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# Prologue

London, 1871

**A**N archway of forsythia, gilded with yellow blossoms, beckoned guests to the formal garden of Orham Park. Inside, pensive Greek statues rose above beds of perennials, and a light May breeze caused the flowers to sway and nod, as if keeping time with the orchestrated strains of Verdi's *Rigoletto* overture.

The most lovely ornament in the garden, however, was Claudette Everly, now Lady Hastings. With a radiance in her expression that could only come from being deeply in love, she stood at the side of her new husband and accepted the good wishes of family members and friends.

"She's beautiful, isn't she?" nineteen-year-old Beryl Courtland murmured to her escort, Lieutenant William Landon, who sat beside her on a teak bench. Beryl had a hard time taking her eyes from the bride's face, so full of promise and joy.

"You would make a far more beautiful bride," he replied with a meaningful squeeze of her hand.

Beryl tore her eyes from the happy wedding party and smiled at William. She knew he spoke the truth. On an ordinary day, Beryl could outdazzle any of the women present. But Claudette's beauty today came from the happiness in her expression.

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Beryl wondered if she, too, could be that happy if she agreed to marry William Landon. She could have a good life, being the center of William's universe. While she had never returned his declarations of love, she did feel a deep affection for the young officer—more than she had felt for any of the other beaux who had pursued her. Of Teutonic heritage, William was tall and fair-haired and carried himself regally in his scarlet-and-white uniform . . . and he never seemed to notice the admiring female glances that were sent his way from every quarter.

Most important, William was a consummate gentleman. He behaved as if his life's mission was to see that Beryl never lacked for anything she set her heart upon.

Beryl sought Claudette's face again. *I could be just as happy.*  
"Beryl . . . darling!"

From out of nowhere her mother advanced upon them, her lorgnette held out in front of her like the figurehead of a ship. "*Ah, vous voilà!*" she panted. Before Beryl could answer that they had been there all along, Mother drew in a stout breath and turned to William. "Would you mind fetching us some punch, *s'il vous plaît?* And some of those marvelous shrimp pastries?"

Gentleman that he was, William left at once, not bothering to point out that one of the myriad of servants would likely be by with another tray shortly. He had been gone for only a second or two when Beryl's mother reached down and pulled her to her feet. "Come with me," she ordered. "I want you to meet someone."

"I've met enough people today," Beryl answered with a shrug of her shoulders.

"Graham Harrington," her mother went on, her opal earrings bobbing with every syllable. "He hardly ever goes out socially

since his wife died. This may be your only chance to make his acquaintance.”

“And why should I want to make his acquaintance?”

“Because he’s richer than Croesus, that’s why.”

Beryl glanced toward the refreshment canopy. “But what if William comes back while we’re gone?”

Her mother’s face loomed closer, and the tone of her voice grew uncharacteristically hostile. “You would be better off if he never came back.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“I mean that your young lieutenant is the fourth son in the family and will likely inherit nothing when his father dies. Do you want to live on the generosity of his older brother for the rest of your life?”

“But he loves—”

“Loves?” She spat out the word as if it were an oath. “What a comfort that will be when you end up scrubbing your own floors and tending to your own brats!”

As her mother’s grip tightened on her arm, Beryl looked once more at the new Lady Hastings. This time it was not the joy in the bride’s expression that drew Beryl’s attention, but the lines of the sateen gown, obviously crafted in Paris. Sunlight danced off the huge diamond-encrusted brooch fastened upon her bodice. The lace veil, most likely woven in Brussels just for the occasion, spilled out from behind her curls.

Beryl brushed the wrinkles from the skirt of her gown. It was a copy of one of the latest French fashions, and had, until just this moment, been her favorite. Ignoring an almost overwhelming urge to look over toward the refreshment canopy once again, she straightened her shoulders and smiled at her mother. “Did you say that Mr. Harrington is a widower?”

# I

*London, 1875*

JUST as the omnibus rolled to a stop at the corner of Park Lane and South Street, Jenny Price caught sight of an old Gypsy woman. The woman's wizened looks and filthy clothing contrasted sharply with the backdrop of Park Lane mansions. The Gypsy only stood there, hunched and statue-like behind an upturned apple crate, yet something about her posture gave the impression that she was waiting for someone.

Jenny moved to the front of the horse-drawn vehicle, handing the conductor fourpence before stepping down to the pavement. She had taken only two or three steps when an inexplicable impulse seized her and she looked to the right. As departing passengers and pedestrians passed by on both sides, Jenny found herself locking eyes with the old Gypsy woman.

A gold tooth gleamed as she smiled, but the woman's eyes were as dark and lifeless as bits of coal. "Read yer fortune, pretty miss?" Surprisingly, the soft voice carried through the frenzied street noises. A clawed hand scooped up several tarot cards from the apple crate. "Tell yer future?"

For a fraction of a second Jenny stood frozen to the spot, unable to tear her eyes from the woman. Then a loud clattering startled her, bringing her back to her senses. "Hey! Watch where yer goin', you clumsy lout!" an angry voice railed.

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Jenny looked through the crowd to see a crimson-faced peddler on his hands and knees, chasing after the snuff tins that had been knocked from his tray.

She started down South Street at almost a run, not looking back at the Gypsy and not slowing down until she reached the stoop of a narrow four-story house. Leaning against the doorpost, Jenny let out a long breath and waited for her heart to stop hammering against her chest.

*Tell my future?* A shiver ran down her neck at the memory of those dark eyes. *I hope I never get that desperate.*

Straightening, she forced the old Gypsy from her thoughts. Her future, at least for the next two years, had already been decided by God . . . and the woman who lived inside the house in front of her. That *had* to be the reason for the invitation Mrs. Wardroper had delivered that morning. The matron of the Nightingale School of Nursing had smiled broadly as she held out the invitation to afternoon tea, penned in a distinct and familiar script.

Florence Nightingale often sent notes of encouragement to “her” students, sometimes accompanied by flowers, fruit, or little gifts. Miss Nightingale had yet to visit the nursing school that she had founded fifteen years ago, yet she was heavily involved in every aspect of running the place.

“You should wear your nicest dress,” Mrs. Wardroper had advised. Jenny reached behind her waist to make certain that the velvet bow was still tied securely over the bustle of her mauve silk gown. She hadn’t needed to be told to dress nicely. Any summons from Florence Nightingale was a special occasion.

Except for church, it was practically the only time that Jenny wore anything other than her brown uniform gown, white apron, and cap. Nursing was a vocation, according to

Miss Nightingale—not just a career, but a calling from God. Dressing the part only seemed natural and proper, even when a student was not actually at her studies.

Confident that her bow was still in place, Jenny took a few more seconds to tuck some loose strands of hair under her bonnet. Her hair, so straight that a curling rod was of little use, had a tendency to slip out of her hairpins, no matter how tightly they were fastened. When she was younger, it had grieved her that she had no curls to frame her heart-shaped face. Now she had little time for vanity, and her hair was annoying only because of the stray tendrils that tickled the back of her neck or dangled in her eyes.

*You'll be standing out here all day if you wait till your looks are perfect*, she told herself, then took hold of the brass knocker on the door in front of her. A young housemaid answered almost immediately, as if she had been waiting on the other side of the door. “The missus is ready to see you,” she told Jenny with a smile, then accompanied her up two flights of stairs.

Miss Nightingale’s bedroom did not have the appearance of a sickroom. It was a bright, airy chamber with white walls, and the windows had no blinds or curtains to keep out the light. The furnishings were cheerful as well—a cozy bed, tables and chairs scattered about, pictures, a rose-shaded lamp, and a bowl of flowers on a chest of drawers. Miss Nightingale sat propped up on several pillows in her bed. Two cats lay curled at her feet, and another occupied a place on one of the Persian carpets.

“Cook should have our tea ready, Abigail,” Miss Nightingale said to the maid. She smiled at Jenny and nodded toward the chair at the right side of her bed. “Come sit close so we can talk, Miss Price.”

Jenny always felt a sense of awe in the presence of the great

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lady, whose revolutionary ideas had brought about improvements in hospital procedures as far away as the United States and Australia. Invalid that she was, Florence Nightingale was not feeble looking. A visitor did not notice the silver in her hair so much as the strength in her eyes. They were gray, like Jenny's, and didn't appear to miss anything.

Jenny's chair was placed only inches away from a square table covered with neat stacks of correspondence from all corners of the globe. Miss Nightingale faithfully kept up with her graduates. And now that Jenny's year-long internship at St. Thomas's Hospital was almost finished, she was about to join the ranks of those nurses. Exactly *where* she would serve was a decision that lay in the hands of this deceptively placid-looking woman before her.

"I hope you are feeling well, Miss Nightingale," Jenny offered. It struck her that it was a superfluous way to greet an invalid, but what else could she say? The opposite, that she hoped her hostess was *not* feeling well?

"Very well today, Miss Price. I've already lived a good ten years longer than I imagined I would, so it would be ungrateful of me to complain." She shifted on her pillows a bit, causing one of the cats at her feet to rouse and stretch. The animal gave Jenny a bored look of appraisal and curled back up into a ball.

With typical straightforwardness, Miss Nightingale got right to the point. "I asked you to come here so that we could discuss your assignment upon graduation. You've been a most exemplary student in all areas, according to Dr. Sutherland and Mrs. Wardroper."

"Thank you. It's hard to believe the term is almost finished."

To Jenny's surprise the woman in the bed laughed, bringing spots of color to her plump cheeks. "I like people who are

mature enough to take a compliment without blushing and simpering little protests to prove their humility. My main reason for not accepting probationers under the age of twenty-five is because I don't want anyone who is likely to marry and leave the profession, wasting the effort put in to train her. But I must confess there has always been an ulterior motive in the back of my mind." She shook her head. "I simply don't have the patience to deal with anyone much younger than that these days."

"And yet you accepted me."

"The first exception I've made in the fifteen years since the school began. And only after Mr. Adam Burke assured us of your maturity and sobriety. Rare qualities in a lass of twenty-two, if you ask me."

Jenny smiled at being referred to as a "lass"—after all, most women her age were already married and starting families. "Mr. Burke has been a good friend to my family," she responded.

"And a generous contributor to the school at St. Thomas." Miss Nightingale paused briefly. "And speaking of school, I've decided where you are to serve after you graduate."

Jenny sat straighter in her chair. "You have?"

The maid returned just then, carrying a silver tray of sandwiches and biscuits. She was followed by another maid with their tea. The two servants drew a round table up to the bedside between Jenny and their mistress, arranged dishes and poured cups with practiced ease, then slipped out of the room with the mewling cats at their heels.

All of this took less than three minutes, but to Jenny the time seemed to crawl by. *She was about to say Ontario*, she told herself. After all, Jenny had requested to fulfill her two-year

commitment to the Nightingale Fund there, and the rumor in the halls of the nursing school was that the top graduates usually were given a choice of assignments.

Jenny hadn't gone into nursing because of its opportunities for travel. Nurturing others had been a basic part of her personality for as long as she could remember. But ever since Jenny was eleven years old, when her mother had married a former private detective named Joseph Price, she had loved to hear about the countless places her stepfather had been in the course of his career. His stories awakened a desire in her own heart to see something besides Leawick, Bristol, and London.

How exciting life would be if *both* of her interests, nursing and travel, could be combined! Of course she would miss her family. Her parents and younger brother and sister, as well as the numerous relatives on her adoptive father's side, were all very important to her. But two years wasn't a terribly long time. And think of the experiences she would be able to write about in letters back home!

Miss Nightingale reached for her cup, took a sip of her tea, and then continued as if the conversation had never been interrupted. "I was paid a visit last month by a Mr. Graham Harrington, an acquaintance of my sister and her husband, who lives here in London. Mr. Harrington is a widower, and his daughter has epilepsy. The child's nurse is to be married next month."

The older woman smiled, and the only sound Jenny was aware of was the pounding of her pulse in her ears. *What does this have to do with Ontario?* she wondered, then felt a twinge of guilt for not considering the plight of the poor child. She had been praised for her maturity only a few minutes ago, and here

she was thinking only of herself. “How . . . how old is the little girl?” she asked.

“Twelve years old. Mr. Harrington has asked for someone with a great deal of compassion for children, along with more than competent nursing skills. Someone who is willing to attend the Church of England, too, for the child will need to have a nurse in attendance even on Sundays. You came to my mind right away, but of course I wanted to spend some time in prayer about it. Such decisions shouldn’t be made lightly.”

Miss Nightingale set her cup down on the table, dabbed at the corner of her mouth with a napkin, and turned her attention back to Jenny. “You look distressed, dear. Is something wrong?”

Her appetite suddenly gone, Jenny set her half-empty cup on the table as well. “I appreciate your confidence in me, Miss Nightingale,” she said carefully. “But I was hoping . . .”

“You were hoping to be assigned to the hospital in Ontario.”

Jenny’s breath caught in her throat. “I don’t wish to sound selfish, Miss Nightingale, but there are other students who are competent enough to take on this assignment. And I know several who are hoping to stay here in London.”

Miss Nightingale was quiet for a long time, staring down at her folded hands. Finally she said, “Why do you wish to go to Canada?”

“I’m going to be a nurse. There are people there I can help.”

“Even if God would rather you stay and help someone here in London?”

*I’ve got to make her understand*, Jenny thought. “I’ve lived in three places in my life, Miss Nightingale,” she began with a respectful firmness. “I’ve been praying God would send me to Ontario so that I could help people and, at the same time, see

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something of another part of the world. You've traveled . . . I've read your journals. Didn't you feel the same way?"

"I went where God directed me," the older woman answered. "And only to the places where I felt his leading." Her eyes became somewhat sad as she studied Jenny's face. "You just said that you've prayed to be sent to Canada. Has God answered? Do you feel he has directed you to go there?"

"He has," Jenny replied immediately. Even as she spoke, she chose to ignore the voice of her conscience, reminding her that she had suffered doubts. Who didn't have doubts at some time or another?

Even her calling to be a nurse hadn't always been crystal clear. Jenny had always loved children, having practically raised three younger cousins when she was just a child herself. At one time in her life she thought that her nurturing spirit could be satisfied by marriage and a family. At the age of nineteen she became engaged to a fine young man, an architect. His death in a train derailment near Manchester had sent her into mourning for months.

Afterward Jenny had turned down invitations from other prospective suitors. She was determined never again to allow herself to attach all of her dreams for the future to one person. People had a way of dying—people like her natural father, and her fiancé. Depending on another person was likely to end in disappointment.

By the time Jenny had begun to cope with her grief, she started to feel that there was a higher calling to her life—something that hovered, especially in the wee hours of the night, just out of her mind's grasp. She prayed for direction while she kept herself occupied, helping her parents care for her two

younger siblings and operate the bookstore they had founded in Bristol shortly after their marriage.

One day in the store she came across a pamphlet entitled *Una and the Lion*, written by Florence Nightingale herself, about Nightingale nurses working at a Liverpool workhouse infirmary. She could not read fast enough. Every word seemed to drive away more and more of the restlessness that had taken hold of her. By the time she knelt for her bedside prayers, she knew with all certainty that God was calling her into the nursing field.

And she was *still* certain of that. After all, hadn't God miraculously opened the door for her to come to school here in London, in spite of the age requirement? And surely he was calling her to go to Ontario. There weren't enough trained nurses to meet the demand over there. Wasn't it written in the Bible that one of the signs of true Christianity was visiting the sick? Well, there were sick people in Canada, too.

Jenny realized that Miss Nightingale was still staring at her. The woman had not replied to the affirmation she had spoken seconds ago, that God was indeed directing her to go to Ontario. Jenny cleared her throat. "I don't feel that our Lord would be displeased if I helped others in any location, do you?"

"Of course not." She smiled. "Ours is a noble calling. And I know you want to please God. Your character as a Christian has been obvious from the first time I interviewed you." After a thoughtful pause, Miss Nightingale went on. "It saddens me to postpone your dream, but I wonder why God would put *you alone* in my heart every time I tried to think of a nurse to send to Mr. Harrington and his daughter?"

"Why wouldn't he put the need in my heart as well?" Jenny pressed.

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“For one thing, how would you understand the message he was sending? You haven’t even known about the Harringtons until just now. But most important, Jenny, God is very wise. He is aware that this isn’t *your* decision to make.”

The sound of her given name coming from the famous Miss Nightingale disarmed Jenny. “I haven’t had the peace of mind about Canada that I had about becoming a nurse,” she admitted miserably. Her heart was beginning to feel like a stone in her chest. “My prayers have mainly been that God would send me there.”

“Then keep praying about it,” advised the older woman. “You’re still young. You can always go when your two-year obligation is over . . . if you find that it is indeed the Lord’s will. I will even help you find a position.”

“You’re still sending me to Mr. Harrington’s then?”

Miss Nightingale’s eyes radiated kindness, but her voice was firm. “It is solely my responsibility to assign the graduates, dear, and every decision I make is bathed in prayer. You are the person I’m to send to nurse that child.”

There was nothing Jenny could do but agree to what was expected of her. Yet before totally surrendering her will, she had to make one more feeble effort. “You’re certain of this, Miss Nightingale?”

“I’m certain,” the woman said with a smile. “I’ve grown too old not to recognize the voice of God when it echoes against the walls of my heart.”

~

Two weeks later Jenny, her parents, and her younger sister and brother occupied a trio of wingback chairs and a small settee in a corner of the sitting room of the Nightingale School of

Nursing. A handful of other families were assembled in similar groups, but most of the students were still upstairs dressing for the graduation ceremony that would be starting at ten o'clock that morning.

"Have you met this Mr. Harrington yet?" her mother asked.

"Not yet, Mother." Jenny shifted in her starched uniform and looked around at the dear, familiar faces of her family.

Even though she would be returning to Bristol with them for a fortnight, Jenny had gotten up earlier than usual so that she could spend more time with them. Once she was settled at the Harrington estate, she would see them only occasionally over the next two years, whenever her parents could leave their thriving business and come to London.

Her only consolation for not getting the assignment of her choice had been their relief when she told them that she wouldn't be going to Canada after all. Even though her adoptive father, Joseph Price, had understood her longing to see the world, he had worried along with her mother about the hazards of a young woman being so far from home and family.

"Is she as big as me?" Jenny's sister, Nicolette, asked. The lisp caused by two missing teeth was every bit as charming as the ivory sateen and lace dress the six-year-old wore.

"Who, Nicolette? Mr. Harrington's daughter?"

When the girl nodded, nine-year-old Joseph Jr. cut in. "Jenny already told us that she was twelve." He spoke with the slightly condescending air that Jenny supposed was typical of all older brothers. "That means she's twice as old as you are."

"Well, she's twice as old as you are, too."

"She can't be twice as old as me," he retorted with still more superiority. "That would make her eighteen years old."

Jenny reached over to tousle the boy's hair, sending a wink

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to her little sister at the same time. “Mr. Harrington divides his time between London and Liverpool, tending to his shipping business,” she said to her parents. “His steward, a Mr. Palmer, sent a letter last week asking what I’ll need for personal and medical supplies. I’ll be staying in the nursery wing with the governess, right next door to Celeste.”

“Celeste is the little girl?” Joseph Price asked.

Jenny smiled at her adoptive father. His dark hair and beard were now flecked with gray, but she still found him as handsome as her mother was beautiful. “I forgot that I hadn’t mentioned her name. She’s a rather pitiful child, or so I hear. Her mother died right after she was born.”

“The poor dear!” Jenny’s mother exclaimed, her face suddenly clouded with emotion. “Why do children have to suffer so?”

Jenny and her father locked eyes for a brief instant. Clearly, they shared the same thought. Her mother was feeling more than just sympathy for the little girl. Remorse, like some monster from the ocean depths, sometimes reached out its tentacles to squeeze at Corrine Price’s heart, attempting to choke out any confidence that her past sins had been forgiven by her daughter and by the Almighty.

“Celeste has not been as fortunate as I have been,” Jenny said gently, slipping her hand into her mother’s gloved one. “I have a mother I wouldn’t trade for anyone else in the world.”

Her mother smiled and squeezed Jenny’s hand, but her eyes had grown moist. “I know, dear. And I’ve thanked God for every day that we’ve been back together.”

The laughter of a group of people over by the fireplace caught their attention. Jenny recognized the family of Martha Westcott, one of the five graduates who would spend the next

two years in Canada. Before envy could take root in her thoughts again, she considered her mother's words and imagined the loneliness little Celeste surely felt. The nights could be unbearably lonely when no maternal hand had fluffed up a pillow or tucked a blanket around little shoulders.

Too well Jenny could empathize with the child, having experienced countless such nights during her early childhood. Suddenly it dawned upon her that she had more to offer Celeste Harrington than just competent nursing skills. And for the first time, it began to make sense that God would keep her here in London.

## *A Note from the Author*

Dear Reader,

Looking back over the pattern of your life, can you say, as Jenny Price ultimately did, that you're grateful that you did not get something you really thought you wanted? Before I started writing, I was offered a part-time job at the reception desk of a clinic at a small private college. It would be during my children's school hours, and as I'm fond of young people, I just knew it would be fun and interesting.

But alas! I had committed myself to a project that would not be finished for weeks. I was heartbroken, tried to rationalize quitting the project, but ultimately had to turn down the job. Three months later, I landed a dream job conducting sessions in local schools that gave students tools for saying no to drugs and unhealthy peer pressure. The hours were even better, the pay twice as much, the work was fun. I thanked God every day for it!

And I thank *you* for reading *Jewels for a Crown*, my friend. May we both strive to handle disappointment with an eye toward the future, when it's just possible we will look back and say, "That was the best thing that could have happened."

God bless you!

Lawana Blackwell