

*Death and the Sisters*

Heather Redmond

Mary Shelley #1

Sample Chapter

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Also by Heather Redmond

The Dickens of A Crime Mysteries

*A Tale of Two Murders*

*Grave Expectations*

*A Christmas Carol Murder*

*The Pickwick Murders*

*A Twist of Murder*

May is the sweet month

Yes, we all dreamed of it once

A poet's embrace

## Cast of Characters

Mary Godwin*	16	Child of fame, a writer
Jane Clairmont*	16	Mary's stepsister
William Godwin*	58	Mary's father, a philosopher
Mary Jane Godwin*	48	Mary's stepmother
Percy Bysshe Shelley*	21	Atheist. Lover of humanity. Democrat
Harriet Shelley*	19	Shelley's wife
Eliza Westbrook*	29	Harriet's older sister
Reverend B. Doone	24	A clergyman
Fitzwalter Abel	28	A Bow Street Runner
John Hocke	21	A handsome young poet
Cecil Campbell	21	A handsome young poet
Mrs. McAndrew	30	Cecil's sister
Sophia Campbell	20	Cecil's cousin
Peter Corn	21	A handsome young poet
Claude Barre	55	A book collector
John Williams*	33	A Welsh man of business
Willy Godwin*	11	Mary's half brother
Fanny Godwin*	19	Mary's half sister
Charles Clairmont*	18	Mary's stepbrother

\*Real historical figures

“Beware; for I am fearless, and therefore powerful.”

—Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*

We drifted o’er the harbour-bar,

And I with sobs did pray—

O let me be awake, my God!

Or let me sleep alway.

—Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*

The rose is fairest when ’t is budding new,

And hope is brightest when it dawns from fears;

The rose is sweetest washed with morning dew

And love is loveliest when embalmed in tears.”

—Sir Walter Scott, *The Lady of the Lake*

## Chapter One

*London, Thursday, May 5, 1814*

*Jane*

“I’m calling my tale *Isabella, the Penitent; or, The Bandit Novice of Dundee*,” my stepsister Mary explained, tucking the notebook she’d brought back from Scotland under her pillow.

“I wish I had your talent for writing.” Fanny, my elder stepsister, seated on the edge of the mattress, bit off the end of the thread from the hem she’d just repaired. Mary’s shift fixed, a trade for the story she’d just read us. “You’re going to be as famous as Mother and Papa someday.”

“It’s just one scene, really,” I pointed out from the end of the bed, irritated by the excessive praise always attached to Mary and her parentage. How could my mamma, mere translator Mary Jane Godwin, compare with their late mother, the famed philosopher and writer Mary Wollstonecraft? “Where is the rest of the story?”

“I don’t know yet.” Mary tapped her pencil stub ostentatiously against her cheek. “I have to decide if Fernando is the villain, or Diego. One has to be the hero.”

“They could both be villains,” Fanny said, her pockmarked cheeks flushing. Her skin was pale like Mary’s, but not in the same ethereal way, though she was only nineteen, three years older than us. She neatened her sewing box and closed the lid.

Fanny rarely left Skinner Street. Not a healthful environment, it showed on all of us. Fanny, pale; Mamma, fat; Papa, old before his time; and Mary, suffering with bad skin and pains. Of my half brothers, Charles stayed away as much as possible, not wanting to run the business he’d been educated for at great expense, and Willy was a petulant child. The doctor had been so worried about Mary that she’d been more away than at home these past years. Even I’d been sent to boarding school when we had the money.

“They could both be the heroes. She can love them both, and they can fight over her.” I winked at Fanny. “Isabella can explore love with both of them. She isn’t tied to outdated morality and the demands of a dead faith.”

“She’s literally a nun in training,” Mary said, frowning at me. “Hundreds of years ago.”

I ran my hands over the soft blanket on her bed. “Your mother and Papa had to have come up with the ideas they presented in their books from somewhere. Maybe atheism and free love were the style in Scotland hundreds of years ago.”

Fanny shushed me, spittle landing on the edge of her lip. “Mary Wollstonecraft? William Godwin? Geniuses don’t need some style from hundreds of years ago to find their ideas. They read and think and, well, write.” She threw up her hands.

“I wasn’t being disrespectful,” I insisted. “That Percy Bysshe Shelley insists community is the way to move forward.”

Mary's lips, not full, but charming in their shape and blooming color nonetheless, curved. "This Mr. Shelley does not know Papa as well as he thinks, despite being his devoted disciple. Papa is not a social being at all. He believes in philosophizing alone."

"He went to see the Shelleys, though," I said. "In Wales."

"And didn't find them," Fanny said with a giggle. "Oh, you'll see, Mary. Shelley, as you must call him, is terribly handsome, with a pretty wife, but I don't think she's coming tonight."

"What does handsome have to do with anything?" Mary asked, picking at the tip of her pencil.

"When you're rich, you can be careless," Fanny said. "And when you are handsome, you can ruin everything around you."

"La." I laughed at her. "Which of us will be known as a philosopher?"

I heard Mamma's voice then, calling us down to the dinner table. We'd been sent upstairs to dress. Must not embarrass ourselves in front of the Godwin family benefactor, this rich Shelley, who had promised to take care of Papa since he was *such* a disciple of the great man.

We collected our younger brother from his room and went down the creaking stairs. Fanny admonished Willy not to run his hands along the walls. They were damp, and the divots from his fingers were starting to show. Plus, during the drier months, the plaster tended to flake off.

In the dining room, where we did most of our entertaining, the walls were papered and dried daily, so they didn't look as bad. Papa had been angry about the expense of the paper, festooned in classical style with columns, grapes, and vine leaves, but Mamma had insisted we needed a room fit for guests. Papa didn't mind accepting the compliments for the redecoration.

They were already in the room, Papa and Shelley. He greeted Fanny and me very friendly but spluttered a bit when Papa introduced Mary. She didn't seem to notice but looked at him under her lashes after we'd all seated ourselves.

Mamma practiced *service à la française*, of course. Papa ignored us as Thérèse, our cook, and the kitchen maid brought in the dishes and placed them in the center of the table, but Shelley's eyes often drifted in Mary's direction. I was bored and merely wanted to get through the meal and back upstairs, where hopefully, I could talk Mary into choosing Diego as the hero so she would continue the story.

I noticed the peonies we had picked on my birthday last week were sadly faded now, despite the sugar I'd added to the water. They filled the air with the scent of decay, almost overpowering the burnt stew. I didn't know why Mamma hadn't tossed the bouquet; Mary and I had been busy minding our bookshop downstairs all day.

Mary glanced at the wilted blooms, the flowers drooping over the chipped jug, then glanced at me sideways. I knew that expression. Judgment, as always. I jumped up from the table, ignoring my mother's hiss, and grabbed the jug. Mary laughed as I opened the window and tossed the flowers onto the pavement below. It couldn't make the street smell any worse. We were across the street from Newgate Prison, after all.

The last public hanging, just out of eyeshot from our front windows, had been over a month ago, but at Smithfield Market nearby, the gutters ran red with animal blood most days.

Time passed, with a discussion of Napoleon that went over my head and floated away without me learning anything.

Shelley delicately pushed his stew aside. "Man forsook the path of nature, and sacrificed the purity and happiness of his being to unnatural appetites."

Mary's eyes went bright. "You are so right." She quoted lines from his poem *Queen Mab* back at him:

And horribly devours his mangled flesh,  
Which, still avenging nature's broken law,  
Kindled all putrid humours in his frame.



Mary pushed her bowl away with an air of triumph.

Shrugging, I pushed my dish away, as well. “What shall we eat instead?”

Shelley’s brown curls danced around his high-colored cheeks as he tilted a plate of sliced bread toward me. The underside of his blue velvet coat sleeve nearly slid through the butter. He would not have cared, I suspected, unlike many gentlemen.

“Man is of soul and body, form’d for deeds of high resolve,” Mary said, quoting again, and took a piece of bread.

“I am flattered by your recollection of my work,” Shelley said, taking the next slice.

He started to pull the plate back, perhaps to offer it to Willy, but I stopped him with my fingers on the edge. “Me too.”

His look slid from me to Mary again. Who could blame him? The pallid, injured girl she’d been when she first went to Scotland two years ago had returned with blooming cheeks, spun spiderwebs of golden hair, and limpid hazel eyes. It was no wonder she’d already had one Scottish marriage proposal, which Papa had turned down.

I bit into my dry slice of bread. Mother tried to keep an elegant table, but she simply wasn’t elegant and always fell short somewhere.

Mary and I were sixteen and positively dying to be anywhere but here, but Papa had insisted we be at home. Neither of us wanted to be shopgirls, which was all Mamma desired for us, so she didn’t have to mind the bookshop herself. She still fancied herself a French-to-English translator, like she’d been before marrying Papa.

Papa and Shelley launched into a spirited discussion about the peace talks that were shortly to begin in France. My mother interrupted occasionally, spouting little phrases in French that added nothing to the stimulating conversation. Our French was very good since we used to live in the Polygon, a collection of thirty-two houses around a garden square, positively teeming with French émigrés.

Papa turned to our visit earlier in the day with Mr. Constable, who published Sir Walter Scott. He and Shelley discussed the *Encyclopædia Britannica* while my thoughts wandered. Would Mary accept a new Scottish proposal if it came? Would I ever see her again if she returned to Dundee? I had no interest in Scotland, but given the opportunity to go to Switzerland, I would be first in line. Mamma said I was half Swiss.

Finally, Papa pushed back his bowl and rose, making a shooping motion with his arm. "I'll speak to Shelley alone now."

My mother went pink with outrage. My father smiled genially at her. "I'm certain you need to close up the office, Mrs. Godwin."

Mary gave Shelley a sidelong glance, then rose, putting her arm around Willy.

I followed them out of the room, the floor squeaking and settling beneath us. Sneaking about was close to impossible in this ill-built house. Our steps on the staircase rattled the entire house. Papa paid no rent on the place since the ownership was in dispute, but as a result, no one maintained it, either, leaving us in a precarious situation.

"Change into your nightshirt," Mary told Willy after pulling it from a peg on the wall and handing it to him.

I picked up his water jug and went downstairs to refill it, trying to keep my footsteps quiet. Papa was attempting to negotiate funds from Shelley, who was heir to a deliciously wealthy family. As a disciple of my father, he had promised to care for the family financially, but as he had little readily available, he had to raise the money by some kind of complicated process I didn't understand.

When I returned with the water, Mary and Willy were sitting on the bed. Mary's slender arms were weaving the air as she sang:

The red-coat lads wi' black cockauds

To meet them were na slaw, man,

They rush'd and push'd and bluid outgush'd,

And monie a bouk did fa', man

I rolled my eyes. "More Burns?"

Willy stuck out his tongue at me. He had reached the age where he wanted to hear about nothing but soldiers and brave deeds of yore. I battled a stew stain on Willy's waistcoat while Mary finished the song. Her voice did not have my skill, but she overcame her weaknesses with the power of her recitation.

Fanny poked her head in. Mary stopped so our eldest sister could give Willy a kiss.

"I see why you were in love with Shelley now," she told Fanny.

Fanny's painfully plain face went pink. "That was a long time ago."

"I was too little then to notice him," I said.

"I don't remember meeting him," Mary said.

"Your Scottish friend Christy Baxter did." Fanny pulled up Willy's sheet. "I think you were ill from the return trip."

"I usually am," Mary said ruefully. She swept the filaments of her hair off her cheeks. "He does have the most piercing eyes."

"Just like you." Fanny's voice was soft. "I like that he worships Mother."

I rolled my eyes. I could admit my mother was an embarrassment, but no one ever sainted the living, right? Mary Wollstonecraft was my spiritual mother, in any case, even if I couldn't claim her flesh as my own. I would have experiences and adventures, just as she had. Fanny had not inherited any of the Wollstonecraft fire, though she, like Mary, had traveled more than I had.

"What?" I suddenly realized all three of them were staring at me.

"You stamped your foot, Jane," Willy said.

I shrugged. "I was thinking I'd like to travel."

“That’s all very well,” Fanny said, “but if you stomp about, the entire house will shake, and Mamma will come.”

All four of us shuddered at that and giggled.

“Mrs. Shelley is very pretty,” Fanny said conversationally.

“I don’t like how she dresses,” I said in a tone of dismissal. “I’m glad she stayed in Bath this visit.”

Mary curled a lock of her hair around her finger. “Shelley though. I like height in a man, and sensibility. Did you hear how rapturously he described Bath?”

“He is nothing like Papa, for all that he claims to be a disciple,” I agreed.

“Papa is old,” Willy said.

“He is bent over by all the writing he does, poor thing.” Fanny ran her fingers down Willy’s discarded socks, feeling for spots where the wool needed reinforcing. She tucked one into her apron.

Mary’s gaze slid over her workmanlike attire. “I don’t think Shelley will grow old and bent. His spirit will keep him upright and strong.”

I snorted. “Who cares, as long as his lips stay full and soft, right?”

“Jane!” Fanny cried, though still in that soft tone she never rose out of, no matter the provocation.

“He is very attractive,” Mary agreed, “but his best quality is his mind.”