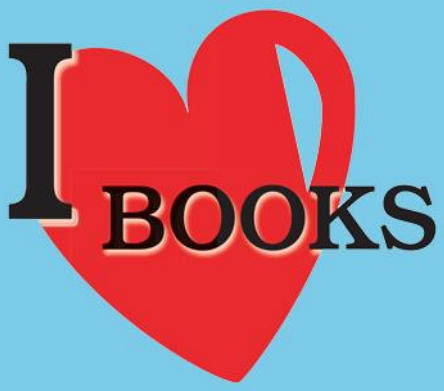

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In an Artist's Studio

One face looks out from all his canvasses,
One selfsame figure sits or walks or leans;
We found her hidden just behind those screens,
That mirror gave back all her loveliness.
A queen in opal or in ruby dress,
A nameless girl in freshest summer greens,
A saint, an angel; – every canvass means
The same one meaning, neither more nor less.
He feeds upon her face by day and night,
And she with true kind eyes looks back on him
Fair as the moon and joyful as the light;
Not wan with waiting, not with sorrow dim;
Not as she is, but was when hope shone bright;
Not as she is, but as she fills his dream.

Christina Rossetti
1856

PART I

THE PEACOCK DRESS

Chapter One

An uncommonly dangerous young woman. She has to go.

The words echoed around Mary Adams's head to the rhythm of the paddle steamer that bore her down the River Thames.

She has to go. She has to go. She has to go.

Standing on deck, Mary drew the ribbons of her bonnet more tightly under her chin and hugged her crimson wool shawl around her shoulders. Even so, the winter wind whipped her face and stray tendrils of long copper hair caught in her eyes. Ahead, the shapes of buildings, tall and ominous, loomed out of the mist. The *Queen of the Thames* was getting closer to London now, leaving everything Mary had ever known in its churning wake.

It wasn't supposed to be like this.

It's the girl, I tell you. No good will come of her.

Thrown out of the job she loved. Beaten by her pa in a drunken rage. Sent to work as a drudge for a family she'd never met. She didn't know when she'd see home again.

Mary glanced around the deck. There were hardly any passengers outside, and the few willing to brave the cold were huddled at the stern of the boat.

Checking that nobody was watching, she leaned over the rail as far as she could stretch, until she could see only the dark, endless waters beneath her. The wind whipped the waves into pounding jets that stung her skin. Under the crest of each wave the water was a thousand shades of green and grey. The colour of her own eyes. Mary thought of the darkness waiting to claim her. How easy it would be to lean further … further … and be gone from this world forever: a mermaid, a skeleton, a ghost.

She breathed in sharply. Gasping, she felt her lungs contract with the shock of the ice-cold air.

Yes! Her skin tingled. Mary laughed at the freezing water. *This is how to feel alive.*

Wet hair clung to her face and rivulets of water ran inside her shawl, down her neck, and into her blue-green bodice. She caught sight of the ringlets trailing

untidily from under her bonnet, turned a river of ruddy clay by the spray. Half-closing her eyes against the bitter wind, she peered at the unknown city emerging from the fog.

"Watch me, Pa! Watch me!" she shouted, throwing out her arms and leaning into the spray.

She was terrified – of the city, the new life, the work and all those strangers. But fear was part of what made Mary cling to life so tightly. And life was ice-cold today, and bitter, and strong as the iron rail. It was sharp on her tongue and stinging in her eyes. It made the blood throb in her veins.

"Look out, miss!"

A voice pierced through the wind behind her. Then came the sound of running feet and a strong hand on her elbow. She looked round to see the anxious face of a young man as he pulled her back from the rail. His coal black eyes met hers.

"You awright?"

Mary shook her arm free of his grip and tried to seem dignified.

"Of course I am … sir." It seemed odd to address this slight young person so formally, but she didn't know

what else to say. Back in Westbrook, she knew everyone by name.

"It's just … over the rail. You looked…"

"I'm perfectly well, thank you."

His face clouded. "But the waters…" He glanced down, embarrassed. "You gave me a fright."

"I'm sorry if I startled you," Mary said, lifting her chin. "I was merely admiring the view. I'm quite safe, thank you." She tried to sound like Miss Elsie Helpman, the teacher at the village school who was always a picture of ladylike composure, and not like a sixteen-year-old girl, cold and wet, leaving home for the first time and forever.

The young man raised his eyes again, and they travelled from her face to her blue-green skirts and back again. Mary noticed with a spark of amusement how long his gaze rested on her very pale skin with its dusting of light freckles, seeming to take in every detail.

"Well then. If you're safe, I'll take my leave. Sorry to have troubled you."

She stood still as a ship's figurehead, whipped by the wind in her bonnet ribbons, while he backed away, never taking his eyes from hers.

"Mary Adams," she said to herself with a smile,

"I do believe that if this were Westbrook, you might have found yourself a beau."

She thought of Mrs Foster, the bitter crone who had called her dangerous and wanted rid of her, and laughed again. *I'm going. And never coming back.*

By now the city – the biggest in the world – was very near. Tall chimneys spewed smoke into the leaden sky. The fog had a sulphurous tinge and there was an acrid smell in the air. Fresh from the country, with its green and brown and earthiness, Mary's senses were overloaded with this strange new world. It was much as she had heard hell described from the pulpit at St Michael's every Sunday.

The steamer moved relentlessly towards the heart of it.