thursday. If you like, I'll make the arrangements at once.'

'Maude will find mourning clothes for me.' Elvira brushed her tears away with her fingers. 'Oh, those poor children without a mother—and your brother—did he love her very much?'

'I don't know.' Charles hesitated. 'I suppose he did.'

The platform at King's Cross Station was crowded with travellers from all walks of life. Everywhere

people bustled. Some sorted out their baggage, looked for their wallets or scanned the crowds for missing companions. Some were parting, tearfully taking leave of their nearest and dearest. New arrivals, just off a train from the north, joyfully greeted friends there to meet them. Monstrous locomotives snorted and snarled. Their noisy emissions seemed to soak up all other sounds and people had to shout to make themselves heard. Even intimate exchanges, that in any other place would have been softly spoken or even whispered, were carried on at the top of the speaker's voices.

Elvira and Charles entered the scene following a porter who trundled a trolley on which was balanced two enormous suitcases, a carpetbag and a hatbox. Shining tendrils of bright hair escaped from beneath Elvira's wide hat and became entangled with the black feathers that adorned it. Her closely fitting jacket, emphasising a fashionably small waist, was fastened up to the neck and trimmed with fur. As she walked, her full skirt flowed with her movements, now and then revealing a small foot and neat ankle encased in a smart buttoned boot. Even dressed in black from head to foot Elvira attracted attention.

'Take my arm, darling,' Charles said. He glowed with pride.

Elvira glanced up at him and smiled, and then slipping her arm through his, she stepped out to match his stride. She didn't miss any of the admiring glances that came her way from fellow passengers. Nor did Charles. They made a handsome pair, his tall lean figure and dark good looks a perfect foil to her golden beauty.