



DISFIGURED

A NOVEL OF THE GILDED AGE

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PROLOGUE

NORA FERGUSON WAS WOOZY from the punch she'd had a tad too much of at the dance. Her sight was slightly fogged. She was only able to move, indeed, she was only able to remain upright thanks to the comforting and strong grip of Sean Fisher. Sean was a pure gentleman and seeing as Nora's best friend Rose Stone (who was precisely forty-three days older) was behind her, being helped by Sean's best friend Paddy Doyle (who was, as was Sean, two years her senior) much as she was being helped, she found her struggles oddly pleasant.

The spiked concoction had been plentiful at the monthly dance held in the parish hall of St. Mark's, not far from Trinity College and thus an easy and short walk from the Fergusons' brick townhouse on the street that bordered the western edge of Dublin's Stephen's Green.

It must have been nearing or even past eleven as the quartet crossed onto Nora's block. After some pantomime of farewells on the sidewalk, she made it up the stoop under her own power and was through the shiny ebony front door that was opened by Edgar, the Ferguson family's butler, just as the girl's foot hit the topmost step.

With some effort, she turned slightly to vaguely wave to the others before nearly falling into the foyer as her friends laughed loudly and continued happily along York Street to deposit Rose at her own house just a block farther along, their voices and laughter echoing against the neighboring townhouses as they went.

Nora's unstable entrance could not be sustained very far or for very long. Sally Desmond, her lady's maid, was quickly upon her to yet again help her charge get to her room. She'd been waiting anxiously on a chair in the dining room looking out the window for her mistress's return. She was thus able to gather Nora promptly, putting her left arm around her mistress's waist as Nora put an arm around Sally's neck and the pair climbed,

though rocking slightly side-to-side like drunken sailors, the stairway to the second floor. Nora's room was to the right, across from her mother's. Her father's was down the hall facing, as was her mother's, the house's rear.

As Nora was the only remaining child in the house, the rooms of her two brothers, Billy and Tommy, had become guest rooms, which they used when they spent the night, although that was rare now that they had wives and children and were living in their own houses in some of the newer, northern parts of Dublin.

None of this particularly mattered at the moment to Nora Ferguson. She knew she would be suffering much of Saturday from her excesses but expected to be recovered by Sunday morning for the sober walk to St. Mark's for services.

Indeed, she had other things about which to be concerned. Truly, though, there were two. They were Paddy Doyle and Sean Fisher.

"I don't know what to do," she moaned to Sally. The maid had just finished removing her charge's boots and had begun helping her from her dress. It was among Nora's favorites, a fine dark blue muslin.

"About what, Miss?" Sally asked as she was undoing the stays on the corset.

"You know exactly," Nora said, and with a mix of amusement and exasperation Sally said, "I do, Miss, I do. But you must decide one of these days."

Nora quickly turned, pulling the corset from her maid's fingers. She dropped her shoulders slightly and said, "I know, I know."

In the silence, she turned back and allowed Sally to complete her task before going to the bathroom to see to her toilet and returning to put her sleeping gown on.

She had a fine if classical figure with slight breasts and pleasing curves. Her face was round with a small nose and broad lips. And when she let her golden auburn hair flow down over her shoulders and she stole a glance at her image in a mirror, she

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took a sinful pride in what she saw. To Sally, who nearly always caught her mistress's self-study, Nora was an equal mix of beauty and intelligence and if neither Sean nor Paddy could see that, those fools did not deserve her.

Sally had waited as always for her return, turning the bed down in her mistress's absence. It was a warm evening. The bed covering had been folded and placed in a corner, and on the bed there was just a single layer of her bed clothes for Nora to get under when she was ready.

The maid always placed a pair of pillows leaning against the headboard of the bed, dark mahogany with four posters but no canopy. It gave Nora the chance to chat before she dismissed the servant. And, as expected, Nora did want to chat. She almost always did when returning from a dance or other entertainment when she had been with the two gentlemen who had long been uppermost in her thoughts.

With Sally standing somewhat at ease to the side of the bed and Nora with her back against the pillows and the sheet brought up to her chest, the mistress went through the events of the evening.

How she'd entered with Rose, and Paddy and Sean were immediately upon them.

How the four of them spent the evening together and danced and nibbled and had too much punch.

It was, in fact, the same story that Nora told Sally after nearly every dance or party she'd attended and it ended as it always did, with Sally removing the extra pillow and Nora arranging the remaining one and apologizing to Sally for going *on and on about those two* and Sally wishing her mistress a good night as she turned down the gaslamp and Nora thanking her maid for tolerating her self-indulgence before quickly falling gently into her sleep.

Her sleep was peaceful as she glided into images she would not remember when she awoke.

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It was not to matter. At some hour not long after she'd drifted off, she was awakened by a large noise, a bang loud enough that she was immediately wide awake. It was not long before smoke began to enter her room in the gap beneath the door. In a confused state still in her bed, she could see the bright red of flames in the opening providing enough light to show the way to it.

Without a thought, she ripped her bed clothes off herself and was up, hurrying by the light of the fire to the door and reaching for the knob. It was warm but not scalding. She opened the door and before she could move, the flames shot into the room and set the right sleeve of her gown and a patch of her hair ablaze. Somehow, she got the door closed and extinguished the flames by flailing her hands on her head and rubbing the sleeve against her stomach in the darkness with the smoke seeping in beneath the door.

Nora was nearly frozen by the rumbling and whizzing sound of the flames in the hallway and could not help but breathe in the acrid air.

She was able to restore some of her senses and there was light enough for her to be able to rush to the window, throwing it open to the empty street and the empty Stephen's Green beyond it. More and more smoke was being sucked into the room from the hallway. Now it was growing and growing, and her breathing became even more labored.

She hung her head outside gasping, and heard the butler Edgar desperately call "Help, Fire" again and again from the floor above where the servants had their rooms. Seeing Nora at her window below, he shouted whether she was alright. She hardly knew. She called to him that she believed she was.

A young couple happening by on the pavement across, along the Green's tall iron fence, heard the commotion. The man left the woman and raced towards the Liffey to find the fire brigade while the woman rushed to the house next to the Fergusons' and pounded on its door to see if help could be gotten there.

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As her room filled with smoke, Nora thought of her parents, in rooms across the way, rooms on the other side of the hallway that was engulfed in flames. Her panic increased a thousand-fold as she realized she could do nothing for them beyond praying that they had somehow escaped.

She had no time to pray for herself. The smoke filling her room was thickening and being drawn to the outside air, and her. The calls from the other servants reached her from the floor above, shouting for help. Suddenly, she heard the clanging of the fire brigade's bell getting nearer and nearer and in what seemed like a moment, firemen were placing ladders against the house's outer walls. One reached her room and another, longer one stretched to the third floor.

A young lad was quickly up to her and maneuvered to get her coughing and exhausted body, wearing only the scorched nightgown, down the ladder. She was laid on her back on the pavement across from the house while the servants who were above were extracted one by one.

"My parents," she rasped. She calmed when told that men were already going out to the back of the house to find them. When she had somewhat more of her senses about her, she dared to look at the house and it hit her that anyone who'd not yet gotten out was likely burned too much to survive.

She struggled to rise. A glance to her right, and she saw what she thought were all the servants, most well enough to be sitting on the curb, wrapped in blankets and soot and staring as one at the house, flames lapping at the windows of the rooms so recently vacated. There was no sign of her parents. Then through the gathering crowd, dear Rose Stone came through, herself in a robe over her gown and on bare feet and set herself down beside her friend.

* * * *

"BACK WITH US, THEN." Nora heard the matronly lilt as she stirred herself awake, a mistiness encompassing her mind and

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finding herself in complete darkness. She gradually was able to distinguish between the sounds of people talking and metal clattering and an overwhelming sadness washed over her until she felt the gentle touch of a hand rubbing along her upper arm.

“Miss Ferguson, Miss, you hear me?”

It was a male voice she did not recognize. The hand continued to rub up and down her upper arm, pushing slightly in like some sort of machine massaging her limb then grasping her hand. She remembered that she’d been asked a question though she could not recall what it was, so she stayed mum.

“Miss Ferguson,” the voice repeated more slowly. “Can you hear me?”

The urgency was clear, and she focused tightly on being able to answer this simple query. “Yes, I can hear you.”

The hand was released, and the man said, “Good.”

His gentle fingers moved to either side of her face, which she was beginning to understand was wrapped in a bandage.

“I am going to remove the covering,” he said, pausing to add that he was a doctor and that she had suffered some terrible wounds, “including, I’m afraid, to your face.”

She was able to breathe deeply and finally nod to him.

He began to hum a quiet Irish song she seemed to recognize but could not be sure about as he slowly removed the bandage inch by inch, unwinding it until its end flicked away and she was free of the material.

She tried to open her eyes but there was too much light, and she shut them again. Someone pulled the curtains down, darkening the room. When she again did open her eyes, they were not blinded by the light. Instead, she could make out a nurse standing at the foot of the bed. She felt fingers on her head, and turned to its source, and there stood a doctor of some years and grey hair with a very serious look on his face.

“You can see, yes?” he asked, and she could only nod.

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He turned. "Nurse. Get her some water," and the nurse beside him rushed away while the other one remained at the foot of the bed.

"You have suffered many shocks, my dear," the doctor resumed, "and we are doing, and have been doing, our best to bring you through." He lowered his voice and leaned in a bit closer. "Frankly, how you made it this far is something of a miracle."

She turned from him to the nurse, but she could not quite focus on her. She was nothing but a blur, though Nora could make out her blue outfit. She was brought back to where she was when the second nurse, the one who'd gone for the water, returned to her side. The doctor moved back slightly so the nurse could administer to her, though it only amounted to lifting the cup to the patient's lips and holding it so she could get some of the water, the nurse lightly telling her not to drink it too fast.

Once done with that and with the wrappings removed, the doctor looked down at her. He rubbed an ointment on her face, mostly on its right side.

"This will help with the healing," he said.

"Healing?" she asked.

As he continued his ministrations, he described what had happened. About the fire and the thankfully short trip to the hospital. The luck that a competent surgeon was on duty when she arrived, so her grave condition was immediately recognized.

He did not get very far, though, when she asked about her parents. *What happened to my parents?*

He removed his fingers from her face, and the nurse who had brought the water reached for Nora's hand and gave it a squeeze then held it. For a moment, it diverted Nora's attention until she turned with great foreboding back to the doctor.

"As you know," he began somberly, "there was a great fire. By the time the fire brigade arrived, it was too late. We do not know where or how it began, but it quickly consumed the rooms of both of your parents and help could not reach either of them.

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They perished in the inferno. You and all of the servants were the only ones to make it out.”

The nurse gave a tighter squeeze as the doctor’s words reached her.

Her dearest parents. Gone. Like that.
Gone.

* * * *

IT WAS A GREAT blessing that Nora’s wounds were not as severe as they at first appeared to be. They were extraordinarily painful, and for much of her stay at the hospital she was dosed with morphine and her thoughts and memories, at least when she was awake, were hazy and traumatic. Her dreams were chaotic.

Her parents were dead. That was not a dream.

If anyone visited her in the first weeks, she could not recall it.

She benefitted greatly, though, from advancements that had been made since the War in the Crimea and even the American Civil War in her treatment, although she never dared view her face in a mirror, the brutal termination of what had become a regular habit she had done so often in what she’d begun to think of as the before-time.

Her body other than her face was mostly intact, except for a large and originally painful stretch on her right arm, below the elbow and across her knuckles. The doctors told her that they surmised that she’d used that arm to try to shield her face when she opened the door to her bedchamber, with flames igniting her nightgown’s sleeve, though blessedly the fire there not catching and preserving her from what would have been a likely deadly inferno encompassing all of her.

It was thought something of a miracle that she had survived with the few, however serious, injuries she suffered, not least in her lungs with the smoke she inhaled before she was rescued.

Those who visited her would sit, even when Nora was heavily dosed and unawares. Sally, her maid, cut her mistress’s beautiful hair to remove the burnt and singed portions and evened it out.

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Though she knew it would be some time before anyone would notice Nora's still ravishing locks. She dared not suggest having a mirror brought to her.

Sally told her that none of the servants suffered anything but minor burns, being that they were above the floor where the main conflagration took place, that is the floor shared by Nora and her parents. The speculation was that the fire began with an overturned candle in Mrs. Ferguson's room though there would never be any proof to resolve the mystery.

Not that it mattered. The house was a shell and within a week efforts had been made to clear the charred debris so something could be rebuilt on the land, now owned by the oldest son.

* * * *

IN THE WEEKS WHEN she remained at the hospital, she had regular visits from her brothers and sisters-in-law, who skirted the issue of what was to become of her. In their silence, Nora knew in fairness she could not pressure them to dwell on what had befallen her, particularly in light of what had happened to her parents. She'd not been able to attend their funeral services.

William, the eldest, would inherit the house, or more accurately the land on which there was nothing but the charred remains of what had been the Fitzgeralds' fine house, and the bulk of her father's estate. He told Nora that he would make sure that the servants would be taken care of until they had the chance to find other employment.

Nora, of course, was closest to her maid Sally. At first, she came to the hospital almost every day, trying to provide whatever Nora needed as if she was still her lady's maid. There came a time, though, when she no longer had the luxury of spending so much time with Nora and through the assistance of Edgar, the butler, she got a position with another family near Stephen's Green and was no longer able to visit nearly so often.

For their part, Paddy Doyle and Sean Fisher came, together, to the hospital several times in those first weeks but they could not

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hide their discomfort or their refusal to look at Nora face and gradually their visits became shorter and less frequent until they simply failed to appear taking whatever affection they had for her with them, except for the occasional Sunday appearance.

More than anything, and more important than anything, was her dearest Rose. She made a point of coming nearly every day to the hospital. She would sit with her friend. Sometimes she read aloud even when Nora lay in the bed or in a chair beside it under the influence of morphine or laudanum, sometimes drifting off. She would study Nora and also wondered what was to happen to her and prayed that she could overcome the tragedy that had befallen her on what was otherwise such an ordinary night.

* * * *

AFTER A MONTH, NORA had recovered enough to move to her brother Tommy's house in the city's northern reaches. It was awkward at first but being in a new place with new, if familiar people, lifted her spirits immeasurably. When she was well enough to return to church for services, it was at Tommy's local church. She was glad that it wasn't St. Mark's where everyone and his brother would be coming up to her and offering their condolences and such and suffocating her with their well-meaning wishes.

Word, of course, spread in the unfamiliar church about who this odd, scarred stranger who was once plainly beautiful was, and she was welcomed into the congregation, a congregation not nearly so exclusive as St. Mark's.

And through it all, Rose remained Nora's angel. She took the tram north to Tommy's house and spent hours there or in a nearby park simply *being* a friend. dear Sally, too, sometimes ventured north on her one day off and slipped voluntarily and happily into being Miss Ferguson's servant for some hours before Nora insisted that they go for a stroll so that she could

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learn more about the girl who knew perhaps more about her than did anyone other than Rose.

For her part, Nora was no longer dependent on the morphine and the laudanum to exist. She grew stronger and in some respects saner with each day and was finally able to address the great question: *What was to become of Nora Ferguson?*

After three or four months of doing little, Nora ventured into Sackville Street. She'd read some advertisements about governess positions in England and America. When she arrived, she sat with a Mrs. Helen Thompson. She explained what had brought her to seek out a position.

"I must be honest with you, my dear," said Mrs. Thompson, "but your looks could be a problem. That's just the truth of the matter, it is."

Nora was hardly surprised and said as much.

"Surely there must be a family for me?"

Mrs. Thompson ran her finger along the piece of paper on which Nora had listed her frankly impressive educational achievements and said she would try her best.

END OF PROLOGUE

1.

NORA FERGUSON WAS STRANGELY comforted by the increasing anger of the storm that was crossing the Island of Manhattan in the early afternoon of a Saturday in the first days of November 1880. It had been just a slight thing not an hour before, when she had finished tending to the three Calhoun children in the classroom on the third floor of a brownstone on the north side of East Twenty-Eighth Street. She was their governess.

Now, she was in her room. It was far smaller and less comfortable than the one in which she long and pleasantly lived on York Street in Dublin, but that room and that house were gone for nearly a year now. As were her parents and such beauty and prospects as Nora Ferguson once had.

Perhaps the only thing that was restored was her hair, which over the months had grown to replace the parts that had been shorn off by dear Sally in Dublin.

She had in the intervening year tired of the little she could still do in that city. Her brothers became increasingly uncomfortable with this reminder of the inferno that had consumed their parents.

Sean Fisher, the man who more and more seemed fated to be part of her future, had drifted off and Paddy Doyle had become attached to Rose.

Only Rose and Sally had established their continued devotion to her. Even they were of the mind, though, that she needed to get away if she was to recover, even with the physical wounds having healed as much as they ever would.

The other wounds? The unseen ones? No one knew whether they would ever heal, least of all Nora herself.

She'd found a position as a governess in New York. It had been through Mrs. Thompson in Dublin and a corresponding agent in New York. Her unconventional training and most particularly

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her unconventional looks made it difficult, but they found a family—the Calhouns—that was desperate, unable to keep a governess because of their awful children and their barely concealed appearance as pretentious, bumpkins who'd been lucky enough to get rich in a western Pennsylvania oil field.

For Nora, it was hard. But it was something.

All of that was baked into who, or what, Nora had become. And that November day's rain had moved from the comforting sheen of the light drizzle she recalled from Dublin at this time of year to the violence of a late Autumn deluge whistling through the canyoned streets of New York City.

She sat in her room. Her room. Sparsely furnished with a narrow metal bed with a wooden side table, a dark wardrobe, a dresser, a wooden chair, and a well-worn armchair. The floor planks were dark and wide and were covered in large part by a Turkish carpet, also well-worn with portions that barely concealed the wood beneath it.

Cheap paintings in wide frames occupied the wall space covered with yellow paper adorned with reddish vertical stripes except in spots along the ceiling where the paper was peeling from the wall and except over the bed, where there was a crucifix. Nora wasn't Catholic but the prior governess, the one who left when she got pregnant (or so Nora was told), was. Nora left it hanging there though she didn't really know why.

Still. She'd come to love her room. The desk and wooden chair that were against the wall opposite the window. Nora's collection of books placed on it beside a stack of stationery.

And perhaps more was the window itself. It didn't look out across to Stephen's Green. It faced the row of similar brownstones on the other side of the street, such color they once had with flower boxes that were filled in the summer having drained away by the time her first November had come around.

She felt a challenge from this storm.

The children she'd been hired to educate would not be her concern again until eight o'clock on Monday morning. The less

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said about them the better. They were Martin, a short, stubby boy of eleven; Martha, a short, thin, freckled girl of nine; and Frederick, a seven-year-old of average height and blond hair. Each was born in Pennsylvania, and their frontier ways were not enhanced by the family's sudden wealth. The three fought each other more than they studied and insulted Nora more than they fought each other.

Nora had quickly learned that making a slight suggestion for improvement had precisely the opposite result. Worse, as the children discovered what conduct had the greatest effect on the governess. And the parents, particularly Mrs. Calhoun, were deaf to the slightest note of concern or exasperation from Nora beyond insisting that the Irishwoman must do better. It made for an unhappy existence for the governess.

Nora had given up on making any comments to the Calhouns other than saying that the children were progressing very well, which was a lie that didn't seem to bother anyone. And it did not bother the governess in this.

As for her, she was entitled to have her meals brought up to her when she wasn't required to dine with the family. On this Saturday, Francis was the maid tasked with bringing her midday meal. After she'd placed the tray on the table that ran along a wall in Nora's space, she pulled a letter from a pocket in her apron and, with a "beggin' yer pardon, Miss," handed it to Nora.

After the girl, Frances, who'd grown up on a dairy farm in upstate New York, left, lunch was ignored as Nora sat on the bed to read the letter. She recognized the familiar handwriting on the envelope. From Dublin. Rose Stone.

The two corresponded regularly, and it was Nora's great connection to her home, or least what had long been her home before the tragedy that sent her to America. While she also wrote to her two brothers, that was a matter of obligation, and they were brief and infrequent in their own writing to her. They would mention Nora's nieces and nephews, but Nora doubted

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those young relations would much remember her and she was saddened each time she read news about them.

Much as she missed her family, or what remained of it, it was the loss of Rose that cut most deeply. And never so much as when she read this letter. Rose had long since written to her about having married Paddy Doyle. That was not long after Nora left for New York. She'd been truly happy for them both.

But Sean Fisher, the one in the end Nora truly pined for. He had suddenly moved to Liverpool, to take a job at a shipping firm. He never wrote.

Now Rose was telling her that Sean Fisher had passed on to Paddy that he'd gotten himself married to the daughter of the owner of his firm and was now a vice president at that with a baby already on the way, the timing and hurried nature of the wedding suspicious, though hardly uncommon, in light of the news about the baby. It didn't matter to Nora. Not after all this time and his having decidedly removed himself from her life.

She restored the letter to its envelope and placed it in the drawer of her side table. She must write to Rose about it, insisting that her congratulations be conveyed and great wishes to Sean and his bride be extended.

And repeating, as she always did, her great wishes for Rose and Paddy and her anticipation of little Doyles making a fine mess of things.

Now, as she ate the sandwich and drank the tepid coffee she'd removed from the tray and placed on the table, she felt a strange comfort in the extinguishment of that last vestige of a true future in Ireland and the plain appropriateness of the continuing onslaught of the New York weather to which she had become accustomed. At least it wasn't the brutality of a dank and humid New York August, the screens the only thing that separated her from the bugs and allowed her to sleep, however roughly.

It seemed apt to Nora.

She thought of staying in instead of walking the several blocks to the Church of the Incarnation on Thirty-Fifth Street and

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Madison Avenue. The journey, though, had become a weekly pilgrimage, a comfort at the start of her Saturday afternoon, often followed by a random yet cleansing walk in the neighborhood, sometimes even reaching the East River or the southern parts of Central Park to the north and west.

She was determined to journey to the church, to her preferred pew, which was about two-thirds of the way down the church's right-hand aisle. That November Saturday's storm, happily for her, made it unlikely that many other and older souls would venture there. She could be alone with her thoughts.

When she finished eating, she touched her window. It had become icy from the insistent rain and sleet that continued to crack and splatter on it.

Yes. Only a fool would venture out in this.

She finished tidying her room and returned her plate and cup to the tray, which she placed on the floor outside her door for Frances to collect it. She selected a plain cream day dress. Its hem was frayed since it was by far her most comfortable and hence the most frequently worn and she again told herself she would mend it before Christmas. Just not yet. It draped nicely across her slight and pleasantly curved form.

Although she would not be out long getting to the church—under ten minutes—she decided on her long-lined coat. It had survived her trip from Dublin. On the shelf in the heavy wardrobe that stood as her closet were several hats, she took down the most practical of them. It had a broad rim. She placed the coat on the bed and opened a drawer, where she found a pair of leather gloves and a scarf, both of which she had accompanied her on her flight from Dublin.

Using the small mirror on her narrow dresser, she adjusted her simple bonnet and secured it with her favorite hat pin. The hat was new but the pin had been a present from her parents years before. And the image in the mirror? That, too, had come from Ireland and she doubted that the task of seeing it reflected

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back at her would ever become easy, though it had become easier over time.

She wrapped the scarf around her neck and secured it with a loose knot then put her gloves in her right hand. Finally, she lifted the coat and crossed it over her lower arm. She opened the bedroom door. The house was very quiet, and she heard little but the echoes of the storm bounding and whistling about. She headed down to the foyer.

The family kept umbrellas in a stand in a small closet near the front door. She grabbed one of the older of them, being careful to leave ones that might be used by a family member in place. It was black with a large point at its top. Though some seasons old, it was sturdy.

In the foyer, she placed the umbrella against the wall by the door as she put the coat on. Outside was cold, though she didn't know how cold. The coat would suffice, and she shook herself to have it drape her properly. After sliding her gloves on, she collected the umbrella and awkwardly opened the heavy front door. The storm was raging, and she opened the umbrella as a buttress against the wind howling down the block.

Evans, the butler, came out suddenly through the door at the far end of the foyer that led to the servants' stairs. It was the way to both the basement with the kitchen and to the servants' quarters on the fourth floor.

"Miss Ferguson. Are you possibly going out in this torrent?" He shook his head.

"Do not worry, Mr. Evans. I shall survive. We had plenty of rain in Dublin."

"But not of the iciness of a frigid day in New York. Are you sure?"

She smiled. She was rarely the recipient of kindness of any sort from the staff, although it was vastly more than she received from any of the family members, but she was determined and she would go.

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She thanked the butler for his concern as he hurried to hold the door for her and nodded as she went out, waiting a decent interval before securing it again.

Nora wrestled the umbrella open with some effort and positioned it so it pointed into the wind. She feared the path would be slippery and that the steps might have a slight bit of ice, so she was careful in stepping down and felt on surer footing when she was on the sidewalk. She headed west and then turned up Fourth Avenue. She was almost unprepared for the bracing northerly wind, which explained the cold air. The rain came at a steep angle. She needed both of her hands to control the umbrella, wielding it like a shield to protect herself from and like a battering ram to push through the large drops, hoping not to impale a southbound pedestrian in the process.

The wind howled as it scythed off and around the buildings lining the broad avenue. Few carriages or cabs were out. The horses and their drivers would be happy enough for the reprieve.

Nora managed to be relatively dry when she reached the church. Its front was almost smack along the Madison Avenue sidewalk, and one entered it at doors with one, two, or three stone steps, the number varying because the avenue itself rose slightly from its southern to its northern side.

Her shoes were drenched and soiled and the bottom fringes of her dress damp from the puddles she navigated around and sometimes through as she crossed the numbered streets on the way, looking somewhat like one imagined Elizabeth Bennet did when she first visited Netherfield to see her sister Jane.

It took some effort for her to open the church's heavy wooden door but she did and a wave of quiet crested over her as it shut behind her. Though there was an umbrella stand inside the entrance, she carried hers to her preferred pew on the right side and placed it by its hook in the pew ahead. She was right. She was alone. She could shout out and hear its echo without disturbing another soul—or at least a living soul—but resisted.

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She breathed in the damp air and methodically removed her gloves, scarf, and coat, all suitably damp even though she'd covered herself with the large umbrella, and she arranged them in the hope that they might dry out when she was ready to leave, unlikely as that was. She sat.

The large stained-glass windows of various saints that offered little light on the dark day were to her right. They watched over Thirty-Fifth Street and the harsh rain was smacking against them, the pings echoing across the nave's open space. The quiet inside and the turmoil outside the church somehow created a relaxing cocoon for her. Without realizing and thinking she was alone, she began to sing a childhood song her mother introduced to her.

*Oh, Dear. What can the matter be?
Dear, Dear, what can the matter be?
Oh, Dear, what can the matter be?
Johnny's too long at the fair.*

He promised to bring me a—

She was jerked to attention by a voice in the aisle to her right.

A bunch of blue ribbons.

"That's lovely."

She turned to chastise whoever it was that decided to interrupt her solitude but stopped herself when she saw a vicar collar around the neck of a young clergyman. She'd seen him assisting at Sunday services though she did not recall him ever doing a reading or giving a sermon.

He bowed to her, looking embarrassed for his bit of impolite foolishness in interrupting her so childishly.

"I did not mean to startle you," he said. "May I join you?"

She scooted slightly to her left without a word, and he sat in the space she'd vacated. He turned to address her, waiting till she turned to him, which she did after the slightest delay.

DISFIGURED

"I'm Reverend Morrison. I believe that I have seen you here before."

"I have a face that's hard to forget, I will grant you that."

He ignored what she said and the cutting smile that accompanied it. "And what brings you here on this horrible day?"

She looked from him and towards the altar. "Sometimes I think I'm a leper."

"And that the Lord will heal you?"

"Exactly."

"We have not done that for quite some time."

She turned at his impudence to look at him. His eyes were gentle, and his smile clear, so she took his words to have been meant kindly. His manner put her at ease, and she no longer was quite so perturbed by his interruption.

"Now we focus on ministering to the parts of the person no one can see but herself. And our Lord, of course. What do you need ministering to?"

"I thought the *soul* was your business."

"Well, we find that helping with the spirit can do wonders for a believer's soul. You're Irish, yes?"

"Aye."

"We don't see so many Irish here."

"I'm a governess," she said, "where all the staff is Irish Catholic and the family is Presbyterian. I'm quite content coming here alone."

"A governess? You're educated then."

"Yes. From Dublin. But all my prospects vanished because of my...misfortune."

"A fire?"

She nodded. "It took my parents. And," she paused. "I could not tolerate remaining."

The church was empty but for the pair. He turned and placed his hands on hers. "I am so sorry," he said. She fought against tearing up and was able to say she appreciated it.

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“Shall we say a prayer for their souls?” he asked, and Nora nodded, and he recited one and when it was over she’d lost the ability to control her tears. He took a kerchief from his sleeve and handed it to her before putting his arm around the grieving woman, wondering how often she’d allow herself this intimate display.

This calmed her, as she dabbed the kerchief below her nose until she had regained control of herself and with a final, deep inhalation she thanked him.

“But I think I must go now,” she said as she turned away from him to collect her gloves. The rain’s battering against the stained-glass windows on the church’s southern side along Thirty-Fifth Street had largely ended.

Nora rose and gathered the rest of her things. He asked to accompany her home, and she said that that would be greatly appreciated. He asked her to wait briefly as he hurried into the rectory and was soon back carrying a coat and hat and the umbrella. She restored her damp outerwear and gloves while she waited.

As they walked, the storm had moved on, rapidly heading east. The sky had become blue with a scattering of clouds rushing overhead, but they had to negotiate puddles at every street corner and take particular care in navigating the sodden and slippery manure that was unavoidable in Manhattan, even in such a high brow neighborhood.

She asked the clergyman about himself. For all her time in New York, she’d only really spoken to the Calhouns, and they were a rough-around-the-edges family made wealthy with a lucky strike in Pennsylvania oil country and their conversations, which for the most part only took place when she was compelled to endure dinner with them, were difficult and condescending. She sat with Stephen Calhoun often for breakfast in the dining room before he left the house and she resumed her governess duties, and those meals were far less structured and far less theatrical than were the dinners.

DISFIGURED

The Calhouns were worlds apart from this urbane clergyman who told of being from a well-off family or from those of her class and background who lived in the Stephen's Green neighborhood where she'd been raised.

The Reverend had been reared in the fashionable society that frequented the Church of the Incarnation. He said he rejected his familial expectations and found he had a calling, allowing those expectations to move to his younger brother, now a junior partner in their father's financial firm on Broad Street downtown.

"I must say, Miss Ferguson," he said, moving away from his sketching his own background, "that tending to troubled souls such as yours is why I entered the church in the first place. You would be surprised to learn how many in this neighborhood, even in the richest houses, are in need of a shepherd's care."

He told her that he had been disarmed when he heard her Irish song and the lilt of her Irish voice. It was a song, he said, that his mother sang to him as a boy, trying to get him to settle down to sleep.

It had turned into the most delightful conversation she'd had since she'd arrived in New York. Indeed, it was the probably superior to every conversation she'd had since the Inferno. She regretted it when they reached Twenty-Eighth Street, and she told him it was where her house was.

When they reached the Calhouns' stoop, she stopped him. He'd been carrying her closed umbrella, and he handed it to her.

"I enjoyed our talk, Reverend. I'm sorry for having taken so much of your time."

He reached to hold her gloved hand. "Miss Ferguson. Did I not say my job is to tend to my sheep? That is all I have done."

"And you have done it very well." She shook his hand, and he bowed as she turned up the steps. As she reached the door she turned back and called and said that she hoped to see him at ten o'clock services in the morning.

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“As do I.” He gave another bow and when she was inside and had closed the door behind him, he reversed his course back to his church.