



# When Stars Fall at Midnight, Part One (The Midnight Stars Saga #1)

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**Category:** Historical

**Description:** 1921

Estelle

Cast out and alone, I lost everything weeks before my wedding—my betrothed, my family, my future. With nowhere to turn, I accept the help of a compassionate stranger, not knowing it may lead me towards a path I swore never to tread.

Percival

After my wife succumbed to a psychotic break, I placed her in an asylum, a decision that haunts me as I raise our daughter alone. Hope for her recovery wanes with each passing year. I've vowed to uphold my marital duty, yet the arrival of a mysterious woman tempts me with forbidden possibilities. My father's dishonorable legacy is a constant reminder of the man I refuse to become.

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# Page 1

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Estelle

June 1921

My twin sister married on a warm afternoon in early June. The air smelled of lavender and tender grasses that made the music of love. She was a beautiful bride. Her dress had been designed and sewn over the course of a year. She floated down the aisle of the church on the arm of our father. My mother and I huddled together, fighting tears at the pure beauty of her.

Pierre Perrin waited for her patiently, his blue eyes fixed upon his bride, a smile playing at the corners of his lips. I was to think later after I'd been sent away, that I had never seen a man in love with his wife in such an absolute way. There was nothing she could have done to change his mind, other than death. And she was very much alive that June afternoon as she floated toward the man she loved with all her heart.

It was all so simple. Their love, I mean. My sister and I were the sun and the moon. She was warm and light, filled with the yellow glow of goodness. The moon filled me, silvery and mysterious and constantly changing. Sunlight is faithful and always there, even when behind clouds or during the dark hour of midnight when the stars serve as a reminder that the light is never far away. Our moon, though? She doesn't care to stay still, shape-shifting into a crescent or a circle or somewhere in between in her endless thirty-day cycle. One cannot harness the moon as one can the sun.

Later, at the reception in our sprawling, blooming garden, I stood aside, lingering under the shade of a great white oak. I was an observer more than a participant. I'd been demoted from best friend and confidant, to be replaced by a man. My sister's gaze did not search for me as it had all our lives. Instead, she only had eyes for Pierre. As it should be, everyone would have said, had I asked. Still, a sadness lurked in my heart. A bereft, cold feeling inside my chest that even the gloriousness of this day could not warm.

A glimpse into what it would be like to have been born good and lovely. God had not granted me a pure and simple heart as he had my sister. She took after my mother. I was like my father. Restless, ruthless, hardheaded.

One of our servants offered me a glass of champagne. I took it, grateful for the distraction and something to do with my hands besides clenching them into fists by my sides. The string quartet played in the background, drowning out the hum of the bees drawn to the lavender and early-blooming roses. I scanned the garden for my father but found only the eyes of a man I'd never seen before staring back at me. How long had he been watching me? I could not say. However, it felt as if it were no accident, this collision of gazes.

He wore a black suit and tie like the rest of the guests, but somehow, he stood apart. His elegant posture and dark hair slicked back with pomade might have looked like some of the other men at the reception, but his piercing green eyes made it impossible to turn away. I've always loved beautiful objects, and he was certainly that.

Before I could understand what was transpiring, he was before me, bowing, his eyes alight with humor. Or was it disdain? I could never tell. When it came to men, I was often in the dark.

"Miss Sullivan, I presume?" English accent, crisp as white linen. He smelled of shaving soap and leather with a hint of tobacco.

“The only remaining Miss Sullivan, as of today. I’m Estelle. Estelle Sullivan, twin sister to the bride.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you. I’m Constantine Harris.”

“The pleasure’s all mine, I’m sure, Mr. Harris.” I gave him my hand. He brushed his lips against my knuckles without moving his gaze from my face. Despite the barrier of my gloves, his touch sent a wave of heat through me. I backed closer to the trunk of the oak, worried I might faint. A flush rose to my cheeks.

This had never happened before. Nothing made me lightheaded. Or fearful. Or particularly excited.

Constantine Harris did all of those things.

“You and your sister do not look alike,” Constantine said.

It was true. My sister, blonde and petite. Me, brunette and tall. “We’re not identical. Obviously,” I said, flushing. I was the plain sister, whereas my sister was one of the most beautiful girls in our debutante class, if not the most beautiful. I was, quite simply, not—all angles and sharp edges, eyes too big for my face. A gap between my two front teeth, the crown jewel of great humiliation. Did I let anyone know how I felt about my appearance? No, that was not my way. I projected confidence and intelligence, even if inside I wondered why God had been so cruel to make one of us beautiful and the other homely.

“Yes, so it seems,” Constantine said.

“Are you enjoying the party?” I asked, taking in his strong jaw and long, thin nose. A full mouth that I suspected had once naturally curved into a smile but now seemed less inclined to do so. Despite the beauty of his emerald-green eyes, a sadness

lingered there. The war, I suspected. It had taken so many of our boys. The ones who had come home were not the same as when they departed, full of vim and vigor.

“Very much. I’ve only recently arrived in America and am quite taken with the gardens. Your father’s estate is perhaps the most impressive of all.”

“How do you know my father?” I asked, curious. “Or is it my mother with whom you’re acquainted?”

“No, I’m afraid neither is the case. I’m a friend of the groom’s. Pierre’s brother is married to my cousin Louisa.”

“Ah yes. Thomas.” I could not say his name without smiling. Pierre’s brother Thomas and his wife Louisa had been at all the pre-wedding functions. My mother referred to him as a card. I’d found him larger than life, with his loud laugh, quick wit, and charming personality. “He livens up any event.”

“Yes, that he does. Louisa’s a patient woman.”

“How have I not met you before now?” I asked. “Have you managed to avoid the tedious parties over the last month or so?”

“As I mentioned, I’ve only just arrived. Before this, I had a rather long convalescence after the war.”

“I’m sorry to hear of your troubles.” The war, just as I’d suspected. “Are you feeling well now?”

“I’m alive. Which means I’m well enough. Regardless of the scars left by the enemy.”

“Scars? I can see none, Mr. Harris.” A slight note of flirtation had crept into my voice. Another thing I did not do before making Mr. Harris’s acquaintance. “An indifferent beauty, perhaps?”

“You’re too kind.” He tugged at the collar of his shirt, exposing his neck. “But you’ve not seen all of me.” I stifled a gasp at the sight of leathery, waxy-looking skin. “I suffered a burn on one side of my torso. It’s made me look rather like a monster. I’ve had to rely solely on my personality ever since.”

“Beauty such as yours cannot be marred by scarring. It’s the kind that comes from here.” I patted the lapel of his jacket to indicate his heart.

“My fiancée did not feel this way, I’m afraid.” His eyes dimmed. “If you were to see for yourself what the war did to me, you might think otherwise. I’m afraid it is only lonely bachelorhood I have to look forward to.”

“Surely not.” I swept a hand toward the guests mingling on the lawn. “You have only to look below the surface to see that most of the men here are monsters in one way or another. Scars and imperfections are not only physical.”

“Tell me more.” His eyes twinkled. “Take him, for instance.”

He’d discreetly pointed at a friend of my father’s, Mr. Lower.

“Oh yes, Mr. Matthew Lower. At first glance, one might see only a clever businessman with six children, given to him by his loyal wife. Yet it is not enough. He has a mistress who is in attendance this very afternoon, despite his wife’s presence.”

“What a shame. Does the wife know, do you think?”

“I wonder that myself.” I glanced up through the leaves of the oak to the blue sky. “I wonder so many things.”

“About why a man would have a mistress?”

“Yes, that, among other things. You’re European. Perhaps you do not care about such things? The social circles my family exist within are not so forgiving. Scandal is something we fear more than anything else.”

“A pity, if you ask me. When there are so many things that matter more.”

“Like what?”

“Kindness. Humility. Survival.”

I met his gaze. Those crystal-clear green eyes looked right into mine, shaking me into a mass of trembling nerves. What did it mean? I’d never felt this tingle of recognition or attraction before. He was like looking at the subject of my deepest desires and wishes.

“Of what age are you?” Mr. Harris asked me.

“Twenty. Last month was our birthday.” My glass of champagne was empty. I didn’t even remember drinking it.

“ Our birthday. What an interesting concept. You’ve never had a birthday of your own.”

“That’s correct. Until Pierre, there was no experience we did not share. He’s taken my sister from me.” I smiled to let him know I was speaking in jest. Even though just moments ago I’d been feeling so very alone and sorry for myself. With him near, the

loss seemed less acute. The natural order of things, I thought, for the first time. Sisters, even twins, eventually had to leave each other and become a man's wife.

"It's hard to let go," Mr. Harris said, "of what you've known all your life."

"I was just standing here pitying myself a great deal."

"No, you mustn't. You're too lovely to be sad on such a fine day."

Lovely? Other than my giraffe legs and the neck to go with them.

"You do not know, do you?" Constantine asked. "How beautiful you are?"

"You're kind to say so."

"We'll have to speak more of this false impression of yourself," he said.

"Would you like to see more of the gardens?" I shall never be able to explain what made me ask the question. Was it a sense of foreshadowing? Did I know somewhere deep down that we were only to have a short time together? Was that the reason I seized the moment? Invited him into my arms?

"I would enjoy that very much." He offered his arm. "Shall we?"

"Wait just a moment, please. I'm going to steal a bottle of champagne and another glass." I gestured with my chin toward the stone path that led to another garden. "I'll meet you there."

"As you wish."

I scampered away, feeling lighter than I had in months. Was this what Mauve felt for



Pierre? This skittering heartbeat? These damp palms? A throbbing of desire deep within?

If so, I suddenly understood what all the fuss was about.

I led him down the path, lavender scenting the way until we reached a thick wooden door that led into the secret garden. It wasn't really secret, of course. However, being fanciful and imaginative, my sister and I had referred to it that way after reading Frances Hodgson Burnett's book. We'd been eleven at the time, possibly our most romantic of ages. Surrounded by tall walls and a locked gate, it was only Mauve and me and the gardener who ever set foot inside. Mother had not had the heart to visit since Robbie died. Father didn't care for the wild nature of creeping vines, tall grasses, blueberry bushes, and fragrant rosemary. Or at least that's what he said. He might have been more like Mother, not able to bear spending time in a garden meant for his little boy. The son who had died before he reached the age of two, leaving only Mauve and me. A sorry substitute for a beloved son.

Mauve and I were drawn to the overrun garden. Our little Robbie was still here, reminding us of his presence each time the breeze rustled leaves, or we smelled the scent of wet dirt or saw the bloom of peonies and wild roses. After we lost Robbie, it had become a place where we could breathe, outside the confines of our house, bloated and stifling from grief.

As children, Mauve and I had played imaginary games for hours and hours with no one to please but each other. Until recently, my sister and I had spent afternoons under the shade of the maple tree near the far right corner, speaking of our dreams and wishes for the years to come. She wanted to be a wife and a mother. I craved freedom, like a pirate free to roam the earth and sea, exploring new lands and cultures. Living by my own rules, not those of society.

"I've never brought anyone here," I said, unlocking the gate. "It's private. No one

will bother us here.”

While I’d been stealing the bottle of champagne, Mr. Harris had managed to come away with a pile of tea sandwiches. He shrugged out of his coat and spread it out over the grass in the shade of the largest maple. “Please, use my coat. I’d hate to see your lovely dress stained.”

“Thank you.” I dropped first to my knees, lifting my skirts to arrange myself against the trunk of the tree.

“What a heavenly place.” Mr. Harris sat on the grass next to me, his legs stretched out long in front of him.

“The garden was meant for our little brother.” I never spoke of Robbie. Doing so now felt a little like making up a story. “A gift from Father, so that he might have a place to run and play without troubling anyone. Our father was raised in the countryside and spent time in the outdoors every day of his life. When he found success, he wanted very much to have a house in the country. Mother wasn’t as fond of the idea at first, but soon she grew to love the quiet, surrounded by nature and gardens. They live part of the year in the city. We have an apartment there, but Mother almost never leaves here.”

“I can understand why,” he said. “One’s soul can find peace here.”

“After Robbie died, Mother was not the same. She’d been lively and vivacious. One of the most sought-after debutantes of her year. She chose Father even though he had only the promise of his dreams to woo her hand.”

“It seems he made those dreams come true?”

“So, he did. He invested in the right enterprises at the right time. Before they had

Mauve and me, they were already rich. By the time Robbie came, we'd moved out here. Mauve and I were eight when he was born—ten when he died. Mother was devastated. She hasn't been the same since."

"Losing a child isn't something one gets over. No matter how much time passes."

"Mauve and I adored him too. She called him our little pet. We took him all around the estate in a little wagon, but we always ended up here. Mauve would sit in the swing there with him in her lap while I pushed them." I smiled, recalling the way the sunshine had made their yellow curls glisten. "Robbie had golden hair and big blue eyes that seemed...too old for his little face. An old soul, perhaps? I've always thought he was too good for this world. God wanted him home with him."

"May I ask what happened?"

I nodded, stomach clenched. Even after all these years, it was hard to talk about. "He woke one day running a high fever. Forty-eight hours later, he was gone." I could recall it as if it were yesterday; the feverish look in his eyes and the way he'd thrashed about in delirium had been forever stitched into my brain. During those terrible hours when we did not know if he would survive, I'd prayed to God to relieve him of pain and restore him to us. He'd not answered my prayers.

"I feel close to Robbie here," I said quietly. "Sometimes I hear his little laugh in the rustle of the grasses or leaves. I'd have thought it would cause me pain to think of him so often—to imagine I hear him—but it's the opposite. His memory provides consolation."

"I've lost enough people to know there's comfort in our memories, even when the pain feels almost unbearable."

"Father never speaks of him. As if he never existed." This hurt Mauve and me more

than I could say. We wanted to hear him spoken of as if he were a part of the family, not some figment of our imaginations. Even this morning, when I'd helped to fasten the buttons of Mauve's gown, we'd talked of him, wondering out loud what he would be like as a teenage boy.

"I imagine he thinks of Robbie, even if he doesn't speak of him aloud," Constantine said. "When it comes to expressing emotion, women are far superior. Men are afraid to show the deep chasms of pain that are inevitable in this lifetime."

We were quiet, eating the sandwiches chased with cold, fizzy mouthfuls of champagne.

"How long will you be in America?" I asked. "Where are you residing during your visit?"

"As of now, I plan to make a new life for myself here. I have little to go back to, unfortunately. My parents are no longer alive. Besides my cousin Louisa, there is no more family left."

"I hope you'll stay here as long as it pleases you," I said. "God knows we have enough rooms."

"Your family's most generous. In fact, your father's extended an invitation to stay the rest of the summer. He's under the impression you might grow lonely with your sister on her honeymoon."

"Father said that?" I asked, surprised.

"Not specifically, but I gathered as much."

He was incorrect, but I didn't bother to explain. Father was concerned about me

because he didn't think any man would fall in love with the likes of me. "Mauve and I have never been apart. It will be a strange adjustment. One that I expected, of course. The moment we were presented to society, I knew she would be gobbled up."

"Gobble?" He chuckled. "That's an interesting verb to use."

"I find it appropriate. Isn't that what happens? A man takes his wife from her family and everything she's known, gobbling her up until there's nothing left."

"Have you a beau of your own, or has this interesting perspective kept the young men away?"

"I have no beau. I don't usually share my viewpoint, so I doubt it's that particular quality that keeps them from noticing me. Such a shame that I was not blessed with my sister's prettiness."

His mouth twitched into a sympathetic smile. "Ah, there it is again. You think you're not as pretty as your sister."

"There's no thinking about it, Mr. Harris. It's obvious to everyone."

"Not to me," he said, looking me directly in the eyes.

I swallowed my nervousness, utterly speechless. Was it true that he thought me attractive? Pretty even? Dare I hope?

"You're unlike anyone else," he said. He tapped his middle finger between his own eyebrows. "Your mark there—a kiss from your guardian angel—proves me right. You're rare and special. Marked for greatness."

Not many people noticed the pink birthmark between my eyebrows. I'd hoped it

would fade, but unfortunately, the flat pink mark had remained.

“I’ve never thought of it that way. I’ve wished it away a thousand times.”

“Could it be that our true beauty is found in what we see as imperfections? These details we focus on are not in fact the measure of anything, but somehow, they help us to find who we’re truly meant to be.”

I didn’t know what to say. His words moved me profoundly, like answers written on a holy grail. “I’ve wished only that Mauve and I looked the same. Like her, obviously.”

“Would it please you to know I studied you intently over the last few days?” Mr. Harris asked.

I flushed with warmth, feeling it rise to my cheeks. A trickle of perspiration traveled down the back of my spine. “Yes, it would please me. Very much so, Mr. Harris.”

“Please, call me Constantine.”

“I’ve shown you my special garden, Constantine, so you may call me Estelle.”

He poured more champagne into our glasses. The bottle sweated in the warm afternoon. Overhead, birdsong provided a sweet serenade.

“What have you left behind in England?” I asked. “That leaves you starting anew in America?”

“There’s nothing to leave behind, which I suppose answers your question. Louisa’s like a sister to me. My mother and father took her in when she was orphaned at only twelve years old. With Thomas and Louisa living in New York now, I feel the tug to

be close to them. In America, I hope to make my way. Find direction and purpose. I've come out of a dark time and like a moth, I seek light."

"What did you do before the war?" I asked. Like so many, he'd obviously put his life on hold to fight against tyranny.

"My family owned a bookstore, which I ran in the years after my father's death—before I was called to serve. Not the most lucrative of professions, but one I loved. Without a profession or experience in anything but selling books, it seemed wise to pursue a new life in America. As I said, I have nothing left to lose. Our store was destroyed during the war. Without many options left to me, I took Louisa up on her kind offer to come to the States. Your father has put me in touch with several businessmen in need of private secretaries. My talents would be well-used in such a position."

I studied him for a moment. He seemed meant for more than the assistant to some arrogant man, but who was I to say? I'd never done anything remotely difficult in my life. I was a wealthy heiress expected to marry well and have children. "If I were a man, I'd have liked to go to school and acquire the skills for a profession."

"If you were a man, you'd have a position in your father's firm."

I lifted one shoulder. "I suppose."

"Are you interested in marrying any of the young men currently pining over you?"

I laughed, shaking my head. "They're interested in my father's money, not me."

"Why do you say so?"

"I know what they say about me when they think I can't hear them," I said. "They

call me headstrong and tiresome with too many opinions and homely as an old goat.”

“I think that’s more a commentary on them than you.”

I lifted my gaze to meet his, suddenly shy. His attention intoxicated me. Or was it the champagne?

No, it was the man.

“If I were not poor as a pauper, I would put my hat in the ring,” Constantine said.

“But alas, I have nothing to offer you.”

“But I have money. If you were to marry me, then you would have money too. In fact, it would be your money then.”

“Isn’t that a shame? That being a man affords me such luxuries?”

For a moment, I thought he was teasing, but his eyes had flattened, and his mouth set in a serious line.

“Well, there’s nothing to be done about it,” I said. “This is the world in which we live. Anyway, as Mauve would point out if she were here, I should be grateful for a life of ease into which I’ve been lucky enough to be born. She doesn’t fret over the same things as I. There is no gnashing of teeth or loosening of corsets for my sister.”

“Be that as it may, I can’t imagine she’s nearly as interesting as you. Tell me, Miss Sullivan, what would you do if you could? If there was nothing restricting you?”

I blinked, surprised at the question. However, I’d certainly thought about it enough times in my twenty years on earth to provide an answer. “If I could do anything in the world, I would like to write a book. Or books.”



His eyebrows raised. “Is that so? What kind of book would you write?”

“Something wholly unimportant but addictively clever and intriguing. Stories with mystery and romance. Forbidden love. Unlikely heroines and men who do not care if they’re different or unusual. If only I had anything from which to draw. Instead, I’m trapped here with nothing to do but hope a suitable man decides he wants to marry me.”

“What about an unsuitable one?” Constantine waved away a fly that threatened to perch on my hand.

“Do you have anyone in mind?” I held my breath, hoping...hoping he would offer himself up to me.

“Ah yes, I certainly do. It could be me. I would offer you my devotion and the promise to make something of myself so that you might respect me. I’d not burden you with the heaviness that comes from pretending to be anything other than yourself. You could write your books and I would be your humble muse.”

“Since we’ve only just met, this is a big promise.”

“Indeed. But I’m a man of my word. Only death could keep me from fulfilling whatever promises I’ve made to you.”

“You have a golden tongue, Mr. Constantine Harris. Perhaps you should be the one to write the books?”

“No, I’m content to be a reader. In fact, I could be your reader. The first one anyway, before you send it out to the masses.”

I shook my head, reaching over to pluck a breadcrumb from his shirtsleeve. “What a

lovely picture you've made for me. Much like the dreams my sister and I spoke of when we were still young and naive. Hers all came true today when she married Pierre. He's good—kind and considerate. He'll make a wonderful father and husband." I sighed, a dart of joy expanding my chest at the thought of Mauve and Pierre starting their life together. "He adores her. Just as she is."

"You deserve the same."

"I don't know. I'm not good like Mauve. I have way too many contrarian thoughts."

He laughed, part bark, part giggle. I'd never heard any sound as delightful. "How about you let me be the judge of that. Tell me one of these contrary thoughts."

I hesitated, questioning myself. Should I be so bold as to suggest he court me? What would Father think of such a match? He'd been poor once too. Maybe he would see the potential in Constantine and give him an opportunity.

"I would like to be courted by someone like you, regardless of your station in life. In fact, I would like to be courted by you."

A smile spread across his handsome face, lighting up the already bright day. "I would agree it's a most pleasant idea. But your father would never agree to it, would he?"

"Father was not born rich. He might see something in you that others wouldn't. As I do."

He set aside his glass of champagne. "I'll do my best to convince him."

A niggling thought intruded. Father had invited him to stay at the estate. The invitation in itself was not unusual. Father could be a generous man, especially when he wanted something in return for his favors. Yet what could be the reason to offer

our home to a stranger? Had he seen something in Constantine Harris that he wanted?

Or had he bribed Constantine Harris to woo me? If something seemed too good to be true, then it probably was.

“Tell me, Constantine. Did my father put you up to this? Give you money to woo me and possibly marry me?”

He looked at me, aghast. “My dear, what an imagination you have. I have told you my honest thoughts and opinions. If you were to see yourself as I do, all your questions would dissipate, and you would see a man smitten and intrigued. Do not let your false assumptions and doubts cloud what is before you. I beg of you.”

I gazed at him for a moment, and a feeling I’d never had before in my life washed over me. This man had been made for me and I for him. I knew it with a clarity I’d not before encountered.

“No need to beg. I believe you,” I said, laughing and singing at once. “I have no earthly idea how to explain what’s happening to me.”

“Does it need to be explained? He picked up my left hand and brushed his mouth against my knuckles. “There’s so much bad in the world. Can’t we simply look upon this as a gift?”

“I suppose we could.”

“May I kiss you?”

“No, not today. Perhaps another? When you’ve asked my father’s permission to court me.”

“I shall be patient, then.” He lifted his glass. “Shall we toast?”

“To what?”

“Do you really need to ask?”

“No, I don’t. Not really.”

We grinned at each other, lost for a moment, until a crow interrupted our picnic by swooping in to take one of the sandwiches, flying off with a great flutter of his black wings and a sandwich clutched in his beak.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:02 am*

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Estelle

“Is this what you want?” Father asked. “Or should I say, whom you want.”

“It is,” I said. “He’s everything I could want. And more.”

Mother and I had joined Father in his study. The subject at hand? Whether or not Father would agree to the marriage of Constantine and me.

Mauve and Pierre were set to arrive home from their European honeymoon in just a few short weeks. I could hardly wait to see my sister and tell her everything that had transpired since her wedding day. I’d already imagined a hundred times her facial expression when I told her I’d fallen in love during the three months she was away. Madly and deeply in love with Constantine Harris.

Constantine had already come to my father and asked for my hand. I had every reason to hope Father would agree to the marriage. He’d consented to a courtship without much discussion, a fact that had surprised me a great deal at the time. But now that my parents knew Constantine as I did, I felt certain that they would see how well we fit together. Despite his financial status, he and I were compatible in every way. He’d won my heart so easily I had to laugh at myself for ever thinking there was not a man out there for me as there had been for Mauve.

“I shall consent to the marriage,” Father said. “But his position in life must be elevated. We’ll find something in the company for Constantine to do. He’s intelligent

and hardworking.”

“Humble as well.” Mother looked up from her needlepoint. “Such a dear boy, really.”

“I think so too.” I flushed, recalling the passion we’d shared just last night. We’d not been able to stop ourselves. The tension had built up for weeks and weeks, and when he’d told me he’d asked Father for my hand, I’d been so overwhelmed with love and desire that I’d quite lost my head. Not that it mattered. We were to be married. I would have him in my bed every night starting very soon.

“Thank you, Father.” I stood, rounding the desk to kiss his ruddy cheek. “You’ve made me very happy.”

“I hope we’re not wrong about him,” Father said, as if discussing a business deal. “If he’s only in it for the money, it’ll soon be transparent.”

“He’s not,” I said. “It’s me he wants.”

“I sense that too,” Mother said. “Although he’ll have to prove himself worthy at any account.”

“I’ll tell him tonight,” Father said. “After supper. Over a scotch. As I did with Pierre.”

“Won’t it be wonderful to have both my girls married? Babies soon to come.” Mother smiled, her eyes softening at the corners. “To be young and in love. There’s no better feeling.”

“Other than to be middle-aged and in love,” Father said, winking at Mother.

“Dear me. You’re positively naughty.” Mother’s cheeks flushed, but a subtle smile

played at her lips.

“May I go?” I asked. “I’d like to have Abigail fix my hair before tonight.”

“Yes, my dear. Off you go.” Father waved me out of the door.

“Have fun tonight, darling,” Mother called as I sailed out the door to the study and danced up the stairs to my room. I’d wear my new blue dress to go with my eyes and have Abigail coax my curls into a becoming twist. If tonight I was to be proposed to, I must look my best.

How silly I was now. This is what love does to a woman. If only I’d known, I might not have been so critical of others succumbing to Cupid’s arrow. Now that it had happened to me, I understood perfectly.

Constantine was supposed to arrive promptly at seven. He’d been called into the city to take care of something but had promised to be ready to take me out for a walk before supper. The weather had cooled considerably the past week, but it was still warm in the afternoon. By sunset, the temperatures dropped and brought the hint of autumn. The air smelled of drying leaves and late-blooming roses.

I sat with Mother in the drawing room trying to read a book but was too distracted. Minutes ticked by, one after the other, until it was thirty minutes past the hour, and he had not yet arrived.

Agitated, I got up to pace around the room, wringing my hands. Something was wrong. I felt it deep inside. He was in trouble. Or had he changed his mind?

Please, Connie, don’t do this to me. Don’t break my heart.

Another thirty minutes passed. Mother, too, had started fretting. Father came down

dressed for dinner and still Constantine had not arrived.

I was about to go out of my mind and go out looking for him when our butler, Frank, appeared in the doorway, looking pale and shaken. “The police are here. They’re asking for you, Mr. Sullivan.”

My stomach dropped to the floor and remained there. Tears pricked my eyes. Father exchanged a glance with Mother. I knew then. He suspected the same as I. Constantine was hurt. Or worse.

“You stay here,” Father said to me. “I’ll be right back.”

I sat next to Mother on the couch. She put aside her needlepoint and took my hand in hers. Minutes passed, the second hand ticking and ticking, driving me mad.

Finally, Father returned, looking grim and a little green.

He’s dead , I thought. “Father, tell it to me straight.”

Father sank into the couch on the other side of me. “There was an accident. A collision of motorcars. Head-on. I’m sorry, darling. Constantine was killed.”

Even though I knew it was coming, the shock of it hit me as if I’d been suddenly tossed against a brick wall. A howl rose up from deep inside me. A knowing, too, that he’d been too good to be true. He was too good for this world. For me.

I was meant to be alone. But I didn’t want to be. I wanted Constantine and the life I’d dreamt of as his wife. The way he’d tamed me in ways I never thought possible had given me hope. The dangling promise of a life had suddenly been plucked from me. Constantine Harris was the love of my life. Besides Mauve, he was the only person who would ever love me just as I was.



Mother took me in her arms, and I wept and wept. Nothing mattered without Constantine. I might as well have died with him.

### Percival

A few minutes after ten, my taxi driver pulled through the gate of Marbella Mental Asylum. Marvin, the gatekeeper, recognized me and waved us through. We traveled down a winding driveway, rows of poplar trees on either side. I rested my head on the back of the seat and focused on the fluttering leaves, anchoring myself to something beautiful before I faced the ugliness that awaited.

The taxi driver glanced back at me, either unable or unwilling to hide the curiosity lurking in his beady eyes. “You know someone here?”

I ignored his question, simply paying him before climbing out of the back seat. Blinking into the bright sunlight, I pulled my hat further down my forehead and made my way toward the main entrance. The grounds were lovely this time of year, with petunias, geraniums, and marigolds blooming in pots near the front door. Since my visit last week, the tight green buds of the hydrangeas had blossomed into balls of purple. Bees flew merrily from flower to flower, their soft buzzing familiar and soothing. This was my sixth summer visiting Marbella. I knew what to expect.

Drawing in a deep, fortifying breath, I gripped the handle of the front door and walked into the white-marbled lobby. Tugging my hat from my head, I waited for my eyes to adjust to the dim light.

When I’d brought Mary here, the nurses had told me predictability and routine were good for the mentally disturbed. If I were to visit her, they advised, it should be the

same day and time every week. This suited my personality fine, as I liked order, especially in the midst of the current chaos of my life. Since I'd returned from the war, I'd visited on Saturday mornings.

However, when I'd served as a doctor in the war, months and months passed without anyone coming to see her. Since I'd come home, I'd returned to scheduled visits. Every Saturday morning, I woke early, bathed, dressed, and headed to the train station. It took an hour each way from my home in Manhattan, during which time I read or looked out the window, dreaming of better days.

The extensive grounds were quite beautiful, with perfectly cut grass, planters with lavender—for their calming purposes—and various other shrubs and flowers. Even after six years of weekly visits, the garden's lush beauty always took me aback. How could something so lovely hold so much pain?

The building itself reminded me of a stone castle. Inside had been designed for hosting hundreds of patients. I'd visited enough to know the layout by heart: the admission area, dormitory-like sleeping rooms, a large dayroom for activities, treatment and isolation rooms. They kept the facilities spotless, unlike other asylums I'd visited while trying to find a place for Mary.

This warm summer morning, patients were engaged in various activities on the patio and grounds, including sewing, painting, and doing crafts. Several worked in the vegetable garden. Others sat in the rocking chairs that lined the patio, unable to do much other than stare at the view, because they were constrained in straitjackets. Nurses in starched uniforms kept a close watch, reminding me where we were. Not a beautiful castle but a place for the disturbed and violent.

Including my wife.

"Good morning, Dr. Bancroft." Margery, a middle-aged nurse with a hawkish nose

and sweet smile, greeted me.

“Good morning. How is she today?” I asked.

“According to the night nurses, she woke from a bad dream, and they couldn’t calm her down without a sedative. However, she’s much better this morning. She had her breakfast without any outbursts and now she’s dressed and waiting for you in the garden.”

“Did you tell her I was visiting today?” I asked, even though I knew the answer.

“Yes, but she didn’t understand,” Margery said kindly. She knew as well as I that there had not been a time in six years that she’d remembered I was coming. Or that I was her husband.

How could she when she thought she was only sixteen and enrolled at a boarding school?

Some mornings my visits were short, with Mary staring into the distance, completely unengaged, as if I were not there at all. Other times she railed against me, threatening to kill me because of the demons she believed lived inside me.

“How are you feeling today?” I reached for her hand, but she snatched it away, looking at me through alarmed eyes.

To her, I was a stranger. An older man, no less, trying to hold her sixteen-year-old hand.

“I’m quite well, thank you. My mother and father are visiting later.”

Her mother and father were dead. Her father had been tragically murdered a month or

so before our daughter was born six years ago. Unfortunately, Mary had been with him and held him in her arms as the life drained from his body. Several weeks later, something or someone had spooked her mother's horse during her morning ride. She been thrown from the horse and died from a brain injury.

Weeks after that, Mary had gone into labor with our daughter.

The doctors believed the trauma of her father's murder in addition to the strain of childbirth had been too much for her, and she'd suffered a mental break. She'd had bouts of paranoia and depression during our short marriage but nothing like what was to come. The morning after she gave birth, she'd become disturbed, paranoid, and violent, convinced there were demons living in Mother, me, and baby Clara. I'd thought she would recover and become her old self after she healed from childbirth. But as the days went by and she refused to care for the baby, I began to despair. My mother, a practical and competent woman, had tried everything she could think of to coax Mary into interacting with Clara, but it was of no use. We'd had to bring a wet nurse in to feed the baby. Meanwhile, Mary had deteriorated further. Still, I believed I could take care of her myself.

I'd been wrong.

One night when Clara was two weeks old, we'd been unable to get her to stop crying. Our ancient nanny, who had helped to raise Mary and her brother, was useless after about 9:00 p.m. Thus, Mother and I took turns walking her up and down the hallway in our Manhattan townhome.

By the time we finally had her calmed and tucked safely into her bassinet, I'd tumbled into bed fully clothed and fallen immediately into a deep slumber. A noise had wakened me. I rolled over, thinking it morning, expecting Robert with a tray of coffee. But no, it was still dark outside. Not morning but the middle of the night. However, someone was in my room.

In the dim light, I saw a figure approach. Blinking the sleep from my eyes, I realized it was Mary. Light from the hallway glinted against something silver and shiny in her hands. She had a revolver in her hands, and it was pointed right at my chest. I scrambled to turn on the bedside lamp. Light blinded me for a moment. When I regained my sight, she had not moved, her eyes glazed and dull, as if all the life had been sucked out of her.

“Mary, darling, what are you doing?” I used the most soothing tone of voice I could muster in my current frightened state.

She babbled something nonsensical, pointing the gun at me with shaking hands.

Instinctively, I put my own hands up. “Mary, it’s me. Percy. Please, put the gun away.”

She mumbled something about the devil, and then she fired a shot that ripped through the muscles of my shoulder, leaving me with a searing, burning pain. I couldn’t fully understand what was happening, but I saw her fall to her knees. She tossed the gun aside and started to scream. Robert, my valet, had heard the gunshot from his room downstairs and rushed into my chambers. I think I shouted at him to call the police, but I can’t be sure. By then, shock had set in. After that, my memory grew fuzzy and disoriented. Then I lost consciousness.

When I woke, I was in the hospital. The first thing I saw was Mother sitting next to the bed. She told me the surgeon had removed the bullet and I’d continued to improve hour by hour. “We weren’t entirely sure you’d make it.” She dabbed at her eyes as she told me what had happened after I’d passed out.

Robert had charged into the room and proceeded to kick the gun under a dresser and take hold of my wife. Although by then, he later told me, she was as limp and compliant as a rag doll. Not knowing what else to do, he’d tied her to a chair and

called the police. They arrived shortly thereafter to take Mary in to the station.

“She doesn’t know what’s happened or what she did,” Mother said as she patted my hand. “Kept screaming about the devil. And, darling, here’s the strangest part. She thinks she’s sixteen. She remembers nothing after that.”

In the weeks that followed, I recovered from my surgery while negotiating with the police about my wife’s care. They’d agreed not to press charges against her, but only if I put her into a mental asylum.

I’d not wanted to. At first, I’d insisted we could look after her ourselves, but the police were opposed to that idea, saying it would not end well. Mother and I had talked at length, hoping to find another solution, but fate forced my hand.

“A psychosis was brought on by the birth of the child and the stress of witnessing her father’s violent death,” the psychiatrist at Marbella had told me after a thorough evaluation of my wife. “Most of the time, she thinks she’s sixteen. Other times she’s sure that everyone around her is possessed by demons.”

Now, six years later, I walked with Mary across the lawn. She’d shown no improvement in all the time she’d been here. Because she thought of herself as sixteen, she’d convinced herself that she was attending boarding school. Often, she told other patients and nurses that her mother and father were coming to visit. The psychiatrist theorized that she’d reverted to a time in her life when she’d felt safe and well taken care of.

If she became agitated or violent, the staff sedated her with barbiturates. Today, after what sounded like a hard night, she seemed fairly lucid and calm. If one were to observe us without knowing the truth, they would see a young couple enjoying a summer day together. Reality was a much darker tale. One that even today I found hard to understand and accept. She was no longer the woman I’d fallen in love with.

Instead, she was forever stuck in her teenage years.

“Shall we sit?” I asked as we approached a bench.

“If it pleases you.” Mary sat primly with her hands folded in her lap. She wore a simple linen dress, and the nurses had helped pin her hair into a neat bun at the back of her neck. Slim and petite, she had always been a beauty, with large brown eyes and a round face. She looked at me, clearly wary. “Why are you here?”

“I’m here to visit with you.” We often had the same discussion.

“You’re too old to be my suitor.” She looked down at her hands, cheeks flushed. “Does Father know you’re here?”

“No, but I’m a good friend of yours. I like to visit you on Saturdays. Do you remember?”

“Do you know my father?” Mary asked.

“Yes.” If I told her he was dead, it would only upset her. I’d learned that mistake early on.

“He wants me to marry well, but I want to marry for love.”

We’d been married almost four months when the true nature of her father’s business dealings came to light. He was not a businessman as I’d thought, but an illegal crime boss. A dangerous, powerful man. A mobster. In addition to gambling and labor racketeering, Mr. Price controlled whole neighborhoods, expecting payment for protection.

Once I learned the true nature of her father’s enterprises, I’d been hurt and angry that



she had not told me the truth. However, she was pregnant by then, and my instinct to protect my family grew stronger. “We’ll have our own life separate from them,” she’d said to me. “I’ll tell them to leave us be. I’ll stay away.”

She had not kept her promise. She’d been with her father when he was killed.

In addition, she’d kept something else from me, an omission that turned out to be worse than her father’s illegal activities. Starting around the age of sixteen, she’d had episodes of manic, violent behavior, including hearing voices that were not there, followed by depressive episodes that lasted weeks. These were the precursor of what was to come. However, at the time of our wedding, I’d had no idea. In fact, the truth had been purposely kept from me by her family.

In hindsight, her mother and father had seemed overly fixated on marrying her off, pressuring me to hurry it along if I was serious or to leave her be if I was not. Unbeknownst to me, they’d witnessed her mood swings, impulsiveness, and delusions for years.

I was still in medical school, finishing up my residency, when I’d met her at a party of a mutual acquaintance in September. By Christmas, we were engaged. Not my typical behavior, that was for certain. I was a slow-and-steady type of man. Mary’s vivacious, unpredictable personality had attracted me. She’d made everything shinier and more fun. At least, that was the way she appeared to me in those early days, before I understood the depth of her illness. Before I’d identified the tornado headed my way, we were married.

Until then, I hadn’t seen her manic episodes followed by periods of extended sadness or depression. I’d been to medical school and learned about people with these ailments, yet I did not know of their existence in Mary during our whirlwind courtship.

Still, I loved her with a passion. I'd told myself we could be happy despite some of her challenging behavior. My job as her husband was to be patient and understanding. Like so many who love someone with all their heart, I convinced myself that my adoration could save her.

When I put her in the asylum, I'd promised myself I would never give up on her, convinced she only needed help from medical professionals. Eventually, I thought, she would get better and be able to come home. It was only the last few years that I'd resigned myself. My wife would not be returning to us. My daughter would grow up without a mother. I was a married man without a wife.

Thank God for my own mother. Without her, I don't know what I would have done.

"If you're not here to court me, why are you here?" Mary asked me, pulling me from my pondering.

"I enjoy your company."

"How strange you are."

If the circumstances were different, I might have found that statement amusing.

We sat in silence for a few moments. Above us from a branch of a tree came the sound of birdsong.

Mary abruptly turned toward me, her eyes seeming almost feverish. "Things happen here at night. I hear them screaming. They're hurting the girls. I don't know why."

"I think they're only looking after them," I said.

"Who are you?" Mary asked, blinking.

“I’m Percival. Percy.”

“Percy? That’s a name for a boy, not a man.”

“My mother calls me that,” I said. “And you called me Percy. Before you came here, that is.”

“No. No, I wouldn’t call you that.” She twisted her fingers together. “They scream at night, hoping someone will help them. Did you know that? Are you supposed to help them? Is that why you’re here?”

As accustomed as I was to these abrupt segues, they still jarred me. “No, it’s not the reason I’m here. I come to see you, that’s all.”

She watched me, eyes narrowed. “Why do you come here?”

I sighed, not wanting to repeat the whole cycle. But I didn’t have to. She abruptly stood, wringing her hands. “You’re here to take me away, aren’t you? To put me in with the girls who are in trouble.” She started screaming obscenities and flailing her arms, as if attacked by a swarm of bees. Other patients turned to look at her. A few others started to scream as well.

I stood, reaching out to try to calm her, even though I knew better. She rushed toward me and pushed her hands into my chest. I’m a large man, which would have made it comical to see such a small woman trying to knock me over if it hadn’t all been so sad.

Two of the nurses came running over and tackled her to the grass. One of them held her down while the other poked a needle into her arm. Mary continued to flail for a few more seconds before slumping over. A male orderly came with a stretcher and strapped her down. By this time, her eyes resembled glassy, polished stones. It was as

if the life had been snatched from her.

I sat alone on the bench for a period of time—perhaps minutes, perhaps a lifetime—thinking about my life. It was impossible not to think, during moments like this, how my middle had been carved out, leaving me like a hollowed-out tree. Although I was grateful for my mother and daughter, I continued to yearn for what Mary, and I had once had. It seemed so long ago now, the life I'd taken for granted and assumed would always be mine.

During my time as an army doctor during the war, the reality of her illness had been easier to push aside. I'd been busy, dealing with life and death every day on the front lines. Clara had been home with my mother, so I could rest easy knowing my daughter was well taken care of. My wife, on the other hand, had been locked away inside this place without any visitors.

Now that I was home, I would do my best to make up for the years I'd been away. Even though my Saturday visits took their toll on my spirits, at least I hadn't abandoned her here in this lonely place like so many of the other patients.

4

Estelle

“Miss Estelle, are you ill?”

I looked up into the brown eyes of my maid, Lenore. Petite and rosy-cheeked, she stood next to my bed, looking at me with concern. Mumbling that I was fine, I turned onto my side facing away from her.

“Your mother wants you downstairs to greet Mr. and Mrs. Perrin.” Lenore had spoken little English when she’d arrived in America from France at age sixteen to work for us. Other than her accent, sweet and jammy as an overripe plum, she now spoke English fluently. She’d married one of our gardeners, Charles Winchester, last summer. No one said it out loud, but I know they’d asked her specifically to keep watch over me. My lack of interest in living had alarmed even Father.

“I just want to sleep,” I said faintly. “You may go.”

“Your mother told me I must insist. I’ve picked out one of your new afternoon dresses for you to wear. The purple one. It’s so becoming on you.”

I sighed, knowing it was impossible to hide today of all days. Mother’s excitement about the return of my twin and Pierre would not allow it. The beautiful young couple’s return from their European honeymoon must be celebrated. No matter that I was heartsick. Regardless that Constantine was dead, and I now had a problem no one could fix.

Lenore perched on the side of the bed, and I flinched when her cool, dry hand came to rest on my forehead. “You’re not warm. But it’s your heart, yes?”

“Yes, it’s my heart.” And the hole that went right through my chest. I sighed and rolled onto my back. “How much time do I have?” I’d been awake for hours. The nausea that came every morning at six could not be ignored. After I’d been sick into the toilet, I’d returned to bed, and fallen back to sleep. I’d dreamt of Constantine and our garden. He’d been sitting on the swing, calling out to me. When I woke, it had taken some time to remember he was no longer of this world. He would not sit in the swing again or hold my hand or kiss my mouth and tell me how beautiful I was. “I cannot wait to call you my wife.” That had been one of the last things he’d ever said to me.

“You can come back up after luncheon and rest,” Lenore said. “But now you must get out of bed so I can help you wash and dress. Do you want your sister to see you this way?”

“I’m too tired.” All I wanted was to sleep and not wake again. My future was undeniably ruined. In fact, I was ruined, and so was the rest of my family. When the truth became known, we would be shunned from society. Pierre and Mauve’s return could not save me.

Even as much as I’d missed Mauve, I didn’t want to face her. Would she know right away? If not, how could I possibly tell her?

“Miss, please, you must let me know what is ailing you.” Lenore smoothed strands of my dirty hair away from my face. “I’ve heard you be sick in the mornings. I know what that is. My mother had six children. I myself have experienced it of late.”

My eyes flew open, surprised. “You’re having a baby?”

“Yes, miss. Mr. Winchester and I are expecting a baby in the spring. Is the same true for you?”

Tears leaked from my eyes and rolled into my ears. “I think so.”

“Dear me.”

“Before he died, Constantine and I...knowing we were marrying soon...” I didn’t continue.

“Yes, of course. These things happen, even to young ladies such as yourself.”

Such as myself? Who was I anymore? Soon, I would be an outcast. The relative no one spoke of and pretended never existed. I knew Father. I knew already what would become of me, regardless of who I’d been or hoped to be.

Still, Lenore understood. She shared a marital bed in one of the cottages built for our married staff. They were not expected to reside downstairs like those without spouses.

The relief upon sharing my secret did not alleviate the horrid dread that lived in the pit of my stomach. It had mixed with my grief into a concoction of black tar.

“What will you do?” Lenore asked, stroking my hand that had crept out from under the blankets.

“I don’t know.”

“You’ve not told anyone?”

“No. I’ve thought about taking poison, but I don’t know how to get any.” I laughed,

but it sounded more like a hiccup.

“You mustn’t speak this way. There must be a solution.”

“You don’t think me wicked? Immoral?” I asked.

“I’m not the judge of such matters, miss. We leave that up to Jesus.”

Jesus? He’d abandoned me. Taken my Connie from me and left me here alone to suffer.

“Did you know I’m a twin too?” Lenore asked. “She remains in France. I feel connected to her still, even though we are so far apart now.”

Mauve and I had always been bonded in a similar fashion. Only since I lost her to Pierre had she seemed out of my grasp.

“Yvonne lives in Paris with her husband. But I feel her here.” Lenore patted her chest. “Whatever I needed, she would provide if she could.”

“Mauve cannot do anything for me,” I said. “My life’s over. Once Father finds out, he’ll banish me.”

“Perhaps so. But not today. Today you’re going to get up and become presentable. When alone, you will tell your sister everything, and she will help you to know what to do next.” Lenore got up from the bed and went over to the desk where she’d set a breakfast tray. “You will have coffee and a roll while I run your bath.”

She set the tray next to me on the bed. Reluctantly, I sat up.

“Here, lean forward just a bit for me so I can fix the pillows,” Lenore said.



I did so. She fluffed and arranged the pillows to support my back. The tray held a basket of fresh rolls, several boiled eggs, and slices of apple. Steam filtered out of the handle of a silver coffeepot, wafting a nutty scent. Normally I loved coffee, but lately it turned my stomach.

“Do you want coffee, Miss Estelle?”

“No, thank you.”

She clucked sympathetically. “Eat the roll anyway. The food will settle your stomach. It is that way for me. Try to eat an egg too. It’s good for the baby.”

She left me to eat my breakfast. I heard water running for the bath about the same time I heard the sound of the motorcar bringing my sister home.

Mauve hugged me tightly and didn’t seem inclined to let me go. I hugged her back, breathing in the floral scent of her perfume. New from Paris, I assumed. Once, I might have felt envious, but I no longer cared about anything as mundane as cologne.

We spent the morning with the rest of the family. Mauve had brought home an entire trunk filled with gifts from their travels. I smiled and acted the part. After luncheon, Pierre excused himself to rest in their room. Mother and Father had other things to attend to, leaving Mauve and me alone.

The weather was pleasant that afternoon, even though September had brought colorful leaves to the trees and a crispness to the air. The gardeners had planted mums in the flowerpots that decorated the front of the house.

Mauve told me stories of her adventures as we strolled arm in arm, as we had as children. I made the appropriate comments and asked questions, but it was an act.

Finally, she seemed to pick up on my dullness. When one shone as brightly as my sister it would be hard to understand the grief of others.

“Darling, what’s happened to you since I was away?” Mauve stopped us near a bench under the shade of an oak.

“Mother didn’t write to you?”

“No, we didn’t stay in one place long enough for a letter.” She took my hand and brought it into her lap. “You seem different. Have you missed me? I missed you terribly. It’s the first time we’ve been away from each other.”

“I have also missed you terribly. More than you could know. And I have something to tell you.” My voice shook, which appeared to alarm my sister. She turned to face me, searching my face for answers.

“What is it?”

“I fell in love while you were away.”

“Yes?” Her eyes flickered with interest but also alarm.

“Do you remember Louisa’s cousin? Constantine Harris? He attended your wedding.”

“Yes, of course. Very handsome, as I recall. Is he the one?”

I nodded, tears flooding my eyes. “We had the most wonderful time at the reception. I showed him our garden. We fell in love so quickly, like you and Pierre, that it made my head spin. Father agreed to our marriage.”

“Thank goodness. Knowing Father I’m surprised. Wealth and influence carry a great weight with him, as you know. But why the tears? Has he decided to call off the engagement?”

“No, he died in an accident. The night he intended to propose.”

Her face drained of color. “Oh no. Please say it isn’t so.”

I swiped at my tears, only to have them readily replaced by more. “My heart’s broken.”

She took me into her arms, cradling my head against her chest. “Dearest, I’m so terribly sorry. I had no idea. This all was happening while I was away? How did I not feel it? We’ve always sensed each other’s emotions.”

I withdrew from her, unable to bear her loving touch. Not when I had to tell her what I’d done. How I’d ruined my life while she was looking at art in Paris. “It’s because you’ve replaced me with Pierre. There’s nothing wrong with it. In fact, it’s the natural way of things. I felt the same about Connie. Romantic love is so all-consuming.”

“When did this happen?”

“Last month,” I said.

“Someone should have sent a telegram. We would have come home early.”

“No one wanted that. Anyway, there’s nothing you can do for me. At least one of us should be happy.”

Mauve’s eyes filled. “I wish I could do something to help you.”

“There’s more,” I mumbled. “Something terrible.”

“What is it?” Her gaze sharpened. My sister might be kind and gentle, but she was also smart.

“I’m going to have a baby.”

The silence that followed was like the world after a snowstorm, everything quiet and paused, waiting for life to resume.

Mauve rose to her feet, her hands covering her mouth as if she were trying not to scream. She walked a few paces to the right and then the left before turning back to look at me. “Do they know?”

“I’ve been waiting for you. I couldn’t face it without you.” Tears streamed from my eyes with such force that it was obvious they’d been waiting for my sister.

“We have to fix this. For all our sakes. What will happen to Father should this get out?”

“Mother too. Think of how happy the society women will be to get rid of Mother. They’ve wanted to before now, simply because Father’s money is new. This will ruin them. You and Pierre will be tainted as well.”

She returned to the bench and bent over her knees, resting her face in her hands. When she looked up, a little color had returned to her cheeks. The initial shock was wearing off and reality setting in. “I thought it would be me—coming home from my honeymoon to tell you I was having a baby.”

“Are you?”

“No. As much as I wished for it, there’s no baby.” She absently placed a hand over her stomach but then pulled it away, staring blankly up at the sky.

“One will come. You must be patient.” I fiddled with the hankie I kept tucked under the sleeve of my blouse, an idea expanding in my mind. The solution was so obvious. Would she do it? Could I, do it? What about Mother and Father? Pierre? “You could pretend the baby’s yours.”

She turned slowly until her eyes met mine. “What did you say?”

“You and Pierre could take the baby and raise it as your own. No one would have to know. Other than the family, obviously. Even the baby wouldn’t have to know that you were her aunt. She’ll believe it’s you if you take it immediately after the birth. Babies bond to whoever holds them and feeds them.”

Her expression turned incredulous. “How could you stand it? Seeing a child raised by your sister that belongs to you? It’s too much. In fact, it could be disastrous.”

“I would go away somewhere. Start a new kind of life. Somewhere far away. You’re all better off without me.”

“What about me? I’m not better off. You’re a part of me.”

“I’ll still be a part of you, just from a distance.” I took in a deep breath. The more I spoke of it, the more I thought this was the right solution. “It will be better for the child. She or he won’t stand a chance of a good life if it’s born out of wedlock. A bastard, that’s what he or she will be in the eyes of the world. Especially the one we live in.”

“There’s something I’ve never told you,” Mauve said.

My blood ran cold at the sight of her face.

“Do you remember when I fell off the horse when we were twelve?”

“Of course. It was awful. I thought you were going to die.” The horse had bucked her and then kicked her hard enough that she broke her pelvis. She’d cried out in excruciating pain. I’d had to leave her in the pasture and ride home to get help.

“The fracture to my pelvis wasn’t the only damage. At the time the doctor told me the kick had hurt my reproductive organs. He said I might not be able to have children because of it. I’ve hoped he was wrong. But after the amount of lovemaking over the last three months without a pregnancy, I fear it’s true.”

“Why have you not told me this before?”

“Saying it out loud makes it seem true,” Mauve said.

“Does Pierre know?”

She nodded. “I told him before the wedding, so that he could back out if he wanted.”

“He didn’t want to. Anyone could have told you that.”

“He said he didn’t care—that we could be a couple free to travel and do as we please. But I could see it in his eyes. He was disappointed. We agreed then and there that we’d pray and hope that the doctor was wrong. Pierre said if it was meant to be, then a baby would come to us somehow.”

“This is your somehow,” I said softly.

“We have to tell Father and Mother. And Pierre. We can’t keep this a secret from

them, as much as I'd like to."

"I know." She was right, but I wished it was not so. "Father will send me away. I'll want to go. It's best for all of us. You and Pierre will raise the child as your own. I'd only be in the way, and it would be confusing for the child if I were hanging about in the shadows, yearning to be her mother instead of her aunt. There will be no place for me. We must think of the baby above all else. Being with you and Pierre without me to muddle things is what's best. You'll see. Once she or he is born, you'll know I'm right."

"No, it will all work out somehow," Mauve said. "We shouldn't be separated. You're my sister. The person I love most in the world. You can't leave me."

I took my sister's hands, squeezing gently. "I'll have to. You know that as well as I. But you're strong and good. You'll be the perfect mother. You were born to do this." Apparently, I was not.

The family gathered at twilight in the drawing room for drinks before dinner. Pierre and Mauve sat together holding hands on the love seat. Father was in his usual chair by the fire. Mother and her needlepoint in the one next to him. Me, alone on the sofa.

One of the maids had brought a tray of gin and tonics. With my recently powerful sense of smell, the acerbic aroma made me sick. I thought for a moment I might have to run out of the room to vomit, but the nausea passed. Regardless, I declined when Mother offered me one.

"Mother and Father, we have something we'd like to talk to you about," Mauve said. "Pierre, Estelle, and me, that is."

Mother, dressed in a lovely fawn-colored gown, folded her hands in her lap. "What is it, darling?"

We'd discussed our strategy beforehand. Mauve, having spoken to Pierre earlier, suggested she and I tell them together. Our telepathic twin-speak, developed when we first learned to talk, would serve us well.

Mauve nodded at me to begin.

"Before he died, Constantine and I were very much in love," I said, voice shaking. "Almost deliriously so, and we got carried away one night—I'm going to have a baby." I blurted out the last part rather abruptly. However, it got the point across.

No one moved for a good five seconds. Then all hell broke loose.

Father's face turned various shades of purple, landing finally on a hue resembling the skin of an eggplant. He leapt to his feet, spilling gin over the edge of his glass. "How could you do this? To me? To us? You've ruined us."

"I understand your concern. However, Mauve, Pierre, and I have decided what to do. We can remedy the situation." I was strangely calm now. Like someone facing a firing squad, knowing my time had come. "Pierre and Mauve have agreed to take the baby and raise her or him as their own."

Mother's hand shook as she reached for her drink. "What will we tell this poor child?"

"That I'm his aunt and Mauve is his mother," I said. "No one but the people in this room will ever know."

Father continued to rage, calling me more foul names and telling me I was headed straight for hell. "You'll be punished one way or another. God's wrath will come down upon you and no one will care. You'll already be dead to us."



My mouth dropped open at the cruelty of his words. How could my own father say such a thing? I was too stunned to cry. Who was this purple-faced monster? Or was this the truth about who he really was? He only loved me if I made no mistakes or missteps? A perfect daughter, like Mauve?

Pierre stood; fists clenched. Specks of pink dotted his cheeks. “Sir, this is your daughter. Estelle’s made a mistake. If Constantine had lived, it wouldn’t matter at all. There would be a white lie about due dates and such, but everyone would assume the baby was made during the honeymoon.”

“But he is dead.” Father’s voice echoed, bouncing against walls to fly back and sting me. “She committed a sin, and now we’re all to pay the price. She’s ruined this entire family. Are you too dumb or blind to see that, Pierre? How are we supposed to keep this from getting out? You know how servants talk. Think of the child—raised as a bastard?”

Mother clasped both hands around her drink. A droplet of moisture slid from the glass onto her lap. “Sean, please, keep your voice down. The staff’s sure to hear you.”

Father’s face fell, clearly chastised by her admonishment. “Yes, quite right.”

“We can send the girls and Pierre away,” Mother said quietly. “To our house by the seaside. Estelle will have the baby there. When they return, Mauve and Pierre will claim the baby as their own.”

Mauve and I locked gazes, communicating as we did without words. I nodded. It was a good idea. Without the prying eyes of servants, no one would know the truth.

Father turned to look at me directly for the first time, speaking softly. “Estelle, you will not be welcome home. Not ever. Do you understand?”

“But Father, why?” Mauve asked, starting to cry. “Isn’t it punishment enough that she’ll have to give away her baby?”

“It’s not a matter of punishment.” Father stomped over to the liquor cabinet and poured himself a whiskey. “I simply will not be able to stand the sight of her.”

I was too numb to cry, but my nerves were another matter entirely. A violent trembling made my teeth clatter. I clamped them together.

“You can’t separate us,” Mauve said. “It’s too cruel.”

“Estelle should have thought of that before she lay with a man she wasn’t married to.” Father tossed his drink against the stone fireplace. Shattered glass cascaded across the floor. Floorboards creaked from his panther-like pacing. But he remembered to speak softly, his fear of the servants hearing more powerful than his contempt for me. “May I remind all of you that I’m the only one in this house who funds this extravagant lifestyle you all enjoy? Three months in Europe. The wedding. Taking Pierre into the company even though he has no skills whatsoever? Has it occurred to any of you that you’d be out on the street if it were not for my good graces?”

“We’re all acutely aware of our stations in life,” Mother said. “We are women. Pierre has nary a penny of his own. You, my dear, are the one with all the power. It’s not the first time this has occurred to us. The pity lies with your lack of sympathy. You have the power to make this as painful as you wish it to be, and we have no choice but to stand by and watch.”

“No, he’s right,” I said, finding my voice. “I’ve made a terrible mistake, and because of it I will be alone for the rest of my life. Separated from my twin and from my mother and you, Father. I’ll go away quietly after the baby’s born. I’ll be no more trouble to you.”

“You were supposed to be my assets,” Father said, shaking his head. “My two pretty girls. Further tools for our entry into society. You had everything. Not like me, who worked and scraped for every single thing I’ve ever had. You’ve thrown it all away.”

I got to my feet, wobbly. “If you would be so kind as to have my supper sent up to my room, I’ll begin preparation for the seaside.”

Mauve got up as well. “Wait, this cannot be how all of this ends. Not like this. Father, please. Don’t you see how you’ve devastated her?”

“There’s plenty of devastation for all of us,” Father said. “She’s made sure of that.”

Percival

“Papa, where do you go on Saturday mornings?” Clara looked up at me as I perched on the side of her bed. “Is it to see my mother?”

I swallowed my alarm. She’d not asked me about where I went, seemingly oblivious to the difference between a weekday and a weekend. I’d decided a long time ago that if she expressed interest in learning more about her mother that I would tell her as close to the truth as possible while sparing some of the more sordid details. Faced with her question, I wished my mother was by my side. Mother was much better at explaining difficult things to this small person entrusted to our care.

“Your mother’s ill. She has to live in a place where nurses and doctors care for her.”

“Why can’t she live here? You’re a doctor. You could take care of her.”

I brushed a lock of Clara’s fair hair from her cheek. She was small for her age and lissome and willowy like a dancer. “I’m a certain kind of doctor. Your mother needs one who helps people with maladies of the mind.” I tapped my temple, as if that would make any sense to a six-year-old.

“What?” Clara eyes widened but never left my face.

“Your mother’s confused. She doesn’t remember much of her life before she went to the asylum. She’s not well enough to live outside of there.”

“Does she know about me?”

My chest tightened. God, I hated this. How did I explain to my daughter that her mother didn’t know who either one of us was. The truth. I must tell her the truth, even if it’s hard. “She doesn’t remember that she had a baby or that she was married to me.”

“What does she remember?”

“She’s under the illusion that she’s still sixteen. For whatever reason, she’s unable to remember anything that happened after that.”

“Why?”

“No one’s certain,” I said. “Some of my patients become ill with certain diseases while others don’t. It’s just something that happens.”

“Will it happen to me?”

“No. You mustn’t worry about that,” I said.

“Can I come with you to see her?”

“No, not now,” I said. “It’s not a place for a little girl to visit.”

“But I’d like to see her.”

I smoothed the quilt over her small frame. “Maybe when you’re older.”

“How old?”

“Let me think about it. For now, it’s time for you to go to sleep. When I come home tomorrow afternoon, I’ll take you out to the park.”

She rolled over onto her side, placing both hands under her cheek. “I like it when you take me to see the ducks.”

“We’ll do that tomorrow.” I leaned down to kiss her forehead. “Good night and sweet dreams.”

“Good night, Papa. I love you.”

“I love you.” Another kiss and then I rose to my feet, watching for a moment as she drew in a deep breath and closed her eyes. My daughter tugged at my every heartstring. As I stood watching her drift into slumber, I thought about how bleak my life would be without her. She brought sunshine into our home and helped Mother and me to stay young. Even though her birth had contributed to Mary’s illness, I could not be sorry she’d come into this world.

She would be asleep within minutes. How I envied her ability to sleep when she was supposed to.

I sneaked out of her room, leaving the door ajar in case she woke in the middle of the night. My room was across the hall from hers, so I could easily hear her, especially given how lightly I slept. Mother’s bedroom was next to Clara’s, but she tended to sleep soundly and was not accustomed to waking. While I was away at the war, the nanny, Miss Lisk, had slept in the same room as Clara, but she’d moved into chambers of her own upon my return. If I were away at night taking care of a sick patient, she kept an ear out for her, but luckily Clara rarely woke. It still amazed me what a happy little girl she was. Mother had done well with her, and I was grateful. If not for my mother, Clara would have had only me, and it was obvious to everyone how inadequate that would have been. Fortunately, my mother was healthy and in

good physical shape from traipsing all over the city to look in on my patients and other poor souls who needed regular medical attention.

Mother was not a nurse, but she might as well have been, given how excellent she was with helping patients with minor injuries and illnesses. Before the war, she'd asked if she could come along on my house calls to assist me. While I was gone, she'd taken on more responsibilities to make up for my absence. What we'd thought was temporary had turned into nearly a full-time job for her. She spent every afternoon caring for the sick and poor, bringing me in when she needed a doctor. We made an excellent team.

I was proud of her. She didn't have to do what she did for others. My father had left us a lot of money when he'd died. In addition, Mother had brought money of her own into the marriage. There was no need for her to do anything but entertain and attend social engagements like the other women in her circles. But my mother was a rare breed, easily bored by the mundane. She was in her element helping others. In fact, she claimed working had saved her from wallowing in self-pity after the embarrassing scandal that came after Father's untimely demise in the arms of his mistress.

It was nearing eight, which meant our supper would be served shortly. When it was just the two of us, Mother and I didn't bother changing into evening attire. Instead, we enjoyed casual meals in the dining room, sitting next to each other rather than on one end of a long table as she and my father had done.

I went downstairs to the sitting room, poured myself a brandy, and settled into my favorite chair. The weather had been too warm for a fire. We had the windows and French doors open to let in the summer air, but it did little to cool the room. The July weather had been unusually hot. In August, we would go up to my summer cottage by the beach for a few weeks. Until then, we suffered through the hot nights.

Mother came into the room, carrying a book in her arms and looking uncharacteristically flustered. “Darling, I’ve just received a call from Simon. He’s coming for supper tonight.”

“Tonight?” Simon Price was Mary’s brother. Since the war, we’d not seen him often. He’d come home physically intact, but he’d seemed troubled these days. It was nothing overt in his behavior, but sometimes I caught a glimmer of the horrors he’d seen reflected in his eyes and the permanent tremble in his hands.

Like me, he never spoke of the war. We weren’t the only ones who wanted to forget and simply get on with the rest of our lives.

Before Mary’s father was killed in 1914, he and Simon had become estranged. Like his sister, Simon not been aware of the details of his father’s business enterprises. Simon had been appalled to learn the truth—he had a strangely acute sense of right and wrong. He and his father had argued, and Mr. Price had cut all ties with Simon. A few months later, both Mr. and Mrs. Price were dead.

Although Simon had been primed to take over his father’s businesses, he’d gone to law school instead. Now that he was home from the navy, he’d opened his own practice in downtown Manhattan focusing on contracts and agreements. He had several large corporate clients as well as a handful of small businesses. “All legitimate, legal business,” he’d said to me recently.

“He’s coming tonight?” I asked Mother again.

“Yes, he’s on his way over now. I’ve told the staff to set another place at the table. Cook said she has plenty of food for three, thank goodness.” Mother rubbed her hands together, a habit she did when nervous.

“What’s wrong, Mother? You seem agitated.”



“No, it’s nothing. I’m just exhausted from my visits today. I’d have not chosen to have Simon of all people to dinner on a weekday evening.”

“I understand,” I said, letting out a sigh. “But thank you for checking on Mrs. Clark. How’s the baby?”

“He’s better. As of this afternoon, he was able to nurse. What a relief.” Mother tended to fret over the babies. Not surprising, given the loss of my infant sister. Although decades had passed since Molly’s death, Mother’s grief remained.

We spoke for a few more minutes, updating each other on various patients while I poured Mother a sherry. A few minutes later, Robert announced Simon’s arrival.

“Show him in,” Mother said.

“Yes, ma’am.” Robert, who served as our butler and my valet, had come to us soon after my marriage to Mary. Although younger than myself by a few years, he had proven to be unflappable during our times of distress. He seemed to instinctually know when to present himself and when to stay in the background, silently taking care of us as best he could.

“I’m sorry to barge in like this,” Simon said, shaking my hand. “But I was in the neighborhood and realized how long it’s been since I’ve seen the only family I have. Am I too late to see Clara?”

“Yes, she’s in bed already,” I said.

“Another time, then,” Simon said.

“She always loves to see you,” Mother said.

My brother-in-law accepted a glass of brandy before taking a seat. He and Mary shared the same eyes, but he had a darker complexion. I'd expected him to marry by now, but he seemed in no hurry to end his life as a bachelor.

We chatted about the weather and other mundane subjects for a period of time before he finally admitted the real reason for his visit.

"I've come with news. You remember my friend at the NYPD?" Simon asked.

I nodded, although the memory was a fuzzy one. "Sure."

Simon tossed back the entirety of his drink. "He came by yesterday to give me an update on my father's case. He does that from time to time."

"And?" I asked.

"He believes the hit came from a mobster called Sean Sullivan."

The name meant nothing to me. "Is he a bad man?"

"Apparently, they've been watching him for years now. He's a powerful crime boss, mostly illegal gambling operations, bookmaking, and underground casinos. He's also a well-known loan shark, offering high-interest loans with violent methods for debt collection, if you know what I mean."

"I'm afraid we do," Mother said.

Simon continued. "Sullivan hides his illegal enterprises well, along with bribes and payoffs to the authorities to stay out of trouble. To look at him, he appears to be an upstanding citizen with the good fortune to have been in the right place at the right time. However, his lovely family and charitable foundation are a front. Recently, he's

gotten into the illegal booze business. Before that, he and my father were in the same game. In fact, they were in direct competition. It's the detective's belief that it was essentially a turf war. Sullivan ordered the hit as retaliation or a warning."

"But they don't have enough evidence to arrest this Sullivan?" Mother asked.

"No. That's one of the reasons he came by," Simon said. "He said they can't pin it on him."

"What a shame," Mother said.

"As you know, Mary wasn't supposed to be with him that night, or he probably would have arranged the hit for a different time." Simon got up to pour himself another drink, splashing a few fingers of whiskey into his glass before returning to sit with us. "It does no good, but I wish she hadn't been there. Maybe everything would be different."

I thought about what this meant and came up with exactly nothing. The damage to my wife had already been done, regardless of who did it. Knowing who killed her father was of no consequence now. She was lost to her delusions. Had they been brought on by her father's murder in combination with Clara's birth? The doctor at the asylum thought so. His theory was that she'd been unable to cope and had become separated from reality. She now thought of herself as sixteen, with no memories intact from the years since she was a teenager.

My mother must have been thinking similarly, because she asked Simon what he wanted to do with the information. "Does it give you any peace knowing what happened?"

"Not really." Simon settled back into the armchair, holding his drink between both hands. "But I thought you two would want to know. If I ever had any doubts about

whether I made the right decision to walk away from my father's life and livelihood, they're certainly put to rest. This was a dangerous way to make money, and he paid the ultimate price. Not to mention that the authorities seized all their assets and bank accounts. Even if he'd lived, they were onto him by then. He would have likely gone to prison, and Mother would have been left penniless."

Mother tented her hands. "I thank God every day you were able to get out and start a life of your own. One you could be proud of."

"If only my sister had," Simon said. "When you first married, she seemed so happy. I thought she'd outgrown what our mother used to refer to as her 'episodes.'"

"I didn't know anything about the episodes before we married." I was speaking more to myself than to Simon or my mother. They knew that before our marriage Mary's parents had purposely kept their daughter's fragile mental health from me. "The truth about her previous mental health issues and your father's crimes were not conveyed to me. I was naive, to say the least. Too besotted, perhaps, to see the forewarnings of what was to come."

"Would you have married her had you known she would become ill?" Simon asked.

I'd asked myself that question many times and always came up with the same answer. "If I hadn't married her, we would not have Clara. So, it's impossible to imagine otherwise. It fills me with sadness when I think of my daughter growing up without a mother, but I cannot imagine life without her."

"Have you given up on her?" Simon asked. "I can't say I'd blame you if you had. Seeing her like she is now—it's nearly impossible to fathom." He rubbed his cheek with the pad of his thumb.

"When was the last time you visited?" Mother asked Simon.

“Last month. She was having a bad day, became confused and agitated the moment I greeted her. I’m ashamed to say I haven’t been able to return since.”

“I don’t blame you,” I said. “It’s hard to see her that way. Some weeks I leave feeling pretty low.”

“It takes a toll, I imagine.” The rims of Simon’s eyes reddened. “You have my admiration—never giving up on her when most men would have.”

“I vowed to take care of her for better or worse,” I said. “Simply abandoning her because it’s not convenient to me is out of the question. Even if she has no idea who I am.”

“Sometimes she knows it’s me,” Simon said. “When she’s lucid enough, she comments about how tired I look. I don’t bother explaining to her that a lot of time has passed since we were in our teens. I’m not tired, only older.”

“I think it might be a blessing that she thinks she’s at boarding school,” Mother said.

Unlike me, Mary’s brother had been part of her life and memories before the age of sixteen, thus she often recognized him. In fact, oftentimes, she thought her brother was visiting her at boarding school on one of his school breaks, as he had when they were younger.

Robert interrupted us to announce that it was time for supper. The three of us, subdued, got up and headed toward the dining room. I couldn’t speak for the others, but I’d lost my appetite.

## Page 6

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6

Estelle

The baby girl arrived on the first day of May. Mauve had found a midwife in the small town by the seashore who assisted in the birth. From what she told me afterward, I had a remarkably easy time of it. She came shooting out of me like a ball fired from a cannon, weighing in at nearly eight pounds. “Robust and full of life,” the midwife, Mrs. Smith, said. I’d done my part, I thought, as I lay in the bed watching Mrs. Smith clean and swaddle the quiet infant.

Mauve, who had been with me during the labor, sat by my side, dabbing my forehead with a damp cloth. “Shouldn’t she be crying?” Mauve asked. “Is she all right?”

“She’s fine.” Mrs. Smith approached with the baby in her arms. “Who wants her?”

“What do we do now?” Mauve whispered. “Do you want to hold her?”

“One time.” Despite my exhaustion, tears sprang from my eyes. How could I possibly let her go? I’d carried her for nine months, felt her kick and squirm. She’d heard my voice all these months.

She’s also heard Mauve’s , a voice reminded me. My sister had been my constant companion these last few months.

“Whatever you want,” Mauve said.

“I want to tell her goodbye. And then I shall keep my word to you and Pierre.”

“Are you sure you won’t change your mind?”

I shook my head and looked the other way. If I were to gaze too long into my sister’s eyes I would forget my promise.

The midwife placed the swaddled baby in my arms while she attended to my afterbirth. I barely noticed, gazing at the babe, my heart filling with a love I could not have imagined. This was a staggering love, one that cut me off at the knees. I had to let her go. It was the right thing to do. I knew it, yet doing so was absolutely contrary to every instinct. But I must connect to my higher, less selfish self, I reminded myself. Taking an infant who deserved better than the life of poverty that surely awaited me was not right.

I searched for Connie in her face, but she was too red and wrinkly for me to see what she would become. For that, I would wait for the drawings Mauve had promised to send every year on her birthday. Pierre was a talented artist. He, too, had vowed to send sketches and paintings so that I might have a small part of her with me.

She stared up into my eyes, her expression solemn.

How could I leave her?

“I’m sorry, little one,” I whispered. “But you won’t even know to miss me.” I’d made Pierre and Mauve promise never to tell her the truth. I did not want my daughter to think her real mother didn’t love her. She needed to start out in this world without that burden. Her mother had made a mistake, one she would have to pay for. But this darling in my arms? She was innocent and deserved every chance to thrive.

I kissed her wrinkled forehead and breathed in the scent of her head. “You are a

perfect angel.

“Here, you take her,” I said to my twin, handing her over.

Mauve cradled the baby close to her chest, and the softening of her features told me everything I needed to know. My sister would give her all the love she would ever need.

Mrs. Smith watched us from the end of the bed. When we’d first met her and explained our situation, she’d seemed undaunted. Had she ever experienced this before? Twins swapping places? Only this time it was not to fool anyone for fun but as an act of last resort. Regardless, she was a highly competent woman who kept her opinions to herself.

“I must go now,” Mrs. Smith said. “You rest for a few days, Miss Sullivan, before resuming normal activities.”

“At home, women convalesce for a month at least,” Mauve said, a hopeful lilt in her voice. I knew what she was trying to do. The longer I stayed, the more in love with the baby I would be. She thought she’d be able to convince me to stay, but she underestimated my stubborn resolve. I had nothing to give my daughter except to sacrifice my own feelings for her good. My sister was the one she needed.

“I’ll stop on my way home and let the wet nurse know to come over straightaway,” Mrs. Smith said. “I told her just yesterday that it would be any day now, so it will come as no surprise.”

We’d asked Mrs. Smith to find a wet nurse, so the child had the best chance to thrive. Cow’s milk mixed with a little sugar was a poor alternative to the real thing, Mrs. Smith had told us when we first spoke with her. “The practice is becoming less common in some parts, but I highly suggest you give her breast milk if you can,”



she'd said.

"Take care of yourself, Miss Sullivan," Mrs. Smith said to me. "Although you're doing right by the baby, there's bound to be some grieving on your part. Allow yourself to feel the sorrow of the loss before you move on." With that she took her medical bag and left us alone.

"Have you decided on her name?" I asked my sister.

"Mireille. For Pierre's mother."

"So French," I said. "And elegant."

"She's tiny and perfect." Mauve stroked Mireille's cheek, and the baby turned her head, opening her mouth.

"I'm leaving as soon as I'm able," I said quietly. "I can't stay. It's too hard."

"You don't have to go." Mauve glanced over at me, tears in her eyes. "We'll stay here at the seaside and live happily, all of us together."

"You know it's not possible. Even if I thought it was best for the baby, which I don't, Father would never agree to taking care of us financially. You and Pierre need to stay in his good graces, otherwise all three of you will be out in the cold."

Mauve shook her head. "No one needs to know you're not her aunt. I'd be her mother, but you would be her beloved auntie."

I looked at the babe in her arms for moment, the tiniest morsel of hope expanding in my chest. Could I bear being only her aunt? What about Mauve? Would she come to resent me for infringing on her life? Her family? And what of the baby? If she

discovered the truth later, she would hate all of us for lying to her. For me, too—having to step aside and watch my sister raise my daughter would be excruciating. What if I couldn't keep the secret?

No. I was right from the beginning. The baby would stay with my sister. I would leave and let them all live in peace. My presence only muddled and complicated everything.

“Mauve, even if it was the right thing for Mireille, Father has sent me away. He's banished me from the family. You know as well as I that he's vindictive and cruel. He might send you away, too, and then what would happen to Mireille? The best thing for her is to stay with you. You'll raise her as your own, without the complications I would bring. She'll have a beautiful life with you and Pierre.”

Mauve's eyes filled. “I've never been in the world without you by my side. I'm not as strong as you.”

“You have Pierre now. Together, you will be strong.”

“I hope the wet nurse comes soon. I think she's hungry.”

“Take her to Pierre,” I said. “He'll want to meet his daughter before she eats. I need to sleep.”

I rolled over to face the wall, closing my eyes until I heard the door open and close. Then I let tears flow freely.

I woke hours later to Pierre sitting next to the bed. He turned when I sat up to gaze upon me with sad eyes.

“How are you feeling?” Pierre asked.

“Thirsty. Hungry.”

He leapt to his feet and poured me a glass of water from the pitcher on the dresser. I drank greedily, then handed him the empty glass. He then gave me a cheese sandwich and an apple, which I ate quickly. When I was done, I set aside the plate and gazed up at the ceiling. The clock told me it was nearing three in the morning. Outside, a cricket chirped but other than that, it was quiet.

“Where are they?” I asked.

“Asleep in the other bedroom.”

Tears leaked from my tired eyes. “I need to go. I can’t stay here. Not like this. I can’t hear her crying or...” I trailed off, not knowing exactly what I wanted to say.

“What do you want to do?” Pierre asked gently. He was a good man—even-tempered and kind. He would be a good father. Not distant and volatile like mine. He loved my sister. I could see that in the way he looked at her. “I put a little money aside from the wedding gifts,” Pierre said. “I want you to take it with you.”

“Where should I go?”

“New York City? You can start anew there. With so many people, you can blend in—make yourself whatever you want to be.”

If only I knew what that was. Right now, I grieved the loss of my daughter and my sister and the life I’d known.

“There’s something I want you to know before you leave,” Pierre said.

“What is it?” Was there more heartbreak in store for me?

“I’ve discovered something about your father. As you know, he asked me to join him in the business. My skills as an accountant and financial expert are something valuable to him, especially if he can manipulate me to do what he wants, all of which is illegal. Nothing is what I thought.” Pierre paused for a second, looking down at his hands. “Your father owns a textile factory, but only as a front and way to launder money. Your father’s involved in organized crime. Racketeering, gambling, loans. That’s how he made his fortune so quickly. And it’s a dangerous business. Very much so. He sheltered you and Mauve from the truth, leading you to believe he was a legitimate businessman. At this point, I’m unsure how much your mother knows or if she’s in any danger.”

“I’ve seen articles in the newspaper about warring crime families,” I said. “Surely you don’t mean to suggest my father’s involved in something so tawdry?”

“That’s exactly what I mean,” Pierre said.

I stared at him, unable to fully comprehend what he was saying. “You’re saying my father’s a mobster? Aren’t those gangs and such?”

“Right. He’s one of them.”

“I can’t believe it,” I said. “When did you learn all of this?”

“It slowly unfolded during the months I’ve worked for him. I didn’t understand what was going on at first. However, it became painfully obvious the deeper I got into his financials. He wanted me to cook the books, Estelle. Hide money. Evade taxes. That kind of thing. I made excuses at first. I told myself, perhaps this was the way the Americans do business, and I must get used to it. Finally, though, I had to face the truth. Your father made his fortune in nefarious ways—as bad as you can imagine.”

“Like murder?” I asked, mouth dry. Could this be true?

“Yes, he’s had people killed. A lot of people. I saw the payments to hitmen with my own eyes. For months, I debated about what to do. My primary focus is to take care of Mauve and now Mireille, and getting involved in organized crime is not the way to do it. But if I were to stand up to your father, he might do to me what he did to Constantine.”

“What are you talking about?” A cold dread made my fingers tingle.

Pierre splayed his hands through his thick, dark hair. “He had Constantine killed.”

“No, no. It was an accident.” A car accident. On his way to see me. It could happen to anyone driving an automobile.

“Your father’s hired killers often make it seem like an accident, but really it’s a carefully orchestrated murder.”

“Why would he want Connie dead?” I could barely breathe. How could Father have killed the man I loved? Who would do such a thing to their own child? The same man who sent me away.

“I believe Connie threatened to go to the police,” Pierre said.

“How did he know, though?” I asked. “Did Father tell him?”

“He must have.”

The truth hit me hard. “Oh my God. Before he died, Connie told me he wanted to talk to me about something important. He called the afternoon he died and said he wanted to take a walk alone. He was going to tell me.”

“He didn’t want any more to do with this than I. Maybe he threatened to take you

away if Father didn't comply."

"Father wouldn't have cared about that." Obviously.

"Or he might have insinuated that he would tell the police. You know the kind of man Connie was."

"So, Father had him killed. Then I found out I was going to have a baby and..." And what? Had he regretted his decision?

"I don't know what he thought," Pierre said. "All I know is I want to take my wife and Mireille away from him."

"Yes, yes. You have to," I said, thinking out loud. "But where will you go? You don't have much money of your own, do you? Does Mauve know all of this?"

"For months I debated about whether to tell Mauve. Or should I just shut up and do as I was told to keep the peace? After the baby arrived, I knew I had to make a decision. It became so clear. I didn't want an innocent child to live in the home of a mobster. While you were sleeping last night, I told Mauve everything I knew. We had a long talk and came to a decision. We're returning to Europe. We'll live with my family. It will be a simple life, but we'll be safe. Now that we have a baby, we cannot be too careful, no?"

"No, you cannot." Not with the precious child he would now have in his care.

"My family's financial situation is not what your sister's accustomed to, but she's agreed that she would rather live modestly than have anything to do with your father. My aunt and uncle own a vineyard near Bordeaux. We'll go there. They'll happily take us in. We'll make a new life. One we can be proud of."

“Does Father know you’re leaving?”

“No, I can’t tell him. I know too much. My desertion will seem like a threat. A loose end. Thus, he cannot know where we are. I can’t risk it.”

“He’s powerful. Won’t he be able to find you?”

“The vineyard belongs to my uncle by marriage, which means his name is different than mine. I don’t think he can find us. We’ll just disappear.”

“Poor Mother. Losing us all at once.”

“She knows who she’s married to,” Pierre said. “At least I think she does.”

“When will you leave?”

“We’re leaving on a boat in two days’ time. I made the arrangements last night.”

“What about Mireille? She’ll need to eat, and the wet nurse is here.”

“We’ve taken care of that, don’t worry. Your sister’s like a hawk over that baby already.”

I leaned back against the pillows. “Will you tell me where you’re going? So that I can write?”

“Yes. I’ve put everything together for you in the envelope on the dresser. There’s our information and some money to get started. We don’t have much to spare after the first-class tickets overseas, but I gave you what I could.”

“It all makes sense now,” I said. “Why Father didn’t make a fuss about your family’s

lack of money. He thought he could groom you.”

“That’s right. Here I was, thinking he was a benevolent man. What a fool I was. It turns out he’s nothing but a thug who had his daughter’s fiancé killed.”

I buried my face in my hands and wept. My sweet Connie, taken from me. Killed simply because of his virtue and strong moral compass.

Pierre awkwardly patted my back but didn’t insult me with platitudes. He knew there was nothing he could say to make any of this better.

When I was done with my bout of tears, I dried my eyes with Pierre’s hankie and drew in a deep, shaky breath.

“Will you arrange for someone to take me to the train station?” I asked. “Before Mauve wakes? I can’t say goodbye to them again.”

“Are you well enough?”

“I’m fine.” I wasn’t, but that didn’t need to be said.

“I’ll have one of the staff take you to the station.”

“Please, will you tell Mauve I’ve gone and how much I love her and that I’ll write when I can?”

He nodded. “She’ll want to know where you are. As soon as you get settled.”

I reached out and wrapped my hand around his wrist. “Please, Pierre. Keep them safe.”



“I’ll lay down my life.” He patted my hand. “You’re strong, Estelle. You’ll find a way to make a good life for yourself.”

Before sunrise, I slipped out of the house like a thief. By the time my driver reached the station, I’d bled through one rag and had to fasten another into my undergarments. The ache from childbirth hindered my walking, but I managed to buy a ticket to New York City. Unfortunately, it wouldn’t arrive until the afternoon.

I huddled in a corner of the station, cold and achy. My body felt depleted of energy. I had no plan. No purpose. My only comfort was knowing I’d done the right thing for Mireille. But God help me, I could still feel the weight of her tiny bulk in my arms.

At this point, I had to trust that God would lead me down the right path.

Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed a man in an elegantly draped suit enter the station. Nice looking. Dark hair and striking light blue eyes.

To my surprise, he was headed in my direction, almost as if he knew me. I turned away, clutching my bag on my lap, and prayed he would not take the seat facing mine. I’m sure he was perfectly nice, but I didn’t have it in me for idle conversation.

No such luck. That’s exactly where he sat.

### Percival

I noticed the young woman straightaway. She sat alone near the middle of the train car, clutching a bag against her chest as if trying to hide the contents therein or as a protective shield against her person. I couldn't be sure which. Perhaps both? Despite the warmth of the morning, she wore a bulky tartan coat that seemed overly sized, as if it had been made for a man. She was a tall woman with a long, graceful neck. Her fair, lightly freckled skin seemed starkly pale next to dark hair swept into an unkempt knot at the back of her head. Her features might have been strange if taken apart and observed one by one. Instead, the combination of wide-set blue eyes, pointy chin, an upturned nose that seemed unnaturally small at the bridge and wide at the bottom and paired with a perfectly round mouth, the creation was a startlingly beautiful woman. God had done well with this one, I thought.

Although with the width and length of those nostrils, she would have to be careful while looking upward during a rainstorm or she could drown.

She'd turned away from me when I headed her direction. Fine with me, I thought wearily, as I sank into a seat across from her. I wasn't in the mood for polite conversations either.

I'd been to see my wife that morning, a visit that had utterly drained me. She'd been agitated from the moment of my arrival and had become violent, hitting and scratching while screaming about the demons that possessed my soul. Sighing at the memory, I felt my cheek where she'd left a mark with her fingernails before they'd

sedated her. I'd left shortly thereafter, too discouraged to simply sit by her bed and watch her sleep.

When would this ever end? Would I continue on this way year after year with no one by my side? No wife to go through life with, other than to pay her asylum fees and visit once a week. I'd not wanted to admit it to myself, but it seemed Mary might be getting worse instead of better.

My stomach rumbled. I hadn't eaten since I'd left home that morning. I'd come up on an earlier train than I normally did, as I'd woken before sunrise and could not fall back asleep. It was strange, actually, the way in which I'd awakened with the thought—I must go to Mary early today. So much for intuition. She'd not been happy to see me. It would have served me better to stay in bed and read.

I reached into my leather briefcase for the sandwiches our cook had packed for me—ham and cheese on sourdough bread with a dab of sweet mustard. My favorite. The women in my house spoiled me. They felt sorry for me, witnessing how alone I felt since Mary grew ill. Regardless, the small kindnesses with which they bestowed me were appreciated, no matter the reason.

I untied the string that held the parchment paper together and brought the sandwich to my mouth. While chewing, I felt a gaze upon me and looked up to see the woman staring at me with hunger in her eyes.

“Would you like a sandwich?”

“What? No. No, thank you.” She flushed and looked away. Her voice had a honey sweetness. Soothing and nurturing. Almost like a lullaby.

“I have another one.”

Her gaze flickered back my way. A quiver in her chin told me was struggling to decide if she should accept my offer. Her pride said no, yet she was clearly hungry.

“Please, take it.” I pulled the second sandwich from my bag and held it out to her. “My cook always packs too much for one person. She’s trying to fatten me up, I think.”

“I don’t imagine it’s working too well.” A flicker of a smile twitched at the corner of her full mouth. “If you insist, I would be grateful. I got here hours early for my train and have had to wait.”

I handed her the parchment-wrapped sandwich. She set her satchel at her feet. The buttons on her coat strained against the movement.

That’s when it hit me. She was either pregnant or had just given birth. I could see the fullness of her middle, even though her long limbs appeared slender.

If she’d just given birth, where was the baby? Had he or she died during childbirth? Stillborn? Or complications during labor? There were many scenarios, and I’d seen them all in my line of work.

We ate in silence for a few minutes. I was happy for the distraction from my own life as I sat there trying to guess who she was and what had brought her to a train station alone and in her condition.

When we were finished, she folded the empty paper into a square and handed it back to me. “Thank you very much. I feel better already.”

“Are you headed to the city?” I asked, sticking our empty wrappers into my bag.

“Yes, sir, I am.”

“I’m headed that way myself,” I said. “Do you live there or just visiting?”

“Visiting, I guess. I’m not sure if I’ll stay or not. Do you live there?”

“I have a town house on Riverside Drive. I also own a cottage by the ocean but unfortunately, I don’t get there as often as I’d hoped.”

“Hoped? Past tense? Do you no longer have hope that you’ll spend more time there in the future?”

I chuckled. This was an odd girl who said surprising things. She must keep it interesting for whoever spent time with her. Did she have a husband? No ring evident under her glove as far as I could tell. Had she given birth out of wedlock?

“No, I simply meant that I’m busy with work and family. My daughter attends school in the city, which keeps us from traveling during the term.”

“How old is she?”

“She’s six. Although precocious enough to be far older.”

“An old soul?”

“Is there really such a thing?” I asked.

She lifted one shoulder in a shrug. “It’s a turn of phrase, but I’ve often thought there might be something to it. I heard a teacher describe me that way once. I took it as a compliment, even if it wasn’t intended to be.”

“Why wouldn’t it have been a compliment?”

She hesitated before answering, as if deciding how forthright to be. “Miss Walker was not particularly enamored with me, so I assumed the worst. My twin sister was the one they liked. Everyone liked her. Likes her. She’s not dead.”

“Are you identical?”

A smile, both sad and sweet, lifted her mouth. “No. We look nothing alike. She’s small and blonde. And I’m...not.”

“I’m a medical doctor and always find twins absolutely fascinating.”

“You’re a doctor?”

“Yes, are you surprised?” I asked.

“A little.”

“Why, may I ask?”

“You seem like a wealthy man of leisure, living off his family’s money.”

I laughed, delighted with this strange, outspoken creature. “That is exactly what was expected of me. My father died when I was young, leaving my mother and me very comfortable. I could have chosen to live that way, but medicine called to me instead. Thus, I went to school and became a doctor.”

“What did you mean by—live that way?”

“I mean, useless. A man who takes up space and not much else. I’ve always found that type of person repugnant. One should be useful, don’t you think? Employ one’s talents for good?”

“I’ve no idea. I’m a woman. Which means no one cares if I’m talented or intelligent as long as I’m pretty and well-mannered and do as I’m told.”

It was the truth. I could hardly argue with her when all evidence was to the contrary. “You don’t seem like a woman who does what she’s told.”

Her eyes widened. “How do you know that?”

“Merely a guess.”

“I was the twin who did all the wrong things, whereas my sister was perfect.”

“Are you exceptionally close, like some twins?” I asked.

“Not in the way you mean.”

“How do you think I mean?”

She fixed her gaze directly upon me, a slight lift of her thick eyebrows transforming her. “We’re fraternal twins—we don’t have a secret language.”

“That’s a relief,” I said, smiling.

“Why?” she asked, deadly serious.

“I was only teasing.”

“Oh.” She flushed and looked down at her lap, flexing her glove-clad fingers as if preparing for a fight. “I usually have a good sense of humor. I’m not myself today.”

“Did it bother you that your teachers liked your sister better?” I surprised myself with

the question. But what harm could it do? I'd probably never see her again. For whatever reason, she evoked my curiosity in a way people seldom did.

"Everyone likes her better. It's all I've ever known, so I never questioned their judgment, just naturally assumed they are right. There was something wrong with me. Mauve was always pretty and delicate, with light blond curls and a sweet nature. I'm sure what you say is true—some children are easier to raise than others."

"Yes, but it shouldn't be that way, no matter what your personality or challenges. Children should be loved by their parents. Do you feel resentful? I wouldn't blame you."

She shook her head. "No, not resentful. Resigned is a better word."

There was something profoundly sad about this girl. My chest ached, thinking about how lonely it must have felt to her growing up.

She continued to gaze at me, cocking her head to one side. "It's interesting. Most people make excuses for my parents or pretend like I'm imagining the discrepancies." She chuckled, deep and throaty. "That it's all in my imagination and everyone loves us equally, even though it's not."

"I'd not insult you with such platitudes. You're clearly a woman who knows her own mind and isn't afraid of the truth."

"Have you seen it in your work? One sibling loved and adored while the other one is merely tolerated?"

"I have, actually." It was rare that a parent's preference was so obvious, but there were times when they didn't bother to hide it. "Sometimes it's for a practical reason. As in, boys are perceived as more valuable because of what they can do for the



family.”

“What about with sisters?”

“I’m not sure. Perhaps some children are easier to raise, less demanding or curious and happy to do what they’re told without question. My mother’s more perceptive about that kind of thing. She often lectures me about paying more attention to my patients’ psychological needs and feelings. I’m too focused on making them well. Under difficult circumstances for the most part. My patients are poor. Immigrants mostly.”

“Really?” She lifted both dark eyebrows.

“It’s where I can do the most good,” I said, hoping it didn’t sound pretentious.

Her gaze traveled the length of me, perhaps taking in the expensive cut and fabric of my suit.

“And have you? Done good?”

“I’d like to think so.”

She placed a hand over her mouth, stifling a yawn.

“You’re tired. If you’d like to rest, I’ll wake you when we get to the city,” I said.

“You’re my savior.” She yawned, this time outright. “A sandwich and a nap are just what I needed.”

“Happy to be of service, Miss...what is your name?”

Her gaze darted upward and to the right. “Stella. McCord. But you may call me Stella.”

A shiftiness in her eyes made me wonder—had she made up the name on the spot? What did it matter? I would never see her again. Anyway, I was probably imagining it. Inventing something that wasn’t there.

“I’m Dr. Bancroft but please, call me Percival. Or Percy.” I smiled. “Only my mother calls me Percy.”

“Thank you. I shall call you Percival. Percy should be saved for your mother and not given to a stranger.” She gave me a weak smile. “Percival. Such a nice name. It suits you.”

“How so?”

“It’s a smart name. Elegant, too. A name for a great man. Do you feel any pressure to live up to it?”

I shook my head, chuckling. “I’ve never thought about it before.”

“That’s probably best. The less expectations we have of ourselves, the better.”

I didn’t reply for a moment, thinking about this unusual girl with the mournful eyes. How was someone so young so jaded? What had happened to her?

She shifted, wincing.

“Are you unwell?” I asked.

“I’ve been...I had surgery recently but I’m fine. A little sore is all. No need to call a

doctor.”

I laughed softly. “Thank goodness for that.” A second later, I asked, “May I inquire as to the nature of the surgery?”

She looked out the window, gazing at the passing landscape, green and lush this time of year. “It’s something private.”

I knew it. She’d had a baby. “Well, you let me know if I can be of any help, all right?”

“I will, thank you. I’m very tired, though. The bone-weary kind. Have you ever felt it?”

“More than once, I’m afraid.” I took a thick scarf from my bag. “Here. Roll this up for your head and take a rest. I’ll keep a close watch on you.”

“Thank you.” She took the knit scarf from me and wadded it into a pillow-like shape, then placed it between her head and the glass window. Within seconds, her breathing told me she was already asleep.

Whatever her name or circumstances—she looked tragically angelic, as if she’d fallen through the clouds to land on earth, lost and bewildered.

I remained seated for the rest of my travels, anxious to keep close watch on Miss Stella McCord. On occasion I went to the dining car for coffee or a drink, depending on the time of day. However, I couldn’t leave her alone and vulnerable to predatory men or thieves.

I took the book I’d brought with me from my bag but found I couldn’t concentrate. Instead, with an unfocused gaze, I faced the window.

A few minutes later, the train slowed and came to shuddering halt. Several passengers got up to exit. A few came aboard to take their place. This was the second-to-last stop before we reached Grand Central Terminal. Miss McCord would not have long to rest. Where would she go after this? Would there be someone waiting for her? For that matter, where had she come from?

We were approaching Grand Central Terminal. I glanced over at Miss McCord. As if she felt my gaze upon her, she stirred and opened her eyes.

“We’re arriving at our destination,” I said.

She didn’t answer, simply stared at me as if I were completely unfamiliar. Had sleep wiped me from her memory? Seconds later, she appeared to remember our previous conversation. “It’s you. My guardian angel.”

“If I’m the one God sent, you might be in trouble.”

Estelle

My eyes felt as if a layer of dust covered the lenses. At first, I had not remembered the dark-haired man who peered at me from a pair of light blue eyes. Then, however, the memories from earlier slipped into my consciousness. This was Dr. Bancroft. Percival. Despite the woolliness of waking from a deep sleep, our pleasant conversation from earlier returned. He'd been kind, offering me a sandwich and to look over me while I slept.

I smiled, pushing stray strands of hair from damp cheeks and forehead. The train's car was stifling hot, and I felt as if I'd not stopped sweating since I went into labor. "Thus far, you're doing an excellent job. Thank you again for the sandwich and sleep."

"You're most welcome," Percival said.

Now what was I to do?

"Are you feeling all right?" Percival asked, watching me carefully with eyes that held deep sorrow. Pain he tried to hide, but as the poets say, the eyes are the mirrors to the soul.

"I'm well enough." A lie. I wasn't well. I'd been hot but now I felt cold, shaky, and disoriented. Was this typical after having a baby? Thinking of getting to my feet and walking into the station and then out to the world made me want to burst into tears.

“Is there someone here to fetch you?” Percival asked.

“There is not. Sadly.” I clamped my teeth together to keep them from clattering. I was so cold.

“You’re shivering,” he said.

“Yes, I’m a little chilled.” He was polite enough not to mention that it was a warm afternoon and stuffy on the train.

“Please, allow me to be of service.” His expression was one of sympathy. Not predatory. This was not a man who would hurt me. I don’t know how I knew that, but I did. “You shouldn’t be carrying anything heavy after surgery. I believe you may be feverish.”

“I only have the one bag,” I said lamely, gesturing toward the one stowed at my feet. Feverish? Did that mean I had an infection?

He stood and offered me his hand. “Allow me to escort you from the train. I can arrange for a cab to take you to your destination.”

“I don’t have one. A destination.” I gave him my hand, grateful for the assist to my feet. The pain had not lessened while I slept—it felt as if a sharp rock had smashed into my private parts. “I’m new to the city and have yet to secure lodgings or work.”

“I see. Perhaps I can be of some help.” His eyes crinkled attractively at the corners. As I’d noticed before, he was quite handsome, blessed with a strong jawline and high cheekbones. Although a lonesome quality clung to him like tobacco smoke in a tweed jacket. I guessed him to be in his late twenties or early thirties.

Earlier, when he’d addressed me with such kindness, I’d been relieved to see he wore

a wedding ring, which meant he was only offering assistance out of compassion, not for seduction.

The lie about my name had rolled surprisingly easily from my tongue. I must remember that I was Stella McCord now. Stella had been a nickname Mauve had called me when we were small. Where I'd come up with McCord, I could not say. As I'd noted before, creativity was an elusive little muse. Who knew from whence it came? Regardless of the answer, I was venturing into a whole new way of life—one built from lies and sorrow. I was a liar.

“Let's get you out of here and somewhere comfortable,” Percival said.

I was too tired to resist and merely nodded my consent.

We disembarked and then walked slowly toward the main part of the station. My typical quick gait wasn't possible. Percival seemed to intuitively understand, tucking my arm close to his side and walking with care while holding my bag in his other hand.

We entered the bustling Main Concourse, grand and elegant. A mural of constellations and stars in gold against a blue background had been painted on the ceiling. Early-morning light coming in the large east-facing glass windows highlighted the marble floor, classical columns, and arches. The four-faced opal clock atop the information booth brought memories of an enjoyable lunch at the Oyster Bar with my mother and sister. We'd come to the city for a shopping excursion before our season had begun. How happy I'd been that day. How naive.

A dart of grief almost brought me to my knees. Instead, I stumbled slightly. Percival steadied me, then led me away from the congested pathway of hurried people.

“Stella, although I fear you'll think me impertinent, you have me worried. Even if I

were not a doctor, I can clearly see you're in pain. You have no place to go. Leaving you seems reckless and cruel. In any event, my mother would not forgive me if I left you alone."

"You're very generous, but I'll be fine. I'll rent a room in a boardinghouse and find a position somewhere." All I wanted was to sleep for days. But that would not be possible. I had to find work. Unfortunately, I had no skills other than knowing what kind of sandwiches to serve at a tea party.

"Do you know the city at all?"

"A little," I said.

"Please, accept my invitation to come home with me. My mother will look after you. In fact, she can assist you in finding a place to live and perhaps even a position."

"I'm not educated in anything. Other than finishing school."

His eyes glittered with curiosity, but he didn't ask further questions. "Mother's a resourceful woman."

My mind raced. Should I take him up on his offer? He could be a killer. Maybe he picked women up on the train and took them home to kill them.

"Will you murder me?" I asked weakly. If he was a murderer, I could only hope it wouldn't be painful. How much worse could it be than sleeping on the street?

He laughed, deep and rumbling. "I'm not a murderer. Only a man raised by a woman who would not forgive an unkindness in her son. She taught me to offer generosity whenever possible."



“She would be pleased with you today,” I said. “You’ve been considerate and attentive. To a total stranger, no less.”

“Think nothing of it. We have an apartment on Riverside Drive with a guest room and enough staff that you’ll be well taken care of. For fear of sounding immodest, my home would provide a good place to convalesce. You may stay with us as long as it takes to get on your feet.”

“What about your wife? Will she care that you’re arriving with a strange woman?”

The same shadow from earlier descended upon his fine features. “Am I right to assume your story’s complicated?”

I stared at the tips of my shoes poking out from under the hem of my long coat. “Yes, that’s correct.”

“I, too, have a complicated story. Suffice to say, my wife won’t mind. She’s very ill and no longer lives with me.”

There was a wife, but she did not share a home with him? “Where is she?” I couldn’t help but ask.

“She’s staying somewhere that provides care for the chronically ill.” His tone told me the subject was not welcome. I would not ask him anything else. It was none of my business. There were details he didn’t want to share, just as I had secrets of my own.

“I’m sorry about your wife.”

“Thank you.”

“Why would you do this for me? You’ve only just met me.”

He smiled, lifting one shoulder. “Life can be terribly cruel. I’m a man who knows that only too well. The only good that’s come from tragedy is that it’s given me more empathy. When I extend a kindness to you, it’s like offering help to myself.”

I thought for exactly two more seconds about whether or not to accept his invitation and decided that I would take him at his word. If he were a killer, then he could put me out of my misery. In fact, it didn’t sound all that bad to leave the world behind for whatever came next. “Yes, thank you, I accept your invitation.”

“Excellent. Off we go. My driver will be waiting for us just outside the doors.”

“How come you don’t have a bag?” I asked.

“My trip was not overnight,” he said. “Thus, I travel light.”

I’d normally have been curious about the nature of his travel, but I was too tired and beleaguered to ask. Perhaps I could ask him more about it later? For now, I was grateful to follow him out of the station.

Dr. Percival Bancroft’s apartment on Riverside Drive stood tall, with multiple stories, each featuring large, symmetrically placed windows. The entrance, flanked by decorative wrought iron lanterns, was set back from the street, surrounded by a well-manicured garden.

His chauffeur, who had driven us to the apartment through the busy, loud streets of New York, bounded up the stairs to the front door and held it open for me to enter. I winced climbing the steps but managed to make it inside, blinking as my eyes adjusted to the dimmer light. It was a spacious, high-ceilinged foyer, adorned with a large ornate mirror and a beautifully crafted console table. The intricately patterned marble floors reflected the light from a crystal chandelier hanging from the ceiling.

A dark-haired butler hustled toward us, taking my bag from Percival's hand.

"Thank you, Robert," Percival said.

"Miss McCord, this is Robert, our butler. He'll take care of anything you need during your stay."

Robert bobbed his head. "Pleased to meet you, Miss McCord. May I take your coat?"

Panic temporarily rendered me mute. I dared not take off my coat for multiple reasons. Firstly, I still looked pregnant, having dressed without a corset. Secondly, I was fearful I'd stained my skirt with blood. The last time I'd put in a new rag was before I got on the train. What if I'd bled through?

"I'd like to keep my coat on," I said. "I'm cold."

"As you wish, Miss McCord," Robert said.

"Is my mother home?" Bancroft asked.

"Yes, sir. She was out this morning but has returned. She's in the living room having her tea."

"Good. We'll say hello to her first, but please take Miss McCord's bag to the guest room."

"Right away, sir."

Percival guided me down a hallway to the expansive living room. Large windows draped in luxurious, heavy fabrics allowed for ample natural light and provided breathtaking views of the Hudson River and Riverside Park. Like my mother's house,

the furniture was of the finest quality, featuring rich, dark wood, plush upholsteries, and elegant designs. A large ornate fireplace served as the focal point of the room.

In a chair beside the unlit fireplace, an elegant, beautiful woman sat with a newspaper spread out on the coffee table. Her dark hair had streaks of silver, but her round face had retained a youthful glow. She looked up when we came in, sunlight reflected in her eyes. They were remarkably similar to Percival's, I noticed. Her expression conveyed surprise, quickly replaced by a friendly smile.

"Percy, darling, who have we here?" She stood to greet us.

"Mother, this is Miss Stella McCord. She's in need of a place to stay for a few days. Stella, this is my mother, Mrs. Bancroft."

Mrs. Bancroft held out her hand. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Stella. You're white as a ghost. Are you feeling sickly?"

"She's just had surgery," Percival said.

Mrs. Bancroft didn't say anything for a second or two, appraising me. Could she see right through my lies already? "Dear me, why on earth are you out and about?"

"I had no choice," I mumbled.

"She's new to the city and without a place to land," Percival said. "I've invited her to stay with us until she's well enough to hunt for somewhere to live."

"I'm delighted you're here," Mrs. Bancroft said. "Please forgive my intrusiveness, but what kind of surgery?"

"Um...I'd rather not say." I flushed with heat. Perspiration seemed to come out of

every pore in my body.

“Of course,” Mrs. Bancroft said. “Are you hungry or thirsty?”

“I’m both. However, I’m mostly in need of a bath and a change of clothes.”

“She’s seeking a position,” Percival said. “I thought we might be of some assistance.”

“Yes, we can speak of that later,” Mrs. Bancroft said. “Miss McCord, you’re clearly in no condition to work. For now, we’ll show you to your room where you can bathe and change clothes. I’ll have tea sent up. Then you should rest.”

“I’ll leave you in the capable hands of my mother.” Percival gave me another one of his gentle smiles. “Mother, I’m heading out to check on a few patients but will be home for supper.”

He kissed his mother on the cheek and then strode across the room and disappeared into the foyer.

“Come along, dear,” Mrs. Bancroft said. “I’ll have Robert take you to your room.”

Soon, I found myself in a spacious guest room with a large bed and finely crafted furniture in addition to a private sitting area and an ensuite bathroom equipped with a claw-foot bathtub. Deep longing for home and my sister nearly overwhelmed me. I instinctively placed my hand on my stomach, thinking the baby was still nestled there, but then I remembered. I was empty. Nothing would ever fill the space left by Mireille. But I had to get on with things, including living the rest of my life without my family. I could not go home again. My life was about survival now.

A young flaxen-haired maid arrived, dressed in a black dress and white apron. “This is Penelope,” Mrs. Bancroft said. “She’ll look after you during your stay with us.”

“Pleased to meet you.” Smiling, Penelope bobbed her head, dimples appearing on both sides of her mouth. Everything about her was round: eyes, the shape of her face, and her hourglass figure.

Mrs. Bancroft instructed her to run a bath before returning her attention back to me. “Miss McCord, please sit. You look dead on your feet.”

I felt dead. “Thank you. It’s been a long few days.”

Mrs. Bancroft tucked a stray hair back into her bun. “I’m going to leave you be for now. Your tea will be waiting after you bathe. I do encourage you to rest. Perhaps later, we can discuss your plans, but for now you must allow us to look after you.”

“Thank you.” I had no idea what I would say or do during that discussion of my plans, but at this point I didn’t care. I wanted only to bathe and sleep. After those primary needs were taken care of then I could perhaps focus on what in the world I was to do next.

I’d just come out of the bath and slipped into the robe Penelope had left for me when she came in to gather my clothes, ostensibly for a wash. If she noticed the extent to which blood had soaked through my petticoat and the back of my skirt, she didn’t say anything or visibly react. “May I take these to the washroom? We’ll do our best to get the stains out.”

“That would be lovely, thank you,” I said stiffly. My breasts were painful and engorged. Milk had come in, but there was no one to feed.

“I’ve hung your other dress in the wardrobe. Your nightgown and underclothes are in the dresser drawers.”

“Wonderful, thank you again.” I sank onto the nearest chair, feeling as if I might

faint.

Pangs similar to those associated with my monthlies tightened my belly. I felt a burst of blood between my legs. If I didn't pin a rag in place soon, I would leak all over the rug. "I need something for my monthlies."

"Yes, of course. I've put some in here." She yanked open the bottom drawer and handed one to me, in addition to a clean chemise and bloomers.

I excused myself and returned to the bathroom. I pinned the cloth pad into place and then pulled the chemise over my head. When I returned to the bedroom, Penelope was placing a tray of food on the table next to the bed. "They've sent up tea sandwiches and cake. Are you hungry?"

"Not really. I had a sandwich earlier." Without my clothes, I felt even colder. I stood there shivering and feeling as if I might pass out.

Penelope watched me, eyes full of concern. "You've grown ever so pale. Please get into bed. Mrs. Bancroft will not want you up and about in your condition." She pulled back the covers. "In you go."

I sighed, feeling the weight of a thousand pounds on my shoulders as I gingerly lowered myself onto the bed. Meanwhile, Penelope plumped and arranged the pillows just so.

"Miss, should I ask Dr. Bancroft to take a look at you?"

I sank back into the softness of the feather pillows, relieved. If I could stay like this for a hundred years, I might feel like standing again. The ordeal of the day had caught up with me. I fought tears and utter fatigue, too tired to think of an answer. "No, I'm fine."

“But you’ve recently had a baby.”

There was no use to lie. Penelope could see the evidence. However, she didn’t have to know all of the circumstances of my trouble. “She was stillborn.”

Penelope clucked in sympathy. “I’m sorry. My sister lost a baby last year. She took it hard.” She went to the tray and returned with a tea-sized sandwich. “Now, take a few bites of this before you sleep.”

I did as she asked, then sank back into the soft pillows.

“When did the baby come?” Penelope asked.

“Yesterday.”

“Oh, miss, you shouldn’t be up and about, traveling on a train. Don’t you have any people to look after you?”

“I do not. My fiancé was killed before we could marry.”

“And your family?” Penelope asked.

“They’ve sent me away.”

“How awful, miss. I’m very sorry.”

“Thanks,” I mumbled.

“My sister’s baby lived only a few days,” Penelope said. “Poor little mite was born too early. She was devastated but since then she had a healthy baby boy. A friend of mine—she had to give her baby away because she had no husband.”



“Is she all right? Your friend who gave away the baby?”

Penelope peeked up at me from beneath her lashes. “She’s never been the same, but life continues, whether we want it to or not.”

“Right.” My fate had been sealed. How could I go on and live life, knowing everything I loved had been left behind?

I shook my head when she offered me another sandwich. She put the plate back on the tray and then returned to touch her cool hand against my forehead. “You’re very warm. I’m going to have to report this to Dr. Bancroft.”

“I’m fine. Other than my breasts. They’re sore and engorged.”

“I know what to do.” Penelope got up and went over to the dresser, returning with several strips of linen material. “I’ll need you to sit up for me so I can wrap your chest. This will help dry up your milk.”

I did as she asked. Soon, she had my chest bound tightly and had me tucked under the covers.

“Please, sleep. I’ll be back to check on you later.”

“Before you go—are the Bancrofts good employers?” I asked. “Good people?”

“Yes. They treat the staff well.” She tugged on her apron. “They’ve had their own share of trials, but they’ve never ceased being kind to us.”

“What kind of troubles?”

“Oh, it’s not for me to say. You may ask Mrs. Bancroft. If she wants you to know,

then she should be the one to tell you.”

Fair enough, I thought. It was none of my business. Anyway, I would not be here long. I could not take advantage of their hospitality any longer than absolutely necessary.

Penelope pulled the curtains closed so that only a crack of light came through. As soon as I heard the door click behind me, I shut my eyes. Sleep captured me almost immediately.

### Percival

In the early evening, I returned from calling on two of my patients. Robert greeted me, taking my hat and medical bag. "Your mother's in the sitting room. She asked that you come see her upon your return."

"Yes, thank you." I smoothed my hair with my hand and walked down the hallway to the sitting room. Mother was at the desk, writing a letter.

"Good evening," I said.

Mother got up from the desk to greet me, lifting her cheek for me to kiss. "Hello, darling. How were your home visits?"

As we settled into our favorite chairs, I gave her a brief synopsis of each of the patients I'd gone to see that afternoon. One had lost part of his arm in a factory accident. His stump was healing well, but the sadness over his loss had grown worse by the day. "Mrs. Knight is doing well." She'd given birth to twins last week. "Both the babies have gained weight, so I think they're going to be fine." I'd been worried, as they'd been born small, weighing just over four pounds each. However, only a week later, they were gaining weight, and their color was excellent. Because of my experience with my own wife, I was especially solicitous of the mothers who gave birth under my care. The more I did this work, the more convinced I became that one's mental state directly corresponded to healing. Mrs. Knight, however, was a sturdy Irish girl and as tough as they came. Adding twins to her brood was done

without complaint, despite the babies being her fourth and fifth children.

“Speaking of babies,” Mother said. “I’ve had a report from Penelope. Our houseguest gave birth recently. Very recently. As in yesterday.”

“I suspected,” I said. “What happened to the baby?”

“Stillborn,” Mother said. “Miss McCord’s unmarried—apparently a fiancé died shortly before their wedding. Her family sent her away.”

An image of her slumped against in her seat on the train came back to me. It all made sense now. “Poor girl. How is she this afternoon?”

Mother told me she’d been asleep for most of it. “She didn’t wake the few times I went in to check on her, and I didn’t want to disturb her. I’d like you to look in on her before supper.”

“Yes, of course.” I poured myself a whiskey and sat across from my mother, crossing one leg over the other. It felt good to sit after a long day. “Did she get any other information from her?”

“Not much. However, she’s from a wealthy family. I feel certain of it, even though she didn’t give Penelope any details.”

“Agreed. She’s too well-spoken and sophisticated for us to think otherwise.”

“What will become of her?” Mother asked. “How could they just send her away like that? It’s unconscionable to send an innocent young woman out to the streets of New York City without any protection.”

“She mentioned looking for work and finding a room at a boardinghouse.” I stretched

my tired legs, absently rubbing a spot just above my left knee. I'd fallen out of a tree as a child and broken my leg. After long days, my knee ached. "She's a fraternal twin, and her parents greatly favored the sister. Now that you've confirmed my suspicions, I expect the pregnancy is what caused her father to send her away."

"How does one just send a young, defenseless woman out on her own?"

"A man afraid of scandal?"

"We'll look after her for now," Mother said. "I can help her find work once she's better."

"I figured you'd react that way." I chuckled to myself. "Which is why I asked her to come home with me."

"Am I so predictable?"

"You're simply good, Mother. Perhaps to a fault."

"Well, anyway, I'm concerned over her health. God only knows who delivered the baby. She felt warm to the touch. I'm afraid she has an infection of some kind." My mother was not a medical doctor, but she helped me enough with my patients that she knew as much as most trained nurses.

"I'll go up and see her now." I set aside my drink and rose to my feet, grabbing my medical bag from the foyer closet before heading upstairs.

I knocked softly on the guest room door but hearing no answer, went inside. Miss Stella McCord slept on her back with her hands folded over her still-round stomach. Protecting a baby who was no longer inside her, I thought sadly. I set aside my bag and went to her side. Red cheeks, clammy skin, and a warm forehead told me she was

running a fever.

She stirred at the sound of my bag opening and moaned softly.

“Stella, it’s Percival. Can you hear me?”

Her eyes fluttered open. She stared up at me with fevered, glassy eyes. “Where am I?”

“You’re at my home. We met on the train.”

She shook her head, mumbling something incoherent under her breath. “Everything hurts. I’m cold. So cold.”

She closed her eyes again and did not answer when I asked her if she could tell me more about what hurt.

I listened to her heartbeat with my stethoscope and heard nothing alarming. However, she was running a high fever, which worried me a great deal.

Penelope appeared in the doorway, looking small and frightened. “She’s been delirious, Dr. Bancroft. Calling out for someone call Mauve. Other times, Constantine.”

“Will you go downstairs and ask my mother to meet me here? Then I need you to go down to the kitchen and bring up a bucket of boiling water. I need it to sanitize my instruments.” I was going to have to examine Stella. There was no other way to see if the midwife or whoever delivered the baby had gotten all of the placenta. In my experience, sometimes small pieces remained inside the woman, causing fever and heavy bleeding.

Soon, Mother joined me, sitting by Stella's side as I placed a cool cloth on my patient's forehead. After a few minutes, Penelope arrived with a bucket of boiling water. I put on a pair of rubber gloves and cleaned my duckbill-shaped speculum, forceps, and a retractor in the hot water. Then, Mother and Penelope each held up one of Stella's legs so I could place the speculum inside so that I could do a vaginal examination.

Sure enough, several pieces of the placenta had been left inside her uterus. I removed them and cleaned her up. For her part, Stella remained quiet, other than a soft whimper now and then. We managed to get some aspirin in her to help with the pain. Penelope pinned a new, clean cloth for the bleeding.

"I'll keep close watch on her," I said. "And pray I got everything, and the infection will subside."

"If not, then what happens?" Penelope asked me, wringing her hands.

"We'll address that if we need to. For now, one of us will need to stay with her. We'll have to work in shifts."

"I'll take the first one," Penelope said. "So, you two can have your supper."

We agreed, leaving Penelope with the delirious Stella.

At the doorway, I turned to look back at the bed. Penelope was on her knees, praying.

Mother and I stayed with Stella throughout the night, taking shifts to sleep every few hours. Stella continued in delirium, crying out for Mauve and then Mireille and thrashing about. Finally, nearing dawn, her fever broke. She'd quieted then and seemed to fall into a deep, peaceful sleep. Penelope came to relieve us at daybreak, sending us off to bed.

Tired, I crawled into bed and slept until ten. I woke with a start, worried about my patient. I rang for Robert, and he came minutes later, reassuring me that Stella was still sleeping and seemed to be on the mend. “Thank goodness for you, Dr. Bancroft.”

I brushed aside his compliment and asked if he could bring a tray of something to eat and a strong pot of coffee.

After he left, I got in the bathtub. While lathering my skin and scrubbing my hair, I thought about Stella McCord. Had I not brought her home, she would have died. Unless by some miracle she’d found her way to a hospital. Regardless, I was glad God had put me in her path.

I ate breakfast and perused the newspaper before going down to the nursery to see Clara. She was on the floor playing with her dollhouse when I appeared. For a moment, I watched her, overcome with the tender, all-consuming love I felt for her.

She jumped to her feet, calling out, “Papa,” before throwing herself into my arms.

“Hello, sweetheart.”

“You didn’t come to church,” Clara said, with a note of admonishment in her tone. Her strong ethical code and religious faith, in addition to her bossiness, reminded me of my mother.

Mother and I had decided not to attend, given everything going on here at the house. “We have a houseguest and she’s very ill. I had to stay and look after her.”

“Grandmama too?”

“That’s right.” I gathered Clara onto my lap and inhaled the sweet scent of her hair. “I’m sorry we missed church and spending time with you.”



“Miss Lisk took me, and she fell asleep. And guess what else? She snored. Very loudly.”

“Oh, dear,” I said.

Clara giggled. “She made a snorting sound and the people in front of us turned around to look at her. It was mortifying.” She dragged out the last word for emphasis.

“Mortifying? Really?” Such a big word for such a little girl. “A lot of people fall asleep in church.”

“I can tell you exactly why. The preacher’s boring. Today, he droned on and on. So long that I scarcely remember a thing he said.”

She even sounded like my mother.

“There was a lady there with a giant hat.” Clara held out her hands to demonstrate. “And you won’t believe it—there was a peacock feather sticking out of the top and all the little feathers kept dancing around because the windows were open. It was the best that I ever saw. Miss Lisk said she thought it was tacky and boog....boog something.”

“Bourgeois.”

“Yes, that’s it. Miss Lisk said she shouldn’t wear something so gaudy to church, but I thought it looked wonderful. Miss Lisk and I do not agree about fashion. She doesn’t know anything about Paris and all the dresses that come from there.”

“I can’t say I know anything about that myself.”

She sighed, flashing an indulgent smile. “Oh, Papa, of course you don’t.”

Of course? Why so emphatic?

“Where is Miss Lisk now?” I asked. “Have you been in here by yourself?”

“Grandmama said she could have the rest of the day off because she looked exhausted, and Miss Lisk said she was unusually tired because someone had kept her very busy all week. I think she was talking about me.”

“Yes, I think you’re correct.”

“I don’t know why she would say such a thing, because I don’t wear her out on purpose. Anyway, I’ve been here playing alone without anyone having to correct me or tell me what to do.”

“I’m proud of you. It’s a good trick to be able to play by yourself.”

“Did you play alone? When you were a boy?”

“That’s correct. I was an only child just like you. And it was only Grandmama and me.”

“Were you lonely?”

I shook my head. “No, not really. I had friends from school. Books too.”

“Are you lonesome now?”

“No, goose. I have you and Grandmama. How could I be lonely?”

Her eyes dulled, and she looked down at her hands.

“What’s this about?” I asked gently. “Did someone say something to you?”

“I overheard some ladies talking and they said you were lonely and how sad it was that your wife was a nutcracker.”

“Nutcracker?” My chest tightened, and a surge of anger warmed my neck. People should be more careful about what they said. Children heard so much more than we thought they did. Especially children like my Clara. “Are you sure that’s what they said?”

“Nut something.”

“Nutc case?” I asked.

“Yes. That’s it. Why would they say that and what does it mean?”

“Remember how we were talking about your mother being unwell?”

“Yes.”

“Sometimes when someone is feeling poorly in their head, people call them ugly names like nutcase.”

“What kind of nut? Pecans are my favorite.”

“It’s just slang. They’re not really talking about nuts.”

“Slang,” Clara said, saying it very much the way one would take a bite of a cookie, full of wonder and expectation. She wrapped her skinny arms around my neck. “I’m glad you’re not lonely, Papa.”

“Thank you, doll.” I kissed the top of her head. “I could never be lonely with you around. You make my heart very happy.”

“Papa, who is the lady in the guest room? Is she sick?”

Her question startled me. I hadn’t realized she had seen Stella. “She’s a new friend who needs our help.”

“Will she have to go the asylum like my mother?”

“What? No. She’s a different kind of sick than your mother, and she’s going to be fine. We need to look after her for a little while longer.”

“Can I meet her?”

“When she’s feeling better, yes.”

“I’m glad she doesn’t have to go to the asylum,” Clara said.

“I am glad about that too.”

Clara rested her cheek against my shoulder and played with the lapel of my jacket while I stroked her silky hair. The chaos of my world disappeared in moments such as this, reminding me that the most important thing in my life was right here. My daughter. Every decision must be made for her benefit, including taking care of her mother for however long was needed. What kind of man would I be if I couldn’t tell my daughter with assurance that I looked after the woman who had brought her into the world? I had to be a man Clara was proud of. Even if it meant that I was lonely. Deeply so.

Life was cruel. If I could keep Clara from hurt and harm, then I would.

10

Estelle

I awakened to the scent of whiskey and leather. Opening my eyes, I was surprised to see Percival by the window, bathed in the last orange light of the day. He must have sensed my waking, because he turned. Seeing that I was awake, he rushed to my side.

“Stella, how are you feeling?”

I tried to lift myself up to a seated position, but I felt as if a boulder lay upon my chest. My head ached, and the light hurt my eyes. However, the pain from childbirth had dulled some, feeling more tender than the throbbing pain that I’d felt earlier.

I fell back to sleep. Some time later, I woke to Percival sitting next to the bed. He placed his warm, dry hand on my forehead. “Hello there. Are you feeling better?”

“Yes, a little. How long have I been here?” I managed to croak out.

“I brought you here yesterday. You’ve been in and out of consciousness since yesterday evening.”

“Am I dying?” It certainly felt like it.

“You had me worried earlier. Whoever helped deliver your baby did a sloppy job. Some of the placenta was left inside your uterus and you developed an infection, which caused a high fever.”

“Placenta. Is it still in there?”

“No, I was able to clean everything up. You’re going to be fine now. It was touch and go over the last twelve hours.

“Thank you.” I closed my eyes, mortified. What had Dr. Bancroft had to do down there? What had he seen? “You know I had a baby.”

“That’s right. It was obvious when I examined you.”

I nodded, not trusting myself to speak without crying.

“We kept you as cool as possible with cold compresses. You came in and out of delirium. Do you remember anything?”

“No.” Had I said anything embarrassing? “What was I saying?”

“You asked for your sister. And someone called Mireille. Who is that?”

I turned away, overcome. Mireille. My baby girl. She was very much alive. Not stillborn as I’d told Penelope. Ashamed of my lies, I couldn’t look Percival in the eyes. “My baby.”

“I suspected as much.”

I stared up at the ceiling, avoiding his gaze.

“Your fever broke just an hour or so ago,” Percival said in a soothing tone. “Since then, you’ve been resting peacefully.”

Mrs. Bancroft scurried into the room, her heels clicking across the hardwood floor.

“She’s awake?”

“Yes, and much improved,” Percival said.

Mrs. Bancroft hurried over to the other side of the bed where another chair had been placed. “Miss McCord, you’ve given us quite a scare.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “Thank you for taking care of me.”

“No need to thank us,” Mrs. Bancroft said. “The important thing is that Percy found you and brought you home. Otherwise, you might have died.”

I could have died. I’d gotten out of bed and run away before my body was ready. Maybe that’s what I wanted. To be punished or put out of my misery? Either one would be reason enough. I shifted slightly and almost howled in pain. My breasts were heavy and full and painful.

“What is it?” Mrs. Bancroft asked.

“My chest hurts.”

“Your milk will dry up in a day or so,” Mrs. Bancroft said. “Until then, we’ll keep you bound. I checked earlier and Penelope did an excellent job. I’ll have one of the maids bring ice, which will help with the pain. It did for me, anyway. After I lost Molly.”

“You lost a baby?” I asked before I could take it back.

“Yes, dear.” She paused, drawing in a deep breath that told me everything I needed to know. The pain of losing a baby had stayed with her. There was strange comfort in knowing I was not alone, even though I would not have wished it on my worst

enemy. “You mustn’t push yourself too hard. Let us take care of you.”

“I’m grateful. Truly. I don’t know what would have happened to me if your son hadn’t gone out of his way to help me.”

“I told her you would not have forgiven me if I’d not tried to help someone in trouble,” Percival said.

“We’re Christian people,” Mrs. Bancroft said. “What would it say about us if we turned you away? Jesus certainly wouldn’t have.”

“Even though I’m a sinner?” I whispered more to myself than them.

“We’re all sinners,” Percival said.

“Unfortunately, yes,” Mrs. Bancroft said.

“You need nourishment if you’re to make a speedy recovery,” Percival said. “Do you think you could stomach some warm broth?”

“I think so,” I said.

“Good girl,” Mrs. Bancroft said. “You must build up your strength.” She rose to her feet. “I’ll be back with a tray of food and tea.” She brushed a clump of my damp hair from my forehead. “We’re so glad to see you looking a little better.”

“Thank you,” I said. “I can say it a thousand times and it wouldn’t appropriately convey my gratitude.”

“No need, dear. Just rest and get better. That’s all the thanks I need.”



“I’m sorry,” I said to Percival after she left. “I’ve caused you all so much trouble.”

“Nonsense. I’m a doctor. This is what I do.” He rose up to pour a glass of water from the pitcher. “Now, I need you to sit up and drink this. I’ll help.”

I was too weak to fight. He adjusted the pillows and then helped me to rise up enough to sip from the glass. Water had never tasted as sweet or as refreshing.

“Your recovery’s somewhat of a miracle,” Percival said. “There was a lot of praying going on in this house.”

“You were praying for me?”

“That’s right,” Percival said.

Touched, tears filled my eyes as I whispered, “Maybe it would have been better if I’d died. What do I have to live for?”

He clucked his tongue and drew closer, smoothing the quilt that lay over me. “I can’t answer that for you. We all have to find our own purpose. My guess? God clearly has more plans for you. Once you heal, physically and emotionally, you’ll know more about what you’re to do next.”

“I wish I knew what that was now,” I said, wiping my eyes with the sleeve of my dressing gown. “At the moment, I feel utterly lost and alone.”

“I understand. It’s easy to say to someone else, and God knows, I’ve struggled with this myself, but you must have faith. Even in the darkest of hours, we have to believe light will find us again. Sometimes it’s all we have to cling to.”

My hands were outside the quilt, resting at my sides. He placed his hand over the one

closest to him for a few seconds. “You’re not lost. I found you. My mother and I are here.”

“And brought me home like a stray puppy?” I asked, smiling through my tears. “I still don’t understand why.”

“As I said before, Mother and I have both experienced loss and heartbreak. None of it was because of anything we did or didn’t do, which makes it hard to understand. When we sense tragedy in someone else, our natural instinct is to help. Perhaps this is the best part of us. The only good that comes from heartbreak. If everything had always been easy, we would not be as sensitive to others’ pain.”

He left me soon thereafter, only to be replaced by Penelope with a tray of beef broth and a chunk of soft, warm bread. Although I wasn’t hungry, I forced myself to eat the broth and a portion of the bread.

Soon, I fell back asleep.

I woke in the late afternoon to the sound of feet clicking on the hardwood floor. Rolling to my side, I saw Mrs. Bancroft shut the bedroom door behind her and then come sit in a chair next to the bed.

“Ah, you’re awake,” Mrs. Bancroft said. “Some of your color has returned.” She sat in the chair by the bed, folding her hands in her lap as if she were afraid they might fly off and do something on their own. She was an attractive woman, tall and angular, with a proud countenance. I’d not noticed before, but her gown was simple, made of gray wool like that of a shop worker or teacher. “How do you feel?”

“A little better, thank you,” I said.

She took a glass of water from the bedside table and brought it to my mouth. “Please,

drink. It's important you get a lot of fluids."

I took two dainty sips, the water cold and refreshing, before sinking back into the pillows.

"Penelope told us about your fiancé dying shortly before your wedding," Mrs. Bancroft said. "Did you love him very much?"

"I did. He beguiled me from the first moment I ever met him."

I watched her carefully. Now that I was better, would she ask me to leave? An unwed mother wasn't exactly welcomed in her social circles.

"Penelope told me the baby was stillborn." She said this bluntly, which I appreciated. It was easier that way.

"That's correct."

"I lost my husband when Percy was only two years old. He died in the arms of his mistress while I was pregnant with Molly."

"No, really?"

"All quite sordid and embarrassing. Then, shortly after his death, I had Molly. She came early and didn't make it more than a few hours. I'd never felt more alone." Mrs. Bancroft patted my hand that had escaped from under the blankets. "It does get easier with time. Regardless, there's a part of you that goes with them."

"You must have been in agony."

"Yes, I was." Mrs. Bancroft's gaze drifted toward the window, her eyes unfocused.

“But I had to pick myself up and keep going for my son’s sake. Now, tell me more about yourself so that I may be of assistance.”

I hesitated, unsure if I should continue with the lie about the stillbirth. My instincts told me she was the type of person who did not suffer fools. Thus, the truth might be better in the long run. Or would it? Was it better to pretend that I’d not abandoned my child? No one but my own family would know about the child they forced me to give to my twin. I could carry on with the lie and no one would be any the wiser.

“What is it?” Mrs. Bancroft asked, eyes sharp.

“I haven’t told you the exact truth about what happened to my baby.”

“I can forgive almost anything, but not a lie.”

Fine. I would tell her everything. The worst had already happened to me. I’d lost everyone I loved. There wasn’t much more that could hurt me. Now it was about survival.

“I’m afraid you might not feel the same if I tell you the truth, but I have nothing left, so it won’t much matter if yet another person tosses me aside like the trash. She was born yesterday, out of wedlock. My fiancé did die—that part was true. However, my daughter was born healthy. But since I was not married, I had no choice but to give her to my twin sister. No one will know that Mauve and her husband are not her biological parents, and my family will avoid scandal.”

“How convenient for them all,” Mrs. Bancroft said under her breath.

“I didn’t want to give her away.” Tears crawled up the back of my throat. “But no one cared what I wanted. They just wanted to get rid of me. I was a problem, and now I’m not.”

“What about your mother? Is she alive?”

“Yes, she agreed with my father. She wanted me to go away. My sister’s a good person and will be a wonderful mother. Up until the last moment, she was trying to convince me to stay and be the baby’s aunt, but I knew I couldn’t do it. I couldn’t watch her grow up thinking I was only her spinster aunt. I’m too selfish.”

“Well, as you said, what choice did you have? There are few for unmarried women. Especially those who find themselves in your predicament.”

“I feel like there’s nothing left of me except shame and regret. Everything good about me died with Constantine.”

“You loved him very much?”

“I did. Enough that I no longer cared about seeing the world. That had been my plan as a child.”

“The world’s not going anywhere. It’ll be there when you’re ready.”

I started to cry, no longer able to keep my despair inside. “No, all ambitions to see the world died with Constantine. Anyway, I don’t deserve anything good to come my way. Not after what I’ve done to my family.” And to myself, I thought. I was the one who had to leave my daughter behind. The rest of them would not suffer. With me out of the way, life could resume in its neat package for everyone but me. Mireille would have a mother and father who loved her. She’d never know that she’d been born out of wedlock.

Mrs. Bancroft handed me a hankie, scented with rose oil. I used it to dry my eyes.

“Dear girl, you mustn’t think that way. It’ll drive you to madness if you let it. Guilt,

shame, and regret—they're insatiable in their quest to devour a woman's soul. You sacrificed your own happiness for the child. It was a true act of selfless motherhood. You gave her a better life, even though it hurt you to do so. This will sustain you in the years to come."

"How do you know?"

"Because I've lived a lot longer than you," Mrs. Bancroft said. "And made many more mistakes than you could imagine."

I nodded, unsure what to say. She didn't seem like someone who would make even a small blunder.

"You'll need a job," Mrs. Bancroft said, "if you're going to make it on your own."

"Yes, ma'am. I don't have many skills, unfortunately."

"What education do you have?"

"Private tutors," I said. "Then, finishing school."

She peered at me long and hard. What did she see? A lost cause? Someone worthless, without skills or talents? Or could she see possible redemption? A way for me to exist in a world that no longer wanted me?

I pressed cold fingers to my forehead. "I never thought I would have to worry about much of anything. Yet here I am. Whatever hopes I had for a life filled with love and family are no longer possible. I want only to survive. I've no money or plans or family and find myself at the mercy of kind strangers such as you and your son."

Mrs. Bancroft tugged at the bedcovers, smoothing them over my legs. "Percy's

always been that way. Some might say he's kind to a fault. He can never give up on anyone, stranger or loved one. I suppose that's why he chose to study medicine. He wanted to help people, even though he didn't have to. We have no financial worries, thanks to my father and my late husband. Percy didn't need to attend university and medical school, but he craved meaning in his life. In fact, he served in the army during the war and then returned home to open a private practice." Her tone of voice clearly communicated the pride she felt in her son.

"I'm sure he's an outstanding doctor," I said.

"Yes, he is. And a wonderful son. After his father died, it was always just the two of us—which has made him protective of me. Now, of course, we have darling Clara, which makes us a family of three."

"Percival mentioned that his wife is very ill. May I ask what ails her?"

Mrs. Bancroft looked down at her lap. "My daughter-in-law's afflictions are of the mental kind. She believes she's sixteen years old. Has no idea that she and Percy are married or that Clara's her daughter. Sadly, we had to admit her to an asylum up north. Percy takes the train up to visit her every Saturday morning. Which is why he was on the train yesterday."

"How awful. Did something happen that triggered her illness?"

"Her father was murdered, and she saw it happen. Shortly thereafter, she had Clara, and became completely delusional, thinking a demon lived in Percy and the baby. She became violent and volatile."

"But why? How could something like that happen?"

"The doctors think it was the trauma of her father's murder and the hormonal effects

of childbirth that created some kind of psychotic break. We would have liked to care for her here at home, but delusions and hallucinations made her too unpredictable. The doctor agreed that she was a risk to the child. All of which has Percy's heart. He suffers great guilt about putting her into the asylum, but we had no other choice. I naively thought the doctors could cure her, but she's not recovered. They have little hope that she will.

"But we have Clara." Mrs. Bancroft's expression brightened. "She's the light of our lives. Even though her birth made Mary sick, we cannot imagine life without her. My son's a very modern father—he spends a lot of time with Clara. Unlike my husband, who couldn't be bothered to hold his own son." She blinked and clapped her hands together. "But that's neither here nor there. We're supposed to be talking about you."

I wanted to know more but kept my curiosity in check. My head swam with all this information. Poor Percival and his sick wife. The little girl must miss having a mother around. Although, clearly Mrs. Bancroft was involved with the child, perhaps providing the maternal nurturing a young girl needed.

"You're not well enough to start a position straightaway," Mrs. Bancroft said, as if we'd not veered from the subject of my employment. "You'll need to recover first. You must stay with us for as long as it takes you to fully heal."

Her kindness brought new tears to my eyes. She blurred in front of me like an impressionist painting. "I'm grateful. I thought I'd be spending the night on the street."

"How could they send you away without anything at all?" Her expression sharpened. "They should be ashamed."

"Pierre, my brother-in-law, slipped me a little money before I left, but he didn't have much to give me. Everyone's reliant upon my father, thus no one can challenge his



decisions or risk his wrath.”

“I imagine someday he’ll be sorry.”

“Why do you think so?” I asked.

“I don’t know, other than to say that time has a way of changing our perspectives.”

“I knew it was better for the baby if I was out of sight and mind. She deserves the chance to have a family without the stigma of illegitimacy.”

“Do you recall the story of Solomon and the baby from the Old Testament?” Mrs. Bancroft asked.

“Yes, I think so.”

“Two women claimed a baby as their own. However, the real mother was revealed because she was willing to sacrifice her own happiness to save the child.”

“Yes, but in the end, that woman got to take her baby home,” I said.

“Correct. However, my point is—you did what you thought was best for the child. It’s a sacrifice larger than any you’ll ever be asked to do again.”

“They let me hold her for a bit. She was perfect.” Her little finger and toes. Her chubby cheeks. Sobs overtook me. “How can I miss someone I don’t even know?”

“Because a woman does know her child, no matter how much time she gets with them. Whether they’re inside you for a few months or nine, your souls are intertwined. Dearest, believe it or not, you will survive this.”

I dabbed at my cheeks. “I don’t know how.”

“There are not many freedoms given women. However, no one can touch what’s in here or here.” She tapped her chest and then her temple. “They cannot take away our thoughts or feelings.”

She paused for a moment, rubbing the palm of one hand with her thumb. “When I lost Molly, I remember thinking my pain was meaningless. What purpose did my suffering serve? I asked God why to show me how I could use my hurting to serve his purposes.”

“Did he answer?” I asked.

“I believe he did. It wasn’t all at once, but slowly my heart began to change. Instead of carrying around the burden of my anger toward my husband and grief over Molly, I became more sensitive. I started to notice things I never had before. The plight of the poor as I passed through neighborhoods grew more vivid. I could see that which my eyes had purposely avoided. One day, on the way to the park with Percy, it occurred to me that a woman of wealth, such as myself, had the luxury of mental anguish because my belly was full and my bed warm. If I were trying to survive, for example, or feed a family, I would have to move on with things, not sit around feeling sorry for myself. I sat and watched Percy play that afternoon with the sun on my face and vowed to do what I could for others. I sought out situations where my gifts could be useful to others. That act saved me from myself and the insidious resentment and anger that wanted to own me. Instead, I embraced my sadness and loss and used it for good. I found meaning in service to others. I cling to it like a blanket on a cold night. In that way, my good deeds do more for me than the people I help.”

“I need something to cling to,” I said. “I’m lost.”

“For today and the foreseeable future, your only job is to grow physically strong. Our Lord brought you and Percy together for a reason. Have a little faith.”

“I’ll do my best.”

“That’s all I can ask.” She squeezed my hand. “Keep the hankie. I must go now. I have several appointments I cannot break. I’ll check on you upon my return.”

“Thank you.” It was all I could think to say, even though I’d uttered those same words many times in the last few days. I could only hope she understood how genuine my gratitude was.

Estelle

Several weeks passed. Each day I felt a little better than the day before. By the end of the third week, I felt ready to return to normal activities. My milk had dried up by the fourth day of binding, just as the ladies had said it would. I no longer looked pregnant.

Despite being bedridden, I'd developed a routine. Mrs. Bancroft visited after breakfast, and we would chat for a few minutes. It was during those times that I learned more about Mrs. Bancroft's work with the poor.

After she left for her appointments, I napped or read until Penelope brought my lunch and sat with me for a few minutes. From her I learned a lot about the household, including the antics of one little girl named Clara.

In the late afternoons, Dr. Bancroft dropped in on me and often stayed to visit. During that time, he told me more about his life, including his years at medical school and stories from his practice. He didn't speak of the war much, but that wasn't unusual for the boys who were blessed enough to come home. Still, I could see the memories of those horrid days and nights lurking in his eyes.

Mrs. Bancroft and Percival seldom mentioned his wife. I came to understand as the weeks unfolded that she had been at the asylum for the entirety of Clara's life. In fact, she'd never met her mother. Although Mary Bancroft still existed, she was absent from conversation.

At the beginning of my third week of convalescence, I was allowed to get out of bed for more than just a bath. In fact, Percival encouraged me to walk up and down the hallway several times a day. I was only too happy to follow his direction. The idleness of being bedridden was enough to drive me mad.

To occupy my time during the long days of recuperation, I read novels from the family library. Mrs. Bancroft brought me a leather-bound journal as a gift, encouraging me to write down my feelings. At first, I resisted, thinking it was nothing more than busy work. However, after a few days of jotting down random thoughts, I found it somewhat addictive. Talking about oneself when no one could hear proved to be therapeutic.

I wrote about Constantine a lot, detailing our time together so that I would not forget. An urgency to catalog our memories had become almost an obsession. One I could not let go of until I'd written about every last moment we'd spent together.

During these musings, I asked myself difficult questions about my own behavior. Would it have made a difference if I'd not succumbed to desire that afternoon? Would he still be alive if we'd acted differently? The outcome was impossible to predict. Still, I found myself contemplating the chain of events that had led to my current circumstance over and over again.

Was it fate or the result of bad decisions? I would never know. That troubled me most of all. If only I could make sense out of what happened. Find something good. Was it enough to know I'd given my sister the gift of a precious daughter? In my darkest moments, I had to admit to myself that Connie and I were the ones who had lost while my sister and Pierre won. But I didn't allow myself to dwell upon it overly long. Jealousy and bitterness hurt only me, not them.

When I finished writing about Connie and me, I spent a day reading through my entries, crying and laughing. Although my grief remained fresh, a sense of gratitude

for the time I'd had with him had embedded itself within me. Albeit short, we had enjoyed every moment together. Now I would have the memories to sustain me for the rest of my life.

I also wrote about Mireille. Sometimes I wrote letters directly to her, telling her about how her father and I had met and what a good man he'd been. I told her about the Bancrofts and their kindness and of Penelope's entertaining stories of her family. Mostly, though, I told her about myself. Knowing I would never send them gave me a sense of freedom. I could write without fear of anyone ever reading my words. I surprised myself with the details of my life that came to mind as pen was in hand.

One afternoon, I asked Percival if I might explore more of the house. "Beyond my excursions up and down the hallway?"

"Are you growing bored?" Percival asked, sitting in his usual chair next to the bed.

"Growing? I would say that I have grown bored." I smiled at the raising of his eyebrows. "Not that I'm complaining. You have all taken such good care of me."

"If you feel up to it, by all means, explore the rest of the house. The more you're up and about, the better."

"Are there any rooms I'm forbidden to explore?"

He laughed. "No, we have no rooms with buried secrets. Other than my bedroom and Mother's, you're welcome to go anywhere you like."

The next morning, Mrs. Bancroft came to see me after breakfast. "I've good news. Our favorite doctor has given me permission to invite you to lunch. You may get dressed and join me for lunch downstairs today. Clara's home for school holiday and is anxious to make your acquaintance."

A thrum of excitement rushed through me. “I’d love to come downstairs for a meal with you and Clara.”

“We’ve caught her peeking through the keyhole several times. The child’s as curious as a cat.”

“I’m curious about her too,” I said.

Mrs. Bancroft sat in the chair next to the bed. “There’s something else I’d like to talk to you about. I’d like to offer you a position here. Working as my assistant.”

“With you?” Was she serious? “But I don’t know how to do anything.”

“You will soon enough. For the most part, the role involves accompanying me to my various engagements and helping me during my visits to the sick. I can teach you everything you need to know.”

“I’m forever in your debt. I’ll do whatever’s required of me.”

“Very well.” She waved her hand dismissively. “I’ve been contemplating your wardrobe or lack thereof. If you are to work for me, you must have decent dresses. My seamstress will come and take your measurements. I’ll ask her to bring samples of fabric to choose from. For work, you’ll need a sturdy dress, preferably made of a dark color. Some of the places we visit can be dirty, damp, and infested with cockroaches.”

I swallowed. “Cockroaches.”

“Yes, they’re disgusting little beasts, but this work is not for the faint of heart.”

“I’ll try to be brave.”

“You’ll be fine. We can offer you room and board and a small stipend. You may stay here in this room. We’re already calling it ‘Stella’s room,’ so it makes sense for you to stay. I’d also like you to take your meals with us.”

“Not with the other staff?”

“No, you belong with us.”

“I accept,” I said.

For the first time in a long time, I felt light and somewhat hopeful. Helping others would give me something useful and purposeful to do, even if it was selfishly motivated. Plus, I would be safe here and well taken care of. What more could I ask for?

Penelope helped me to dress for the midday meal. I’d only brought two dresses with me, and bloodstains in the dress I’d arrived in had proven impossible to remove. Thus, I was left with only a drab brown dress. I’d resigned myself to wearing it for our luncheon but to my surprise, Penelope arrived with two dresses draped over her arm.

“These are Mrs. Bancroft’s dresses, but she thought you might like to wear them until yours can be made.”

“Yes, that would be lovely.”

“Which would you like to wear this afternoon?” She placed them both on the bed. One was a pale pink and the other a deep midnight blue.

“I think the pink’s best,” I said.



“Yes, it’ll be cooler than the other.”

She helped me into one of the girdles that had essentially replaced the corsets my mother had been forced into when she was my age. I stood in front of the mirror, amazed that my stomach had flattened in such a short time. The dresses were shapeless, with dropped waists and slim skirts, all meant to hide women’s curves. I had none to speak of, being tall and slender, which made the latest fashions flattering. Mauve used to express envy at my figure. She was short and curvy—unsuited for the current styles. I’d always admired her voluptuousness, but I had to agree that the straight dresses looked better on me.

During my pregnancy, I’d not cut my thick, dark hair, and it had grown longer than was fashionable. I’d not bothered to fix it of late, simply leaving it in a braid that hung down my back. Penelope was having none of that. She marched me over to the dressing table and soon had my hair fixed with pins and curls in a mimic of a bob. Next, she powdered me and pressed rouge into my cheeks.

When she deemed me satisfactory, she helped me into the pale pink cotton dress.

“You look lovely,” Penelope said, clearly pleased with her efforts.

“It feels nice to wear something pretty.” I actually resembled my old self. Except for my eyes. They no longer sparkled with the idea that something wonderful could happen at any moment. Would they ever do so again? Or would the weight of what I’d done, what I’d lost, haunt me the rest of my days?

“Thank you for making me feel like normal again,” I said.

Penelope stood back, a pleased smile lighting up her round face. “You look very well, miss. Very well indeed. This is the beginning of a new life for you.”

“I’m frightened.” I met her gaze in the mirror.

She gave me an encouraging smile. “You’re stronger than you think.”

“I certainly hope so.”

“Come along. Mrs. Bancroft said to bring you down when you were ready.”

I nodded and drew in a deep breath to fight my nerves before heading downstairs.

Lunch was served in a sunroom, clearly designed to catch the morning light. Large floor-to-ceiling windows framed with finely crafted wood dominated the walls. French doors opened onto a terrace, where potted flowers burst with spring color. Light, airy curtains moved gently with the breeze. A soft light filtered through the gauzy material.

The colors of the wall and furniture appeared inspired by nature, with soft greens and floral patterns. Comfortable rattan chairs and sofas, adorned with plush, vibrant cushions, added comfort and style. A large decorative rug anchored the seating area, with potted plants and flowers placed around the room.

A small table, surrounded by a few chairs, had been set for three. Upon my entrance, Mrs. Bancroft turned from the French doors where she’d been looking out to the flower-laden garden.

“Miss McCord, how well you look.” She held out her hands and I took them, flushing under her keen gaze.

“Thank you. It’s nice to be up and dressed.”

“Madam, lunch is served.” A middle-aged footman dressed in black gestured toward

the table. “Would you like me to bring the first course?”

“Yes, thank you, Samuel. I’m famished. Are you hungry?”

“Indeed. Thank you.”

Soon we were seated, and I was about to ask about Clara when I heard the pitter-patter of feet. I looked toward the doorway to see a little girl bounding toward us, wearing a sailor-style dress and patent leather shoes.

“Clara, there you are.” Mrs. Bancroft beamed and held out her arms. Clara threw herself into her grandmother’s embrace, nearly knocking the older woman over.

“Grandmama, do we have company?” Clara pushed away locks of yellow hair to gaze up at me. She had her father’s eyes, although fringed with thick, curly lashes.

“This is Miss McCord,” Mrs. Bancroft said. “And this is Clara.”

Clara curtsied and grinned up at me. Her two front teeth were missing, adding to her charm. “Pleased to meet you, Miss McCord.”

“I’m pleased to meet you,” I said. “I’ve heard a lot about you.”

“You have?” Clara’s eyes widened. “What did they say?”

“Never mind that,” Mrs. Bancroft said.

A silver-haired woman dressed in gray came in just behind Clara, slightly breathless. “Ma’am, I’m sorry we’re tardy. We ran into one of Clara’s friends at the park and I didn’t realize how late it had gotten.”

Mrs. Bancroft introduced me to Miss Lisk, Clara's nanny. With her hook nose and close-set, bulgy eyes and fidgeting hands, she reminded me of a squirrel.

"Pleased to meet you," I said.

"Likewise." Miss Lisk's gaze flickered toward me briefly before she turned back to Mrs. Bancroft. "Miss Clara's washed up for lunch. Would you like me to dine with you?"

"No, thank you. Enjoy an hour off," Mrs. Bancroft said. "We'll be occupied for at least that long."

"Thank you, ma'am." Miss Lisk darted away, as if worried Mrs. Bancroft might change her mind.

We all sat at the table, unfolding napkins and placing them into our laps. Samuel returned with the first course, a cold tomato bisque.

"Clara, will you say the prayer, please?" Mrs. Bancroft asked.

We all bowed our heads.

"Dear Jesus. Thank you for food and school. And Grandmama. Amen."

Mrs. Bancroft and I both chimed in with an "amen."

"How come I get to eat luncheon with you today?" Clara asked, picking up her spoon.

"Because we have a guest," Mrs. Bancroft said.

Clara's gaze slid to me, blue eyes scouring my face. "You look different."

"That's because I'm out of bed and dressed," I said. "I've been ill."

"I heard you saying strange things one day," Clara said, with a guilty glance in her grandmother's direction. "When I happened to be walking by your room."

"Happened?" Mrs. Bancroft asked. "Or walked by there on purpose?"

"I was looking for something," Clara said, innocently.

"Miss McCord had a terrible fever, which caused her to become delusional," Mrs. Bancroft said.

"Did I scare you with my feverish ramblings?" I asked, picking up my spoon.

"No, not really." Clara shrugged. "I don't scare easily."

I hid a smile behind my hand. "An excellent skill to have."

"I'm glad you're feeling better." Clara used her spoon to daintily scoop a small amount into her mouth. "My mother's sick. She never comes to visit me because she's locked up in a bad place."

I glanced at Mrs. Bancroft to gauge what to say to the little girl, but she seemed untroubled by this honest statement from a six-year-old. She nodded in my direction, essentially granting me permission to speak freely.

"You must miss her," I said.

"I've never seen her." Clara smacked her lips before diving in for more soup.

They never took her to visit her mother? How sick was the poor woman? Clara's mother was like me—she would never see her daughter. I immediately said a silent prayer for the younger Mrs. Bancroft. I fervently hoped she did not feel as alone as I. Or miss her daughter as much as I missed mine.

“Clara dear, Miss McCord might like to hear about your adventures this morning. Were you able to feed the ducks as you hoped?”

“Oh yes.” Clara's face lit up. She spent the next few minutes giving details about the various ducks and their apparent affinity for breadcrumbs. “Would you like to go to the park with me sometime? I've named them all and can tell you who is who.”

“I'd be delighted,” I said. “However, your grandmama has a job for me, so I might be too busy to go anytime soon.”

“What kind of job?” Clara asked, staring at me as if finding it hard to believe I had any skills whatsoever. Not that she was incorrect in her assessment.

“Miss McCord's going to assist me in my work,” Mrs. Bancroft said.

“Can I come with you?” Clara asked.

“Not today, darling.” Mrs. Bancroft turned to me. “Sometimes Clara goes with me to visit our elderly patients.”

“Goodness me,” I said, astounded to learn that a little girl would accompany Mrs. Bancroft. “You're brave to do so.”

Clara nodded solemnly. “Grandmama says I've been blessed with good fortune and therefore must assist those in need. She claims it's more important than going to the park.”

The last was said with some skepticism.

“Clara’s been quite helpful during our visits,” Mrs. Bancroft said. “She cheers the patients.”

I had no doubt, I thought, glancing at the little girl’s sweet face.

“Who will you see today?” Clara asked her grandmother.

“Mrs. Caldwell, for one,” Mrs. Bancroft said.

“Ah, yes.” Clara nodded, as if a forty-year-old spinster had suddenly entered her body. “Papa says the poor woman’s been very ill.”

“She’s had pneumonia,” Mrs. Bancroft said to me. “A deep cough keeps her from getting any rest, not to mention her lack of proper nutrition. I go by several times a week to make sure she’s eating and to help her take a bath.”

“How kind of you,” I said.

“My son does all the important work, but I do what I can,” Mrs. Bancroft said. “You cannot imagine the squalor so many endure here in the city. It’s shameful.”

“Are you going to stay here in our home?” Clara asked, returning her gaze to me.

Before I could answer, Mrs. Bancroft did so. “She’s going to live here with us for the foreseeable future.”

“Where’s your real home?” Clara asked.

“I do not have one.” The truth of my words showered me with a spray of stinging

grief. I had no one, other than the kind people who had taken me in. “I plan to earn my keep as best I can working hard for your grandmother.”

“You will, dear girl. You will.” Mrs. Bancroft winked at me.

Should I be glad or frightened of the work ahead? I couldn’t be sure of one or the other. All I knew is that it was a chance for survival, and I must not shrink away but face it boldly.

That afternoon Mrs. Bancroft’s chauffeur drove us in one of their automobiles toward the Lower East Side. Before my intrepid recent travel, I’d been to New York City many times, but we had never veered into neighborhoods such as the ones I saw before me now.

Soon the driver stopped in front of a tenement housing project, and I followed Mrs. Bancroft inside a hallway that smelled of mildew and grease. I followed my companion up a skinny staircase. Paint peeled in places along the wall; water damage had lifted floorboards, and mold crept along the ceiling. I heard several people coughing, deep and phlegmy. As we climbed, I caught the putrid scent of communal toilets located on each floor. This could not possibly be sanitary, I thought. Diseases must spread from lack of clean water and shared bathrooms.

I brought a handkerchief to my nose, but it did little to block the scents of poverty.

“Most of the people here share a one- or two-room apartment with extended family,” Mrs. Bancroft said. “Sometimes there’s a dozen occupants in one small room. Because of the close proximity, the moment one in a family becomes ill, the virus or bacteria quickly spreads to others. Even when stomachs are full, their diet lacks nutrients, which only worsens chances of survival. We lose women and babies in childbirth. Sometimes, an infant will only live a few days. It’s a terrible thing to see.”



We reached the fourth floor. Mrs. Bancroft and I walked down a narrow hallway until we reached apartment 12. She knocked, then opened the door a smidge to call out to the occupant. “Mrs. Caldwell, it’s Mrs. Bancroft. May I come in?”

“Yes, please,” a weak voice called from within.

I followed Mrs. Bancroft into the room. A single bed and a chair were the only furniture. The kitchen, if one could call it that, was located in one corner, equipped with a woodstove for heating and cooking. A scattering of a few personal items lay on shelves made of wooden fruit crates. One small window, too dirty to see though, brought little light into the room.

Mrs. Caldwell lay on her back in the slim bed. She lifted her head as we approached, revealing a face lined with wrinkles and a mouth missing most of its teeth. Dirty, scraggly white hair fell around her thin shoulders.

Mrs. Bancroft introduced me. “This is Miss McCord. She’ll be assisting me today.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you,” I said.

Mrs. Caldwell looked at me from deep-set, faded blue eyes. “Why would a pretty young thing like you want to take care of the likes of us?” Her voice faltered between words, as if it were a struggle to speak.

“I’m proud to assist Mrs. Bancroft,” I said. As if I had anywhere else to go.

Mrs. Bancroft’s mouth twitched into a near smile as she nodded approvingly in my direction. I’d pleased her with my answer.

“You must not have much of a life if you want to come see me,” Mrs. Caldwell said.

“Has my son been by to see you today?” Mrs. Bancroft asked.

“Nah, but yesterday afternoon he come by. Said I was showing signs of improvement. Ain’t that something?”

“What excellent news.” Mrs. Bancroft set to work then, warming water on the stove for our patient’s sponge bath while instructing me to take a loaf of bread and a chunk of cheese out of her bag. “Cut up a few slices of each for Mrs. Caldwell.”

I did as asked, none too sure about the sanitation of the rickety table. I located a cracked plate to put it on and then took it over to her. “May I help you sit up?” I asked her.

“Yes, thank you kindly.”

I slid an arm around her shoulders and helped her to sit up and lean against the headboard. No sooner did I have her upright than a coughing fit overwhelmed her. I stood there powerless to help. When it seemed she was done, I brought her water in a canning jar I found near the stove. She drank greedily and then asked for the food.

I set it on her lap, as there were no trays anywhere nearby.

“How’s Mr. Caldwell?” Mrs. Bancroft asked as she fetched a clean washrag out of her bag. What else was in that thing?

“He’s found work at one of the factories.” Mrs. Caldwell took a piece of bread and tore it savagely before sticking the corner into her mouth.

“What a relief.” Mrs. Bancroft dragged the only chair from the table and came to sit next to the bed.

“Yeah, they won’t be able to throw us out of here for at least another month.” Mrs. Caldwell bit into a slice of cheese from the side of her mouth that still had teeth.

After our patient was done eating, Mrs. Bancroft gave her a sponge bath, then brushed and braided her hair. “I don’t see any nits. I think we got them all last time.”

Nits?

Immediately, my head started itching.

Soon, we were on our way, promising to come back in a few days to check on her. We stopped in two more apartments, one with a newborn baby who seemed to be doing well, much to Mrs. Bancroft’s relief. I couldn’t so much as look at the baby and instead busied myself cleaning up and putting a pot of beans on the stove. The final visit was to see an entire family—five small children and their mother—suffering from the flu. They were much improved, according to Mrs. Bancroft. “Thank goodness. Last week I wasn’t so sure the little boy would make it.”

“Why is there so much coughing?” I asked on the way down the dank stairwell.

“Tuberculosis, pneumonia, typhus—take your pick,” Mrs. Bancroft said, with a sad shake of her head.

The Bancrofts’ chauffeur was waiting for us at the corner and helped us into the back seat.

On the way home, I asked Mrs. Bancroft a question that had been on my mind all afternoon. “Why do you bring Clara with you on these visits?”

She glanced over at me, eyes bright. The rumbling of the car’s engine did not drown out what she said to me. I was to remember it all my life. “Because I want her to

understand that to be born into wealth is a privilege she did not earn—it was merely luck. She'll have all the education she wants and never worry over whether she'll eat that day or now. My hope is that it will awaken a part of her that wants to do something meaningful with her life. Other than being some man's pretty wife."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Every time she sees a person in need and does something to help them, she not only improves their life but her own. To be of service is the only thing that matters. If we wake to the luxury of a day without hunger or cold or utter despair, then we must take it upon ourselves to do whatever we can to alleviate the suffering of others. It's the only thing God wants from us and in fact, may bring us closer to him. Clara has no mother, other than me. If I do nothing else important with my time here on earth, I can leave this world knowing I helped shape two spectacular people—not because of their accomplishments or wealth, but the way in which they use their gifts to improve the lives of others. I've done my duty with Percy, and I'm very proud of him. Now I must do the same with my little Clara."

"It's no wonder he rescued me on the train." The emotions coursing through me brought tears to my eyes.

She patted my hand resting in my lap. "If you're looking for a way to lessen the ache in your heart, then you have only to look around you and see who needs your help. You'll be amazed at how much it enriches your life to give of yourself."

In the weeks to come, I went on many such outings with Mrs. Bancroft. She taught me everything she knew, including how to clean and bandage a wound, tend to minor burns, and provide advice on nutrition and hygiene. At the beginning, I felt like a fish out of water, so unsure of myself and self-conscious. But by the end of those first few weeks, the work had become almost second nature. I was not at the caliber of my mentor, but soon I could see what needed doing almost as quickly as she. She was

right. It gave me great joy to spend my days in service.

If only the nights were easier. The darkness of my soul came then, like the grim reaper, only instead of death, he cursed me with a deep sadness that had no cure.

Estelle

June and July passed quickly, filled with work during the days and time with the Bancrofts in the evenings. Before I knew it, we were in the middle of August. One evening, Mrs. Bancroft, Percy, and I retired to the drawing room. Clara usually ate early with her nanny. I would have loved to hear her chirping during the evening meal, but Mrs. Bancroft insisted she be in bed by half past seven. We didn't eat until eight, and the meals were not meant for a child. However, the little one often joined us for our midday meal with Mrs. Bancroft and me before we headed out for our daily house calls.

Percival poured us each a brandy and then sank into his favorite chair. The nights brought relief from the heat.

Earlier that day, Percival had gone to visit his wife. It didn't take a keen observer to see that his visits took a toll on him. He was unusually quiet those evenings. His thoughts he kept to himself, as I did mine. Instead, we talked about the patients and what we'd learned during our visits.

Tonight, however, both Percival and Mrs. Bancroft were quiet. I sipped my brandy and watched the fire. I was startled when Mrs. Bancroft excused herself for an early night.

"I find myself wearier than usual this evening. I'll leave you two young people to enjoy your drink."

We bade her good night and then fell back into silence. I had a book nearby that I'd planned to take to bed and reached for it, thinking it would be nice for Percival to have an hour or two in which he did not have to converse with anyone. As much as he loved his work, and clearly found purpose in it, I could see how the conditions of his patients and the neighborhoods they lived in nagged at him. How could they not?

As I reached for the book, he stirred, as if I'd awakened him from deep thoughts. "Stella, my apologies. I'm clearly not good company tonight."

"Please, don't apologize. You deserve an evening where you can just be, without anyone requiring anything of you."

"That's very perceptive of you. And kind. Thank you."

"Considering everything you've done for me, there are no thanks necessary." I returned his smile. "I shudder to think what would have happened should you not have taken it upon yourself to help me."

"I'm a doctor. It would have been criminal not to."

"Still, I'm forever indebted to you."

"You've more than repaid us with your hard work. Mother says you're a natural and that the patients have grown fond of you."

"Really? That's nice to hear. I have to be honest, that first visit with Mrs. Caldwell shook me to the core. This will sound terrible, but I'd never seen people live that way."

"It changes a person."

“Yes,” I said.

“You’re looking very well,” Percival said. “Strong. Mother says you’re tougher than you look.”

“Do you mean to say I do not look tough?” I asked, pretending offense.

He laughed. “No, I cannot confess that you look particularly tough. Your slender stature does not tell the story of your inner strength.”

“I feel physically stronger than I do here.” I tapped just above my heart.

“Ah, my dear. I’m sorry.” He cocked his head to the right, empathy reflected in his eyes.

“I’m still bruised. Perhaps forever broken. Even a talented doctor such as yourself cannot heal the wounds to my soul.” I smiled to take the edge from my words.

He sat up straighter, his gaze sharp upon me. “Do you intend self-harm?”

“What?” I asked, startled. “No, nothing like that. I meant only that I’m still grieving my losses.”

“To be expected, I’m afraid. Considering what you had to give up. Life is hard. I don’t know why.” Percival sighed, his shoulders lifting momentarily before he seemed to relax again.

We sat in silence for a moment before I asked a question that had been on my mind for some time. “Do you think ill of me? For what I did?”

“You did what you had to,” he said.



“No, you misunderstand me. Not leaving the baby. Having her in the first place. Doing what I did before marriage.”

“I’m a doctor but also a man with instincts of my own. One who has seen many things in my work. Also, I’m certain I’ll not be considered for sainthood any time soon. It is not for I to judge.”

“Thank you,” I whispered, embarrassed but touched. “That is nice of you.”

“You were in love. You expected to marry. It’s not such a terrible sin. Not enough for the punishment you’ve received, I can assure you.”

“I’m not sure. Maybe God’s punishing me for what I did? He took everything from me. My sister and mother. My child. Why else would God do such a thing?”

“I don’t have answers,” Percival said. “But I don’t think he’s the punishing God they’ve taught us he is. I think he weeps with us. Every slash and cut, he feels with us.”

My arms pricked with goose bumps as I imagined God’s tears falling from his eyes to earth. “Does that explain the rain? It is merely God weeping with us?”

“Tears falling from heaven? I suppose we could take comfort in the rain, then? A sign that he’s there? Or a gesture meant to heal our sadness?”

“I’d like to think so,” I said.

“If drops of rain could heal this ache in my heart, I’d move to the dampest place on earth.” Staring into the fire, he lifted his glass to his mouth to finish his brandy.

“I wish it was not so for you,” I said softly. “You deserve better.”

After a moment, he said, “How much has Mother told you about my wife?”

“Not much, other than she’s very ill.”

“Yes, she is.” He got up and poured himself another brandy before returning to sit.

Instinctively, I waited for him to continue. After another sip of his drink, he did.

“When she first showed symptoms of psychosis, I thought it would be temporary. I’d learned about mental illness in school, obviously. The type of illness that comes after childbirth often dissipates after a time. However, the doctors have told me the shock of seeing her father’s murder in combination with childbirth so soon afterward caused irreparable harm.”

“What happened to her father?” I’d not heard this part from Mrs. Bancroft. “He was murdered?”

He didn’t answer for a few seconds, as if deciding whether or not to share. “My father-in-law was involved in some less-than-legal enterprises. The authorities didn’t look that hard into his death. They knew it was a rival that ordered his killing. I guess they figure they can all kill one another, and no one will care.”

“Ordered?”

“Organized crime.”

“Oh. I don’t know anything about that.”

“Why would you? Let’s just say it’s a dangerous business. The warring gangs and families do not mess around.”

“Your wife was with him?”

“They were coming back from a weekend in the country. I had stayed behind to take final exams. They were ambushed and driven off the road. They gunned him down. Multiple bullet wounds through his chest. He died in Mary’s arms.”

“How awful.”

“She’d shown signs of instability before then, but it was too much. She reverted back to when she last felt safe. That’s why she thinks she’s sixteen. She’s stuck in time.”

He went on to tell me she no longer remembers who he is. “She has no recollection of Clara, either.”

“Is that why you don’t bring her with you?” I asked.

“That and it would not be good for her to see the way...they are. Also, at one point she tried to harm Clara. She was under the misperception that we were possessed by the devil.”

I shook my head, feeling sick. The poor woman.

“I knew after that—if I didn’t get help, my daughter and my wife could end up dead. God help me, I couldn’t allow her to hurt our child. No matter how much I hoped she would get better. Mother and I researched the best institutions. We visited a few. One here in the city. They were awful places.” He shuddered and paused to take a drink. “The screaming was the worst. You can’t imagine. The sounds of hell. Tortured souls crying out for help. However, the asylum where she is now—it’s not terrible. I pay for a private room and give the nurses a little extra to ensure they look after her.”

“No one would blame you for doing what you did,” I said.

“For years I held on to hope. Finally, though, it became more and more clear that she would not return to us. My wife’s not coming back to me. Furthermore, she’s no longer the woman I loved and trusted with my life. The vibrant young woman I fell in love with is gone. I can accept it for myself, but for my daughter? It breaks my heart that she will never know her mother.”

“Clara has her grandmother,” I said gently.

“Yes, strangely enough, my daughter’s suffered less than I. She knows no other way—does not realize what she lost because she never had it. As much as I wish it were different, I’m grateful Mother can provide the nurturing and love my wife cannot.”

“Clara’s a happy little thing,” I said. “Sweet and smart. You and your mother have given her a great life. Anyway, it doesn’t have to be a biological mother who raises you as long as you have someone to fill that role. Their bond is strong. She knows she’s loved.” I looked away, swallowing the lump in my throat. The waves of grief drowned out all else for a few seconds.

His eyes softened. “I’m sorry. I’m an idiot.”

“Don’t be,” I said. “I can’t avoid the subject of children the rest of my life, can I?”

“I wish things were different for you.”

“I wish the same for you,” I said.

His sympathetic expression and the gentle tone of his voice brought tears to my eyes. Why did kindness evoke such emotion? I dabbed at the corners of my eyes with a hankie.

“You know what I think?” Percival asked. “It was very brave. Giving her up like that. You could have run off with her. Done what you wanted instead of what was best for her. That shows great character.”

“I’m not sure about that. If I’d had the means to do so, I might have. I fantasized about taking her out west where no one knew us, and no one would care if I was unmarried. I could make up a story that my husband died. But then reality hit. I had no funds. No skills. How would I have taken care of her?” I folded my hankie into a square, smoothing the corners with my thumb. “My twin sister’s a good person. She’ll do right by my girl. Give her everything I wished I could.”

Percival took another drink of his brandy. “Tell me about your fiancé. What was he like?”

I drew in a deep breath. “I don’t know if I can describe him adequately. Our time together feels like a dream. As if it happened to someone else.”

He nodded, glancing toward the fire. “I understand perfectly. Mary and I were married only a month when we found out we were expecting. The joy I felt when she told me—it was what I imagine heaven is like. Sadly, that time in my life fades a little with each passing day. I can’t remember much. I try, too. I lie there at night sometimes and I do whatever I can to conjure a new memory, but none come.”

“How did you meet her?” I asked.

“She was a debutante. I found her enthralling, as did many other men. But she chose me. I never understood exactly why. Other than my family’s money, I wasn’t sure what she saw in me.”

“How could you say that? You’re more than your money.”

He lifted one shoulder. “She never understood my desire to practice medicine. In fact, she tried to convince me there was no reason to work so hard. We bought a home in the country, and she wanted to live there full time once the baby came. My plan was to be a country doctor. There are sick people everywhere.”

“I can’t imagine you without your work.”

“Thank God I have it. I’m not sure what I would have done if I had idle hours day after day.” He shifted slightly, drawing one ankle under the other. “During the days the loneliness doesn’t overwhelm me as it does at night.”

“It’s the same for me,” I said softly.

“I wish I could share my life with a woman I loved. It’s such a simple thing, isn’t it? The desire to love and be loved?”

“You have love,” I said gently. “Clara and your mother adore you.”

One side of his mouth twitched into a half smile. “Yes, this is true.”

“But I know what you mean. I thought I’d be happily married to Constantine by now. When I think of what my life could have been like—almost was—the bitterness is enough to bring me to my knees.” The lump in my throat grew too large for me to continue.

“Good Lord. We’re quite the pair, aren’t we?” Percival asked.

I laughed despite the tears that leaked from my eyes. “We truly are.”

“In all seriousness, you’ll have another chance for love,” Percival said. “A man will come along and sweep you off your feet.”

“Who would want me? After what I did?”

Percival looked at me for a few seconds, in a way that made me feel like a newly peeled, delicious orange. Like he saw the best part of me.

“What is it you think is so unforgivable?” Percival asked. “The gift you gave to the man you love? Or is it the baby?”

“Both? One couldn’t have happened without the other.”

We sat in silence for a moment, sipping our drinks. The brandy burned my throat like a punishment, but I liked it. If only it would burst me into flames and take me away from all this pain.

After a good thirty seconds passed, Percival said, “My best friend, Michael Higgins—he thinks I should divorce my wife. I could get one, probably. She’s insane and institutionalized.”

“But you don’t want to?”

“What kind of man would abandon the woman he once loved? The mother of his child?”

“I abandoned my child for the sake of all of us. Is it different? I don’t know.”

“Over the years, I’ve thought about what was best for all of us, especially Clara. What would she think of me if I divorced her mother and left her to rot in an asylum? Most of the women in that place have been left there. Abandoned. No visitors. No kindness shown to them other than from the staff. And I have to wonder what goes on there after all the visitors leave.”

“Divorcing her does not mean you’ve abandoned her. You could still take care of her.”

“But could I live with myself?” Percival asked. “Look my daughter and mother in the eyes?”

I had to wonder if his stubborn moral code was actually the right choice for him or his daughter. If he were to remarry and give his child a stepmother and perhaps more children, would it be advantageous for all of them? What would his wife have wanted for him before she succumbed to insanity? These were questions impossible to answer. Just as mine had been. Yet we’d been forced to make a decision. God help us, we did the best we could with what we had. Was there solace in that? Perhaps.

“I spend a lot of time thinking about what kind of man I am. Good or bad? Generous or selfish?”

“No one is that simple. We’re a mixture of many nuanced qualities. That said, would a man without goodness or generosity even think to ask himself these questions?”

“That is an extremely insightful question,” he said, smiling at me.

Miss Lisk appeared, as if out of thin air. She cleared her throat and glared at me, before turning her attention on Percival.

“Yes, Miss Lisk?” Percival asked drily.

“I cannot find your mother and wanted to let someone know that I am retiring for the night,” Miss Lisk said.

“Thank you. Good night.” Percival gave her a curt nod.



Miss Lisk turned on her heel and headed out of the room. When we could no longer hear her footsteps, Percival turned to me, sighing. “She’s a frightening woman, that Miss Lisk.”

“I don’t think she likes me.”

“It’s nothing personal, I’m sure. Miss Lisk was Mary’s nanny when she was young. She’s been with my wife’s family a long time. She looked after Mary and her brother Simon.”

“Where’s Simon live now?”

“Not far from here.” Percival downed the rest of this drink. “You’ll like him. Everyone does. Mama and Clara adore him. He’s charming and clever—effortless with people.”

“How is that different from you?” I asked.

“He can capture an entire room’s attention. People find themselves unable to look at anything but him as he entertains with tales of his adventures. I’ve never met a woman who didn’t succumb to his charisma. A bit of a scoundrel, if the rumors are correct. Nothing I could share with a proper young lady such as yourself.” His eyes twinkled with humor. “Regardless, he’s good to have around for entertainment.”

“It must be difficult for him to see Mary so ill,” I said.

“I believe it is. With him, I’m never certain. He hides his feelings behind his ebullient personality.”

“He lost his family. I’m sure he’s suffering,” I said.

“We all cope with grief in different ways. Apparently his is to bed every woman in Paris.”

I gasped. “Really?”

“If rumored reports are correct, then yes.” He stretched his legs out in front of him. “I’ve been thinking—we should spend the next few weeks at the beach house in Montauk. Clara loves it there, and the heat’s stifling here in the city.”

“What about our patients?”

“We can come into the city when we’re needed,” he said. “Regardless, Clara should have some fun before she’s no longer a child. I can’t spend all of my efforts on others. My daughter needs me as well.”

“Time at the beach sounds like heaven,” I said, truthfully.

“Have you spent much time by the ocean?”

I pressed my hankie against the back of my neck, feeling uncomfortably warm. “My family owns a cottage up north. It’s not large or grand, but we loved it there as children. Mother’s family had owned it for decades when she married my father. It was the place I was most content as a child. We would usually go with just Mother, leaving Father behind to work. When it was just the three of us, we could all relax without worrying about Father’s temper. My sister and I stayed there while I was expecting. Or, rather, Father sent us there for the duration of my embarrassing problem.”

“Has your recent time there soured you for the beach?”

“Goodness, no. Nothing could turn me against the ocean.”

“Then it’s decided. We’ll leave in a few days,” Percival said.

“Will Mrs. Bancroft agree to go?”

“Oh, yes. She loves the ocean. It’s the only time I ever witness her slowing down. Like your family, my mother’s people owned the cottage, and she’s held on to it since her parents passed on. We spent the entire month of August there when I was a boy. We spent many happy days combing the beach and enjoying cool evenings.”

“I’ll look forward to it,” I said.

Percival rose to his feet. “Now I must retire as well, or I’ll have another brandy and give myself a headache in the morning. Thank you for an enjoyable evening. It’s always lovely to converse with you.”

“It is for me as well.” I couldn’t stop myself from smiling back at him.

He bobbed his head in my direction and bade me good night. I sat alone for a few minutes, thinking through what I’d learned about my benefactor. Percival Bancroft, despite his reservations, was indeed a good man. He was also tortured and lonely, as was I. A friendship might develop between us that could perhaps offer comfort. As much as I missed my family, Percival and his mother had provided warmth and companionship when I desperately needed it. For that, I was grateful.

This was not the life I’d expected, but I would make the best of it. After all, what choice did I have?

### Percival

We arrived at our beach cottage several days after my initial suggestion we leave the city for the remainder of the stifling August weather. Mother had been thrilled at the idea and soon had us organized and packed up for a few lazy weeks by the ocean.

I'd arranged with a colleague to keep watch over my practice, hoping I could spend most of the days with my family instead of in the city checking on patients. I sent a letter to the asylum to let them know I would not be visiting for several weeks.

We'd sent Penelope and Robert out the day before to air out the cottage and get it ready for our arrival. For our time at the beach, we typically brought a minimal staff. We lived simply at the beach and only had room for two in the servants' quarters, unlike our apartment in the city. In the past, Mother and I had enjoyed a few weeks of simplicity, without formal suppers or social obligations. We spent our days doing little but beachcombing, swimming, and reading.

Clara and Stella climbed down from the back seat of my newly purchased Studebaker Special Six. Before we left the city, I'd taken the top down to enjoy the wind in our faces. Mother and Stella had wrapped scarves around their wide-brimmed hats and now unwound them, the gauzy material lifted by the sea breeze in pastel ribbons.

Mother had ridden up front with me. I ran around the front of the car to open the door for her, but she had gotten out by the time I reached her. Grinning, she turned to face the ocean, closed her eyes and drew in a deep breath. "Is there anything better than

the scent of the beach?”

I had to agree. My shoulders already felt less tight than they had in the city.

“This is beautiful.” Stella clasped her hands together, seeming to take in everything at once.

The cottage had been in Mother’s family for generations, although I’d updated it five or so years ago with electricity and indoor plumbing. Weathered cedar shingles had lightened naturally to a soft, silvery gray tone in the salty, moist air. A prominent gable with decorative trusswork lent a touch of elegance to the otherwise rustic facade.

My favorite thing about the house, though, was a generous wraparound porch that provided places to sit, read, or converse from every angle. Wicker chairs and a swing bench faced directly toward the ocean.

“It’s been too long since we visited,” I said.

“I’d like to stay here for a whole summer,” Clara said.

“Wouldn’t that be lovely?” Mother asked, absently.

“Miss Stella, would you like to see the beach?” Clara asked.

“Darling, let’s get settled first,” Mother said. “We need to have lunch, and then we can put on our bathing costumes for a swim.”

Clara nodded and ran ahead, reaching the front door to our cottage around the same time Penelope appeared.

Robert came around from the sea facing front of the cottage, greeting us with a friendly wave. He wore a light-colored linen suit instead of his usual formal black, and a straw boater hat. Even Robert was more relaxed at the beach.

He helped me with the trunks and bags from the back of the car, while the ladies and Clara followed Penelope into the house.

Soon, we had everything from the car inside the house.

“May I offer you a tour?” I asked Stella.

“Yes, please.”

“I’ll help Penelope with lunch,” Mother said.

As I showed Stella around the house, I wondered what she saw. To me, the furnishings, a mix of hand-me-downs and carefully chosen pieces, were not only comfortable and functional but gave off an air of faded elegance. Would she agree or would it look shabby and disorganized?

Walls paneled with light-painted wood created a bright and airy feel. Braided rugs covered wide-planked, honey-colored wood floors. My mother’s father had loved the sea and collected framed maritime maps and paintings of the sea that now adorned the walls.

Large windows and a sunroom gave expansive views of the ocean. Light flooded the rooms, and sounds of waves permeated the atmosphere. Large double-hung windows draped with light, breezy curtains that fluttered in the ocean breeze. A large stone fireplace served as the centerpiece. The mantel displayed a collection of seashells, beach glass, and old family photographs in mismatched frames. Several shelves were packed with books and games.

“What do you think?” I asked.

“It’s a place for a family,” Stella said. “I can only imagine the memories that have been made in this room.”

Next, I took Stella into the kitchen, with its practical, freestanding cabinetry and a deep farmhouse sink. The back door led from the kitchen to a small herb garden that added splashes of greenery. Penelope and Mother were putting together sandwiches, chatting amicably about our plans for the week.

We went upstairs where Robert was in the process of delivering bags to the right rooms.

I ushered her into the largest of the bedrooms. With the best view of the ocean, the room had a queen-size bed with an ornate wooden headboard, draped in a quilted bedspread. A sitting area by the window offered a perfect spot for morning tea or reading, with an old-fashioned chaise longue and a small wooden bookshelf filled with well-worn novels.

“Mother and I argue every year about who stays here, but I always win. She’s the matriarch of the family and should have the best room, don’t you think?”

“I couldn’t agree more.” Stella and I shared a smile that felt like a secret handshake.

And made my heart pound and my stomach flutter.

I pushed away the sensation. It wasn’t the first time in the last few weeks I’d had such a reaction to Stella. The night we’d shared so much of ourselves had left me absolutely unmoored. I could not stop thinking about her.

If I were honest, one of the main reasons I’d wanted to bring my family here for the

rest of the summer was to see the joy reflected in Stella's eyes instead of sadness. Once she'd told me she'd loved the beach as a child, I could not let the idea go. I wanted her to spend time by the seaside where salty mist had cured more than one broken heart in years past.

"This is Clara's room," I said, opening the door to let her go in before me.

"How quaint," Stella said, a touch of melancholy in her tone.

Would she ever be able to see a child's room and not think of the one she'd lost?

Twin beds separated by a shared nightstand remained from the days Mother and her sister had slept in this house. The beds were covered in patchwork quilts, and the walls were adorned with whimsical, nautical-themed wallpapers featuring ships and seashells. A toy chest at the foot of one bed held treasures from many summers spent by the sea.

We had two additional bedrooms, similarly furnished with double beds and wooden dressers. Each room had a small desk by the window. I showed her into the room across the hall from the one I stayed in.

"What a sweet space," Stella said. "Thank you for inviting me here."

"I wanted you to see it. The beach, that is. And the house, I suppose. We made a lot of good memories here when I was a boy."

"I'm sure we'll make a few for Clara this week," Stella said.

Robert appeared with the last of Stella's things, which he set near the dresser. "Should I send Penelope up to help you unpack?" Robert asked Stella.



“That won’t be necessary. I can take care of it myself,” Stella said. “Thank you.”

“Mrs. Bancroft has asked if you will join her downstairs when you’re ready,” Robert said. “Penelope is preparing a meal for you.”

“Thank you, Robert. We’ll be right down,” I said. If only we were a we instead of two lonely souls hanging on for dear life.

“Where do Robert and Penelope stay?” Stella asked after he left.

“There’s a converted room in the attic for Robert, and Penelope takes the maid’s room off of the kitchen.”

I leaned against the doorframe, watching her as she thrust open the bay window. This room was located on the side of the cottage with a view of tall grasses and a skinny trail that led down the beach.

Stella pressed her nose against the window screen. “The air’s refreshing here. The scents too—they’re like a healing balm.”

“I hope they will be,” I said. “For both of us.”

She turned away from the window to look at me. “Thank you, Percival.”

“For what?”

“For everything. For taking me in. For helping me get better. For bringing me here. I didn’t think I would ever feel like living again, but I do now. Your family has been so good to me. I shall never be able to repay you.”

“There’s no need. I’m happy to see you smile.” If only I could be the reason for that

smile. But I was not free. I must resign myself to a dear friendship and nothing more.

“I’d like to see your smile more often,” Stella said softly. “If only I could change things for you, I would.”

I cocked my head to the right, contemplating her sweet, beautiful face. “Knowing you would if you could is somehow almost as good.”

For a moment, an all-too-fleeting one, we locked eyes, and it was as if we were the only two people on earth. Until, seconds later, she flushed and looked away.

“I’ll see you downstairs,” I said, awkwardly, feeling as if I’d just taken off my clothes and shown her every part of me. “Take your time.”

She mumbled another thanks before I turned away and left her room for my own.

The rest of that afternoon we spent on the beach. Robert and I put up an umbrella for shade and lugged three chairs out from the storage shed to sit upon. Mother spread out an old blanket that smelled slightly of mothballs under our feet. Penelope brought a chest with a block of ice wrapped in newspaper to keep it from melting quite as fast. Inside she’d placed a jar of lemonade and bottles of beer, as well as a tin of strawberries and a plate of cookies.

Our beach consisted of light, powdery sand near the dunes but became more compact closer to the water. Clam, scallop, and oyster shells and the smaller periwinkles and slippers peppered the shoreline. Today, the long stretch of sand was populated with bathers and picnickers as far as my eye could see in either direction. Bathers bobbed in the water not far from shore. Others played volleyball or badminton in the sand. Couples walked hand in hand strolling along the water. Children ran, laughing and squealing, in and out of waves.

Mother sat primly in one of the chairs, reading a novel. She'd changed into a bathing costume but had covered it with a robe and had declined a swim, preferring to read peacefully under the shade of the umbrella. I sat next to her, attempting to read, but I couldn't focus. Instead, I stared out at the blue water and let my mind wander aimlessly. Clara had convinced Stella to help her build a sandcastle. Thus far, their castle seemed more like small hills of wet sand, but who was I to judge?

It struck me how young Stella seemed in this setting. She wore her hair long, unlike many of the young women of late. Today she'd braided it and let it hang casually down her back. A straw hat kept the sun from her face. Her bathing costume was made of a dark blue wool and of the right length to keep the police from fining her for indecent exposure. I hadn't seen one today, but often cops prowled the beaches with their ruler, making sure the skirts were no more than a modest eight inches above the knee.

My little daughter also wore a hat, but hers kept slipping off her head and dangling from the string around her neck. Her skinny legs were pink from the cold water. Sand stuck to almost every exposed surface of her skin.

"Put your hat on," I called out to Clara. "Or you'll get burned."

Clara obeyed without a glance in my direction. She and Stella were bent over their work, serious expressions on their faces. Occasionally, they exchanged words, but the breeze carried them away.

"She's something, isn't she?" Mother asked, glancing sideways at me.

"Clara?"

"Yes, Clara, but actually I was referring to Stella," Mother said.

“Yes, she is...splendid to have around.” Too splendid.

“Splendid. Interesting word.”

“You know what I mean.”

“Do I?” Mother asked.

I looked over at her to see her gazing at me intently. “What?” I asked.

“You’re a married man.”

“Don’t you think I know that?” I asked, anger creeping into my voice.

“It’s not unheard of, you know.”

“What’s that?”

“To have a mistress. You could be discreet.”

My mouth dropped open. “Don’t be absurd. What kind of man does that to a woman? She should be married to someone who can give her the world.”

“She’s not exactly untainted. With fewer choices than she might have had. Perhaps she was sent to us for a reason.”

“Mother, I can’t believe what you’re suggesting. You of all people?”

“Because of your father, you mean?” Mother asked, gaze focused on the water.

“Yes. Because of that. What else could I be referring to?”

“I was not ill or living in an asylum. This circumstance is different.” She brushed sand from the pages of her book, still looking out to sea. “I don’t want to see you this lonely for the rest of your life.”

“We don’t choose our fates, do we?” I asked. “As much as we’d like to.”

“I don’t know about that. There’s acceptance of one’s situation and there’s fighting to make one’s life better no matter what you’ve been given.”

“I’m not the kind of man to have a mistress. What would Clara think if she were to ever learn of it? She would lose all respect for me.”

“She loves you and wants you to have a good life. I can’t imagine she would begrudge you love.”

“What about you? Why haven’t you found love again if it’s so attractive?” I asked.

“I’ve never met anyone that I care for.” She shrugged. “But that’s not the situation here.”

“Mother, I’m appalled at what you’re suggesting. No one wins in the situation you’re describing. I’d be committing adultery, a sin in case you’ve forgotten. Clara would see me acting without honor and who knows what long-lasting effects that could have on her. And, lastly, Stella should have the very best of what a man has to offer—wealth, security, marriage, a family of her own. I have none of those things to offer her. It would be unconscionable for me to treat her with such disrespect.”

My mother didn’t say anything for a few minutes. I thought I’d convinced her to the drop the outrageous subject. However, I was incorrect.

“Darling son, you surely know how short life is and how we must seize love should it

come our way. I see the way you look at her. I've been thinking about this for some time, and I've come to the conclusion that I'd rather you choose love than more years of loneliness. Mary's not returning to us. You know that as well as I. Do you want to spend the rest of your life lonely?"

"What about you? You've never even tried to meet someone new."

She turned and looked at me directly in the eyes. "I regret it. I'd do it all differently if I could. I was still young and beautiful when your father died. I should have let my heart open to the idea of a good man coming into my life. Instead, I withdrew, focusing only on you and my volunteer work. Now, as I enter the last chapters of my life, I wish I had someone to wake up next to. Someone who made me laugh and with whom I could share the simplest of life's pleasures."

I dug my bare heel into the soft sand. As close as Mother and I were, we did not discuss such topics.

"I'm sorry. I've made you upset. Let's speak no more of it," Mother said. "I only wanted you to know how I felt. It's your decision to live your life the way you want, of course. But what kind of mother would I be if I were to act as if everything was so cut-and-dried? Yours is a marriage on paper only. You are a good man. I'm proud of your ethics and fierce loyalty. However, I want you to be happy. Standing aside and watching you sacrifice everything for Clara's sake when I know it's not the right thing to do is enough to make me sick."

"You're not sick, are you?" Maybe she was dying? Why else would she have broached such an outlandish notion?

She shook her head, laughing softly. "No, I'm not sick. Only worried. About you. The plight of all mothers."

We could not continue the discussion further, thank God, because Clara came running up from escaping a wave to ask for lemonade and a cookie, followed closely behind by Stella.

Stella flopped into the chair next to mine and dangled one arm over the side, looking over at me with laughter in her eyes. “I haven’t had this much fun in a long time.” She lowered her voice and drew closer. “Thank you for sharing Clara with me. Spending time with her warms my broken heart and gives me a glimpse into a future where I could feel joy again, without the burden of my mistakes. I know I don’t deserve to spend time with such a special gift, but I’m grateful just the same.”

An ache in my chest made it hard to breathe. How could something so beautifully said be so tragically sad?

Estelle

The first week at the beach unfolded in one glorious sunny day after another. On the evening of our eighth day, we enjoyed dinner on the patio, the sun setting before us in shades of pink. We dined on fresh corn on the cob smothered in butter, cold fried chicken, and potato salad with dill pickles. Mrs. Bancroft and Penelope had been into town earlier, returning with the fresh ingredients for our supper as well as several bottles of Chablis. One of which had been opened and set into a bucket surrounded by chunks of ice.

Percival poured his mother and me a second glass of wine. We'd become more and more informal as the days passed. It had taken some convincing, but Robert and Penelope had agreed to taking a night off and had gone into town together for a local dance. I'd been watching their interactions carefully during our time at the beach and had come to a conclusion—a growing attraction simmered between them. I felt sure of it just this morning when I'd caught them in the pantry together. They'd jumped apart when I entered and Penelope, cheeks flaming, had run back into the kitchen.

For a moment, I'd stood in the pantry alone, overwhelmed by their obvious affection for each other. Of course, it took me back to the heady days of my courtship with Constantine. Was there any better feeling than falling in love? I'd been lucky to have had such a great love, even if I'd lost him in the end.

When I'd returned to the kitchen, Robert had disappeared, but Penelope was hunched over the sink washing vegetables.



“I’m sorry, Miss Stella,” Penelope said. “I’m so ashamed.”

“Don’t be. Love is a gift. There’s no reason to run from it.”

Mrs. Bancroft had come into the kitchen then, cutting off our conversation. Tonight, though, when I’d helped Penelope with her hair instead of the other way around, she’d been lit up as bright as the sun. Apparently, Mrs. Bancroft had given her blessing, encouraging them to attend the dance together.

Penelope wouldn’t hear of it until she’d spent the afternoon frying chicken and making the potato salad for our supper. In the end, though, Robert and she had gone into town in the car. I’d watched them leave together and said a little prayer to keep them safe and open their hearts to the possibilities of love.

Thus, it did not surprise me when Clara made an announcement at supper. She’d just finished her second corn on the cob, some of which remained on her buttery chin.

“I saw Robert and Penelope kissing.” Clara picked up both of her finished cobs and pressed them together, wriggling them against each other. “Like this.”

I hid a smile behind my napkin and exchanged a glance with Mrs. Bancroft. She did not seem surprised by this announcement. However, she appeared much less amused than I.

“Clara, that is not appropriate,” Percival said sharply.

Clara dropped the cobs back onto her plate but appeared undeterred by her father’s tone. “Then Penelope started crying and she ran back inside.”

“Where were you when you saw all of this?” Mrs. Bancroft asked.

“Over there.” Clara pointed to the corner of the porch where Percival had hung a rattan chair for Clara to lounge in while she read or drew pictures in her notebook. “No one remembers I’m there.” She grinned. “It’s a good hiding place.”

“Right in plain sight,” Mrs. Bancroft said wryly.

I was stuck on Penelope crying. Why had a kiss made her cry? Was it unwelcome? Or was she racked with guilt over her growing feelings? A romance between the two of them complicated the household, but it wasn’t insurmountable, surely?

“Why was Penelope crying?” Percival asked, as if his daughter would know the answer.

As usual, Clara astounded me with her understanding. In turns out, she did know the answer.

“She thinks it’s wrong because they work together,” Clara said. “Is it?” She wrinkled her adorable nose, peppered with nutmeg-hued freckles from our time at the beach. “Penelope gives her family money, and it would be very bad if she were let go.”

“Did you hear all that?” Mrs. Bancroft asked.

Clara shrugged and widened her eyes innocently. “I can make myself quite small when I want to.”

“For heaven’s sake,” Percival said, glancing at his mother. “We have a little spy among us.”

“Really, Clara, you mustn’t eavesdrop,” Mrs. Bancroft chastised. “It’s very bad manners.”

“I can’t help it if my ears hear.” Clara’s bottom lip trembled. “Or that people forget there’s a kid around.”

“Well, don’t make a habit of it,” Mrs. Bancroft said, less harshly.

A single teardrop caught in Clara’s bottom lashes. “Yes, Grandmama.” Clara wiped her hands on the cloth napkin in her lap and then asked if she could get up so she could come sit on my lap.

I was as shocked as the other two adults, but pleased too. She wanted to sit on my lap for comfort. What a nice feeling, I thought, to be wanted. However, not wishing to interfere, I kept quiet, other than to smile at Clara.

“Is it all right with you?” Percival asked me.

“Of course.” I scooted my chair a few inches back from the table to prepare.

“Yes, you may,” Mrs. Bancroft said to Clara, after a glance in my direction.

Clara got down from her own chair and headed to the opposite side of the table where I scooped her into my lap. The little one rested her cheek against my collarbone and sighed. “Are you tired?” I asked.

“No. I’m wide-awake.” A wide yawn proved otherwise. “I want Stella to put me to bed tonight.”

Percival raised his eyebrows at me. I shrugged and nodded. “I’d be happy to tuck you in.”

“Did your mother tuck you in?” Clara asked me.

“No. We had a nanny. She tucked us in.” I couldn’t remember my mother ever coming into the nursery to say good night to my sister or me. “My parents often entertained in the evenings, and she didn’t have time.”

“How sad,” Mrs. Bancroft murmured.

“I didn’t know any different,” I said. “It never occurred to me that parents put their children to bed until I came to live with all of you.”

“Papa likes to be with me,” Clara said.

“Yes, he does. Lucky you.” I kissed the top of her head, which smelled of the sea breeze and sunshine.

Clara yawned again and nestled closer to me, her warm breath tickling my neck.

“I can take her up now,” I said.

“Yes, please do,” Mrs. Bancroft said. “We should all get a good night’s rest. In fact, I may retire early myself. I’ve started a wonderful book and could use some quiet time.”

“Does this leave me all alone to clean up the dishes?” Percival asked, teasing.

“I’ll come down and help you,” I said, glancing down at a nearly asleep Clara. “I have a feeling I’ll be done shortly.”

“Here, let me take her up for you,” Percival said. “She’s too heavy for you to carry up the stairs.”

Mrs. Bancroft remained seated while Percival and I headed inside and up the stairs.

When we reached Clara's room, I helped her change into her nightgown and brush her teeth. Percival turned down the bed and Clara climbed inside, mumbling about a story.

"I usually read to her," Percival said. "What story do you want tonight?"

"Peter Rabbit," Clara said, snuggling into her pillow. "Come sit, Papa. Stella will read to us."

"Bossy little thing," Percival said under his breath as he settled next to his daughter.

I moved the rocking chair in the corner of the room closer and opened the book I'd found in the stack on the dresser.

"This was one of my favorites too," I said, opening to the first page of Beatrix Potter's gem.

"No, you can't sit there," Clara said. "I have to see the pictures." She patted the bed on the other side of where her dad lay propped up against the headboard.

I froze for a moment. If I did as she asked, I would be dangerously close to Percival. For the most part, I avoided getting too near him. I'm not sure why, other than I didn't want our relationship to be misconstrued by anyone. The lines were becoming blurry for me when it came to the Bancrofts. I was growing increasingly attached to each of them.

They were not my family. I had to remind myself of that daily. Even if they treated me as such, they didn't know the entirety of my story. Not that they needed to. My family had sent me away. They were no longer part of my life. I could pretend they didn't exist much easier when no one knew the truth of where I'd come from. It wasn't an outright lie, simply an omission.

“It’s all right,” Percival said. “I’ll sit in the chair. There’s not enough room for all of us.”

Clara pulled the covers up to her chin and peeped up at me. “I’m ready.”

I lay down next to Clara, carefully arranging my skirt to keep it from hiking up my legs. Once again, I opened the book and began to read. Minutes later, Clara was asleep. I gingerly removed myself from the bed and bent over Clara to plant a kiss on her forehead. I’d never done that before and found it to be as natural as breathing.

Percival turned off the lamp by her bed and we tiptoed from the room, leaving the door slightly ajar. We walked down the stairs to the first floor to find Mrs. Bancroft had cleared the table and must have headed to bed, because she was nowhere to be seen.

“Shall we clean up?” Percival asked.

“Yes. We don’t want to Penelope to come home and find the dishes undone.”

I filled the sink with warm, soapy water and went to work on the plates and silverware. Percival dried, using a hand towel left on the counter. Briny air drifted in through the open windows. We spoke softly so as not to wake Clara or disturb Mrs. Bancroft. Our conversation was nothing of consequence, going over the events of the day, chuckling over various Clara antics, then gossiping about Robert and Penelope.

“Do you mind their romance?” I asked as I handed him the last plate.

“Not in the least. We can adjust living arrangements should they decide to marry.”

“Why does the idea upset Penelope so?” I asked.

“A lot of people are depending on her,” Percival said. “She doesn’t want to risk losing work that helps to support her family. Regardless, I shall have a talk with Robert tomorrow and let him know that he doesn’t need to worry about us. I’m sure Mother will do the same with Penelope.”

“Wouldn’t it be wonderful if they married?” I asked, dreamily. “And had a baby.”

He didn’t say anything until he’d put away the plate and folded the towel. “It would be nice to see them happy.”

I lifted my gaze to observe him. He’d folded his arms over his chest and leaned his backside against the sink.

“What is it?” I asked softly.

“Nothing, really. It’s only that I wish I were less jaded.”

“About love?”

“Yes. When you fall in love it seems that nothing could ever go wrong...”

“But then it does.”

“For us, anyway.” He smiled, lifting on shoulder. “Maybe others will have more luck.”

“I certainly hope so,” I said, matching his light tone.

“Would you like more wine? We could go outside. It’s a full moon tonight.”

“Yes, please.”

We returned to the patio where Percival refilled our wineglasses. “Come, let’s go down to the sand.”

I nodded, following him out the grassy area that overlooked the sea and down the skinny path to the stretch of sand. He hauled chairs down to the beach the first day we arrived. Now he dragged them to a spot a few feet from the incoming tide.

“Sit?” Percival asked.

“I don’t mind if I do.” I sank into the low chair, kicked off my shoes, and buried my feet in the cold, dry sand.

I looked out to the ocean and drew in a deep breath, overcome by the beauty of the night. Stars twinkled from a velvety, deep blue sky. The moon hung low, a soft golden orb, peeking above the line where the sea met the sky and bathing everything in an ethereal silver light. The moon's reflection danced on the gentle, rippling waves and their frothy crests that rhythmically crashed against the shore. A warm, balmy breeze carried the salty tang of the sea to my lips.

“I used to think I was the moon,” I said. “My sister was the sun, all yellow light and warmth, whereas I thought of myself as elusive, mysterious—like the moon. Isn’t that silly?”

“Not silly at all. You were trying to figure out your place in the world—who you were and who you hoped to be. Because of the way you were treated in comparison to your sister, you assumed you were the moon instead of the bright, shining sun. But perhaps you’re a million sparkling stars that in combination far outshine the sun.”

“If I am a star, I would be one who falls from the night sky never to be seen again.” I hesitated, caught up in the metaphor. “A falling star at midnight.”



“I’d not let you fall. I’d catch you before you crashed and put you in my pocket for safekeeping.”

My eyes stung, enchanted by this man with the golden tongue. “I’d stay in your pocket, safe and warm, and not cause any trouble at all.”

“No, no. You’re meant to sparkle, not just for me, but for anyone who finds themselves lost. You should never be hidden away. Nothing so beautiful should be.” He reached out to briefly place his fingertips on my bare wrist. “You’ve made me feel less alone, even though you’re not mine to keep.”

I held my breath, as if that would magically erase these feelings for Percival that had washed over me under the glow of the traitorous moon. Steady, loyal Percival. He made me feel safe and forgiven for my mistakes. I wanted more of him. Not just the sight and smell and sound of him, but the touch and taste, too.

I was a bad person. This longing for a man I could never have proved it once and for all. He was a married man. Married to a very sick and helpless woman. What kind of monster was I?

No, this was not happening. These feelings were only a delusion. We were caught in the light of the moon, and it had lied to me, tickled my imagination into believing in something that wasn’t true. Percival and I were lonely and broken and thus drawn to each other.

You’re a fool if you believe that , I thought . An utter fool. You’ve fallen for him. Little by little, it had crept up on me. Not in a hot blaze like Constantine but a subtle, steady, and dare I say, sneaky way that warmed but didn’t burn.

“Stella? Have I lost you?”

“No, I’m here.” My voice shook slightly. “I was thinking I’ll remember this night for the rest of my life. I’ve never seen a prettier sight than the one before us.”

“There will be more like this.”

“No, not like this one.”

“Why do you say that?” Percival asked. “The moon always returns.”

“Because this one has you sitting next to me.”

A wave and then another crashed to shore before he spoke. “Yes. I understand.”

“Do you?” I asked, breathless. Was I alone in my yearnings, or did he feel something too? A pull toward me as strong as the ebb and flow of the ocean?

His voice floated toward me as soft and deep as the silky indigo sky. “I believe so. Beauty’s amplified when witnessed with someone you care about.” He paused and everything went still for a moment or two as I waited for what he would say next. “Someone you might love if the circumstances were right.”

Three more waves crashed to shore. Someone you might love. I had so many things I wanted to say to him, but I couldn’t. Some words should not be spoken, even if they’re expanding inside you, begging to get out.

“We shouldn’t speak of it,” I said.

“No.”

“Once I leave your family to go on with my life and leave you to yours, we’ll be strangers again. I’ll think of you, perhaps, during the full moon, and remember the

splendor of the evening and know that it is all I have left of our time together. A memory.” Tears gathered in the corners of my eyes at the thought of no longer seeing the Percival, Clara, and Mrs. Bancroft every day. “It’s been a privilege to be part of the family, for however long it lasts, but it will hurt when it ends.”

I heard him sigh and turned to see him lift his glass to his mouth. Moonbeams washed over him, giving his skin an almost luminous quality. Shadows played delicately across his chiseled features, hiding his expression.

He twisted in his chair to meet my gaze, his eyes reflecting the light of the moon. “If I could, I’d give you a thousand more evenings such as this one. But soon, you’ll be swept away by a worthy man. One who is free to love you.” He reached out to touch my arm again briefly. “I wish you all the happiness in the world, even though it will hurt to see you fall in love with a man who can give you everything. As selfish as that sounds, it’s true.”

“In this world made up of schemers, thieves, and liars, you are a rare man of honor,” I said. “Strangely enough, qualities like loyalty to family and integrity are the very reasons I hold you in such high esteem.”

“I can’t be my father. I can’t make the same choices he did and look my daughter in the eye. No matter how much I might want something. Or someone.”

“I would never ask it of you. Or of myself.”

We sat quietly for a few minutes, our silent agreement thick and heavy between us. Although I could barely make myself do it, I rose to my feet, grabbing my shoes and the empty wineglass. “I’ll go up now. We’ll not speak of this again. For all our sakes, we must pretend we never had this conversation.”

“Good night, beautiful Stella. Sweet dreams.”

I walked up the sandy trail toward the house with a heavy heart. At some point, I would have to leave the Bancrofts before any of us became further attached. The problem? I had nowhere to go and every reason to wish to stay.

Still, I told myself, I'd made it this far by choosing what was best for my baby. Doing the right thing was all I had left. No one could take it from me.

15

Estelle

When we returned to the city after two glorious weeks, we fell quickly back into our routine. Clara started school. Mrs. Bancroft and I returned to our work. Percival spent long hours away from home, often not returning to eat supper with his mother and me. I knew he was avoiding me. I understood why. Knowing, however, did not make the pain of his absence hurt any less.

Blessedly, Mrs. Bancroft kept me so busy that the days sped by. She had been correct about one thing. Focusing on others helped to keep my mind off my own worries and troubles. In addition, seeing how bad people had it compared to my life at the Bancrofts' kept me from feeling too sorry for myself. There were times, usually when checking on a mother and her newborn, that a crippling pain threatened to bring me to my knees. However, I fought through it, having taken Mrs. Bancroft's advice to heart. Doing for others was a balm like nothing else.

Autumn was over before I knew it. Thanksgiving came and went. Soon, we were weeks from Christmas.

One morning, out of the blue, Simon Price, Mary's brother, arrived for an extended stay. I didn't know what to make of him. His thick, wavy brown hair, dark twinkling eyes, and full mouth made him undeniably handsome. A cleft perched in the middle of his chin endlessly fascinated Clara. No matter how many times her grandmama told her not to, she couldn't resist poking her finger inside the dent and giggling.

Yet the hairs on the back of my neck stood straight up whenever he was in the room. He was dangerous to me. I could feel it in my bones, even though he was charming and pleasant.

One morning, a few days after his arrival, I was alone in the sitting room enjoying a cup of tea and a good read. Price sauntered into the room, hands in the pockets of his trousers. He wore no jacket, roaming around in his shirt and suspenders without even a tie looped around his neck. In the middle of the day, no less!

“Miss McCord, good morning.” Simon gestured toward the chair across from me. “May I sit?”

“Good morning. Yes, please do.”

He cocked his head to the right and puckered his lips, watching me.

“Is there something you needed from me?” I asked, keeping my tone pleasant even though he made me nervous.

“You’ve made yourself very comfortable here in my sister’s house.”

I looked at him in surprise. Was it malice I detected in his tone? This wasn’t his sister’s house, I thought, defensiveness tightening my stomach. This home belonged to the Bancrofts.

“Do you enjoy playing the role of Mary’s replacement?” Price asked.

“I don’t know what you mean. I’m an assistant to Mrs. Bancroft. Nothing more.”

“Yet you’re living in the guest room. I’ve not known a secretary to reside in the home of their employer. In addition, I’ve never known one who couldn’t type.”

My stomach churned nervously. It was a legitimate question, but how did I explain my presence without spilling my entire story? I didn't want Price to know about my pregnancy or the shame I'd brought to my life. Percival and Mrs. Bancroft understood what had happened to me and had given me grace. Not everyone would be that way. Perhaps no one but them? "The Bancrofts have been very kind to me, giving me a home after I became estranged from my family."

"To clarify, has Percival been kind to you, or his mother? In fact, that brings another question to mind. Whose idea was it for you to stay here and work for the family?"

This line of questioning made me nervous. What did he want? Did he suspect there was something romantic between me and Percival? If so, he couldn't have been more mistaken. We'd not so much as glanced at each other since that night on the beach. All right, perhaps a glance, but nothing more. We'd kept our promise to each other.

"I believe it was a mutual decision between Percival and Mrs. Bancroft," I said, wishing I could swipe away the droplets of sweat that had erupted along the bridge of my nose. "They needed someone to assist them in a variety of capacities, and I desperately needed a job."

"But why? You're obviously well-bred and educated, which makes it all the more befuddling to me. You clearly come from money. Why would you need a job?" Price flopped into a chair and crossed one leg over the other. "Was it you who seduced my brother-in-law or the other way around?"

"There's been no seduction," I said, horrified. "I don't know what you think you know, but you couldn't be more mistaken. Percival is very loyal to his wife."

"Has he admitted he's fallen in love with you?"

I was right. He thought something untoward was going on between Percival and me.

That explained his obvious hostility.

“That’s ridiculous. You’ve got this all wrong.” Heat rose to my cheeks. How dare he insinuate such things? “Your brother-in-law’s a good man, faithful to his wife and daughter.”

He went on as if he hadn’t heard me. “Was that your aim all along? Did you target him? Knowing he was vulnerable and lonely? Or did you work the old lady? Make her feel as if you’re the daughter she never had?”

“Whatever you might think, I’m not skilled in the art of seduction, even if Doctor Bancroft wasn’t a married man. As far as Mrs. Bancroft goes, she took pity on me and offered me shelter and a job. I do my best to pay my keep.”

He smirked, nodding knowingly. What he thought he knew? He couldn’t haven’t been more wrong.

“It’s a shame what happened to my sister. Still, he’s a young man. Should he pine away for her for all time or get a little piece when he can?”

A little piece? Appalled, for a moment, I couldn’t speak. My heart beat fast inside my chest. “I cannot say, as it’s none of my business.”

“Shall I be frank?” Price didn’t bother to wait for a response. “I did research on you, Miss McCord . Very interesting what I found.”

Why did he say my last name as if it were a bitter pill in his mouth?

“Research?” My instincts told me to flee the room, but of course, I couldn’t. It would only make me look guilty.



“Yes, I have a private detective who does extraordinary work here in the city. One might find it interesting—his discovery about you, that is.”

I clasped my hands together to stop them from trembling. “I have to get ready for work, Mr. Price, if you’ll excuse me.”

“If I were a different kind of man with different experiences, I would consider it merely a coincidence. However, knowing that you changed your name and have taken on a new persona, I have to say the evidence is quite damning.”

I swallowed the bile that had risen up from my stomach. “I don’t understand?” I tried to sound flippant, but the squeak in my voice gave me away.

“Isn’t it remarkable that no one’s discovered who you really are? No one in this house thought to investigate a stranger who showed up on their doorstep with a sad story? I knew my brother-in-law was a do-gooder, but I had no idea how naive he could be. Unless, of course, he chose you because you’re beautiful. A lonely man and a grifter easy on the eyes is certainly a recipe for debauchery and treachery.” He paused, watching me with amusement—waiting for me to make my next move, like a conceited cat who knows he has a mouse trapped.

I glared back at him, conjuring as much courage as I could muster. “What is your point, Mr. Price?”

“My point is you’re not who you say you are. You’re Estelle Sullivan, not Stella McCord. I must say, you might have chosen a better city than New York to disappear into. It was very easy to find you.”

Nerves seemed to travel up from my hands to my heart, making it beat even faster. “I don’t know what you’re referring to, Mr. Price.”

“Do lies fall out of your mouth easily, Miss Sullivan? Who taught you the art of deceit or seduction or both? I ask again, why are you here? What game are you playing with my family?”

“There’s no game.”

“Your father’s an extremely wealthy man, which leads me to the conclusion that you were tossed out of the nest. The question is—what did you do?”

“You’re correct. I’m estranged from my family for reasons which are personal. The Bancrofts took me in when I was very ill. They’ve given me shelter and a place to live. I’m repaying them by being of service.”

“Why the name change?”

“I don’t want my family to know where I am. It’s that simple,” I said.

“Why?” One eyebrow arched. He changed the position of his feet, so that the left foot was over the right.

“It’s not your concern. I’ve told Mrs. Bancroft and Percival why. I don’t have to answer to you.”

“That’s where you’re mistaken. I found out something damning. Something that will change Percival’s opinion of you, I have no doubt.”

I waited. The grandfather clock in the corner ticked away the seconds.

“Miss Sullivan, your father’s responsible for the death of my father. Or should I say, the murder of my father in front of his daughter?” His mouth stretched into a grimace.

“Which I believe contributed greatly to my sister’s decline.”

“I’ve no idea what you’re talking about.” The room spun. If I’d been standing up, I might have fainted dead away.

“Your father ordered the hit on my father,” Price said. “Simple turf war type of thing.”

I stared at him. “I’m not sure what you mean.”

He cocked his head to the right, peering at me from eyes that I’d at first interpreted as warm and inviting, but now seemed menacing. “You may not know the details of your father’s trespasses. That hadn’t occurred to me until just now.”

“What trespasses?” My voice now shook as violently as the rest of me. How did he know?

“Your father has a reputation as a ruthless businessman.”

“As a woman I wasn’t privy to the details of his work.” I pressed my hands together, unsure of what to admit.

“What would make a girl leave her comfortable life?” Price asked.

“Didn’t your detective discover my reasons?” Anger surged, replacing some of my fear. What could this man do to me that hadn’t already been done? Percival and Mrs. Bancroft knew my reasons for leaving home, even if I hadn’t told them my real name. “If this detective of yours knows who I really am, then he must have also discovered why I had to leave.”

“No, that’s where things became a bit nebulous.”

A movement in the doorway caught my eye. It was Percival, looking none too happy,

given the scowl that etched his fine features.

“What’s going on here?” Percival strode into the room to stand next to the desk, glaring at Price. “Simon, do you mind explaining yourself?”

“I’ve been getting to know Miss McCord. Or should I say her real name? Estelle Sullivan.” Mr. Price raised his hands as if warding off a physical altercation, which I knew Percival wasn’t capable of. He was too gentle, too well-mannered to participate in something so ugly.

“Estelle Sullivan?” Percival looked in my direction, confusion in his eyes.

“Sean Sullivan’s daughter,” Mr. Price said. “I take it you haven’t properly met.”

“Sullivan?” Percival asked. “Stella, is this true? Is that your real name?” Percival had gone perfectly still, watching me.

“Yes, it’s true. As you know, I didn’t want my family to find me, so I changed my name.”

“Oh, God. This can’t be.” Percival sank into the chair next to his brother-in-law. “Sean Sullivan’s your father?”

“Yes, but what does this have to do with your family?” I asked, fighting tears.

“Your father had him killed,” Percival said. “We’ve known it since the beginning but there was no way to prove it, even if the cops were interested in the murders of mobsters.”

“Mobsters?” I asked.

“Sean Sullivan ordered the hit,” Price said. “As an act of revenge.”

“Oh. God. This can’t be,” I muttered under my breath. “What are the odds?”

Percival scrubbed a hand over his face and drew in a deep breath. “Your father was in deep with a lot of bad people. He and my father-in-law had a disagreement over a business matter. We don’t know the details, but it involved a large amount of money. My father-in-law was involved in bootlegging, gambling, racketeering. Your father is as well.

“Simon, you can see she had no idea about any of this,” Percival said.

Price turned to me. “My mother died weeks after him when she was thrown from her horse. Because she was distraught? Perhaps? Or was it planned for something or someone to spook her horse? She was an experienced equestrian. For her to have lost control is more than a little suspicious. Your father took our parents from us, Miss Sullivan. He’s the reason my sister succumbed to madness. She wasn’t strong enough.”

I pressed my fingers against my mouth, worried I was going to be sick. “My father’s cruel and ruthless, but I didn’t know he was a criminal. I had no idea. About anything, apparently.” I looked over at Percival, but he would not meet my gaze.

“C’mon, Percy, you can’t stand there and tell me this doesn’t stink to high heaven?” Price asked. “She shows up at your door out of the blue?”

“I didn’t show up here,” I said. “I was invited.”

“It is a strange coincidence.” Percival lifted his gaze and watched me through narrowed eyes. When he spoke next, he hardly sounded like himself. “One that evokes questions. Simon, I need to speak to Stella alone, please.”

Simon nodded and without another word, left the room.

For a moment, neither of us spoke.

“I don’t understand what’s happening here,” Percival said. “Is this just a coincidence? Namely, did you plan this? Target me on the train?”

“Target you? For what purpose? If you recall, you sat next to me. There was nothing premeditated.”

“Stella, how could this be? Your family’s the reason for my wife’s illness.”

“I don’t know, but I’m sorry. I should have told you my real name.”

“If you had, I would not have invited you home with me,” Percival said.

“It was my father, not me,” I said, lamely. “Everything else I told you is true.”

“God, Stella.” He rubbed his face and drew in a deep breath. When he looked back at me, tears flooded his eyes. “What am I supposed to do now? Let the woman whose family ruined mine stay in my home? My daughter loves you. My mother loves you. I...I...” He trailed off and fumbled for his handkerchief to wipe his damp face. “Why is God punishing me like this? I’ve tried to be such a good man, but the blows keep coming.”

“I’m sorry. For everything. For my father and everything he did to your family. But it’s not me. I’m a woman without a family.” I rose shakily to my feet. “I’ll leave. You’ve all been very kind, but I can’t stay here now that we know the truth.” Our friendship and working relationship was essentially ruined. I knew the same would be true for Mrs. Bancroft. The tangled web of our two families made it impossible for me to stay.

“I wish I could disagree, Stella. I really do.”

“It’s all right. None of this is your fault. I’ll pack and be gone by the morning.”

“Where will you go?” Percival asked woodenly.

“I’ve no idea. Not home.” But where would I go? “I’d like to say goodbye to your mother.”

“Yes, of course.”

I fled from the den. By the time I reached my room, sobs racked my body. I had nowhere to go. Not enough money to last me but a few weeks at a boardinghouse, even if I could find one. Images of the tenements we’d visited over the last few months played before my eyes. Was the plight of the poor people I’d been helping the future that awaited me? It was hard to think otherwise.

No one wanted me. My father had made sure of that.

By the next morning, I’d packed up my belongings. I’d not slept much, thinking about how to say goodbye to the woman I’d come to think of as a friend and substitute mother.

There was Clara too. I’d grown attached to her and she to me. What would be best? To say goodbye to her? Or just slip away as I’d done with my sister and Mireille? The pain of goodbyes seemed to be the plague of my life.

Penelope knocked on my door soon after I’d finished packing. Her tear-streaked face told me she’d heard that I would be departing.

“Miss Stella, I’m going to miss you very much.” She started to cry, prompting more

tears from me. We fell together into a tight embrace.

“It’ll be all right,” I said. “Don’t be sad. Some things are not meant to be.” What was meant for me? A lonely life of poverty?

“Where will you go?” Penelope asked, withdrawing from our embrace.

“I don’t know. I’ll find a room somewhere and look for another position, I suppose.”

“I’d help if I could, but I don’t know how,” Penelope said.

From behind us, Mrs. Bancroft appeared. I wanted to shrink into the floorboards when I saw the sadness and confusion in her eyes.

“Penelope, have Robert come up for Miss Sullivan’s things,” Mrs. Bancroft said.

“Yes, ma’am.” Penelope gave me one last look and then scampered from the room.

“Is it true you had no idea?” Mrs. Bancroft folded her arms over her chest.

“That’s correct. I had no idea about my father’s business dealings or the connection to your family. Honestly, why would I have come here if I’d known my father was the cause of so much of your family’s pain?”

“Right. It makes no sense.”

“Regardless, I can’t stay. Not with all of this between us,” I said. “I’m sorry. I’m going to miss you very much. You were more a mother to me than mine ever was.”

Her expression softened, and she held out her arms. “You were like the daughter I never had.”



We held each other tightly, both weeping. When we parted, she patted her face with a hankie. “Why is it that the sins of the men in our lives cause us so much pain?”

“I don’t know.”

“If it were up to me, I’d ask you to stay. However, the complexities of the relationship between our families is too much for us to continue as we are.”

“I understand. Thank you for taking me in and helping me to recover. I’ll always be grateful to you for your kindness.”

Mrs. Bancroft pulled a check from her pocket. “This is a little something to keep you going. I should have been cutting you checks all along for your work.”

“No, room and board was payment enough.”

“You’ll find somewhere to stay, won’t you?” Mrs. Bancroft asked. “I could make some calls.”

I shook my head. “You’ve done enough. It’s time for me to go and let you and Percival and Clara get back to your lives. I’m not worth any more of your time.”

“Listen to me.” She wrapped her hands around my arms. “You’re tough and intelligent. You will find a new life. You’ll meet a man and have a family. Soon, you’ll barely remember your time here.”

“That will never be the case. You’ve taught me so much. I’ll remember you for the rest of my life.” I hesitated for a moment before asking, “Will you tell Clara I said goodbye? I can’t do it.” Seeing her little face confused and rejected was too much for me.

“Write her a note before you leave,” Mrs. Bancroft said. “Reassure her that you’re not leaving because of anything she did.”

“Yes, of course. I’ll do it now and leave it on the desk with her name on it.”

“Goodbye, dear one. Be well.” Mrs. Bancroft opened her arms, and I walked into them for one last embrace. And then she left without looking back, but not before I saw her lift her hankie to her eyes.

I went to the desk and found a piece of stationery and an envelope. It took two tries before I was satisfied. How did one say goodbye to a little person whom I’d grown to love? Another loss, I thought, to add to so many.

Dearest Clara,

I’ve been called away to take care of something important and unfortunately, will not be returning. I’ve enjoyed our time together, especially at the beach, and will miss you very much. Always remember how smart and kind you are. You’ll grow up to be wise and good like your father and grandmama. Much love,

Stella

I slipped the paper into the envelope, the lump in my throat painful. Next, I chose another piece of paper and envelope and addressed this one to Percival.

Dear Percival,

The night we swallowed moonbeams and said the truth will stay with me all my life. When I see the moon, full, crescent, and everywhere in between, I shall think of you. I wish you nothing but the best and hope that life will prove kinder to you in the years to come. Quite simply, you are the finest man I’ve ever known. I’m sorry our

friendship had to end this way. However, I'm mostly sorry for the sins of my father and how they took your Mary away. If I could change any one thing in this world, it would be that.

Love,

Stella

I sealed the envelope and left both of them on the desk. Mrs. Bancroft would know what to do with them. Then I drew in a deep breath and walked out the front door.

I found a room in a boardinghouse not far from where Mrs. Bancroft and I had frequented during our visits to the tenements. My landlady, Mrs. O'Grady, was a silver-haired woman in her sixties missing most of her teeth and as stingy as she was skinny. I paid her the first month's rent in cash and then borrowed a newspaper to see if I could find a position somewhere. With no references and no skills, I wasn't sure how much luck I would have.

The weeks that followed were a series of failed interviews with various degrees of horrible men. By the end of the month, I was completely discouraged. I was almost out of money and had no job in sight. One night, while eating some of Mrs. O'Grady's watery soup, one of the other girls, Luella, announced her intent to leave us at the end of the week.

Mrs. O'Grady looked up from breaking a piece of bread into pieces to soak up the last of her soup. "Where are you going?"

"None of your concern." Luella glared at her. There was no love lost between the two women. Luella was a robust, pretty farm girl who had come from Minnesota to try her luck in the city. She'd been friendly and forthcoming from my first night at the boardinghouse, unlike some of the others. There were six of us, and Luella had been

the only one who spoke to me at all. That said, none of them seemed friendly with one another either. They were like ghosts, these girls. Waiflike and pale, keeping to themselves. It was fine with me. I was too sad to want to spend evenings chattering away as Mauve and I had done as girls.

Later, I was in my room scouring the help wanted ads in the Times when a knock on my door drew me from my task. “Come in.”

The door opened to reveal Luella. She wore a cotton nightgown, and her yellow hair hung in two braids down her back.

I greeted her with a smile. “Do you need something?”

“No, I just wanted to talk to you—tell you about where I’m going.”

I waited, curious to see what she would say next.

“I’m going to work at a house run by a madame,” Luella said. “To provide services to the wealthiest of clientele.”

At first, I didn’t follow. “A madame?”

“Ladies of the evening. You know, for men.”

My stomach dropped as it became clear what she meant. I stared at her. “But I thought you were working at the livery?”

“I was. However, Miss Scarlet discovered me and asked me to come by her mansion for tea. Once I got there, she explained what she does. You should see the house and the rooms. Stella, they live in luxury. Only the best clients are allowed inside. Miss Scarlet says they’re not permitted to treat the girls unkindly or rough them up.”

Rough them up? Good Lord.

“You’re going to work for a brothel?” I could hardly breathe. “As a...?” I couldn’t even say the word.

“A lady of the evening. That’s right.” Luella grinned. “Miss Scarlet says she has a few clients who like my type.”

“What type is that?”

“You know, I’m tall and strong from working on the farm all my life. I guess some men love women who look Scandinavian. She said I should really play up the whole farm-girl persona, and it’ll be kind of like acting on the stage. I’ll play a part for these men and be handsomely paid for it.”

“Have you done any of...the work yet?”

She smiled and tugged on one of her braids. “I sure did. Two nights ago, Miss Scarlet gave me the opportunity to prove my worth. She had me go upstairs with an oil tycoon from Texas.”

“Was it awful? Touching him?”

“I thought it would be, but once I got him up there, it didn’t take him long at all to do his business, and then he wanted to talk. He practically talked my ear off—all about his frustrations and worries. Miss Scarlet said I did so well he wants to see me every time he comes to town.”

“But don’t you want to get married? Have a family?”

She shrugged one muscular shoulder. “I gave up on all of that when I left home to

move here. This is only temporary anyway. Just until I can get a role in a play. Miss Scarlet said she looks after her girls. There's no place safer in the city."

As long as one was willing to sell her body. Dear Lord above, was this the only option?

"Why are you telling me this?" I asked, keeping my voice steady.

"Miss Scarlet asked me if I knew anyone who might be interested in coming to work for her. You have to be pretty and classy, so I immediately thought of you. Like I said, she has only the very best type of men visit. What with your fancy way of talking and all, plus you're almost exotic-looking with that dark hair—why, she'd be happy to meet with you. What do you say? I can take you there."

"I wish you the best, of course, but Luella, that's not for me. I couldn't just lie with a stranger." With Constantine, it had been beautiful and special. He'd been gentle and loving. I couldn't imagine a stranger inside me as he'd been. It was too awful to think about.

"Some of the girls have regulars. They don't have to do it with anyone else because their men pay to keep them there."

My eyes widened at the idea. "They're paid mistresses?"

"Yes, isn't it wonderful? They never have to worry about being hungry or where they're going to sleep for the night."

"What happens when they don't want you any longer?" I asked. "When they find someone younger or prettier?"

Luella stared at the clock on the wall, which lost approximately one minute per day.

After seven lost minutes, Mrs. O'Grady would set it back to the correct time, only for the cycle to begin again.

She turned back to me. "Do you really think we're going to live long enough to grow old in this city that eats poor people alive, especially women? For whatever time I have on this earth, I'd like to spend it somewhere comfortable and with a full stomach. Whatever I have to do, I will." Her blue eyes glittered. "It may be different for you—growing up rich—but I've been poor all my life. No one cares about us. There's nothing to pull us from poverty except work like this. We have only a few options and none of them are virtuous by nature. Thievery. Cheating. Taking advantage of those in need to line our own pockets. Prostitution."

"The meek shall inherit the earth," I said under my breath.

"They tell us that to keep us from rebelling or questioning our lot in life. You can starve to death from moral superiority. One bowl of watery soup at a time." Luella gave me a sad smile before leaving for her own room.

I sat alone, listening to the sounds coming from the kitchen—a murmur of voices, clanking of dishes and pans. Was she right? Would we only survive through dubious means? Had I signed my own death warrant the day I left our idyllic cottage by the sea? Or was it the moment I fell in love with Constantine Harris?

I closed my eyes, evoking an image of that first day in the garden. The dappled light through the trees, the buzzing of insects, and the kaleidoscope of greens and yellows in Connie's eyes. I'd been naive and powerless to do anything other than fall in love. Luella was correct. Because I was born into wealth, I'd assumed my life would go as planned because nothing had ever challenged that idea. I'd lived in luxury, educated and spoiled without any knowledge of my father's criminal empire. The truth of what I'd seen since arriving here in the city had opened my eyes to the suffering of others. I was no longer that naive girl under the fluttering leaves of a maple tree.

My thoughts drifted to Percival. I missed him, Clara, and Mrs. Bancroft with an ache like homesickness. I'd let myself believe that somehow, I could stay as long as I needed. However, once again, my father ruined my chances for any kind of secure life.

Still, I could not give up. Tomorrow would be the day I found work. It had to be.



16

Percival

The day Stella left, I tried to put her out of my mind and go about my tasks. However, as I made my rounds that morning, the pit in my stomach made it difficult to concentrate on my patients. Somehow, I got through the day and then prepared myself to return to a home where Stella would no longer light up every room she entered.

When I arrived home around five that afternoon, Mother was still out, but Clara was in the nursery playing with her dollhouse. Miss Lisk was in the rocking chair, her eyes closed and snoring softly. The poor old thing needed to retire.

I stood in the doorway watching Clara play with her miniature people in the dollhouse. She looked up, breaking into a smile, and ran to me. I lifted her into my arms for a hug and kiss before setting her back on her feet.

“Do you want to play house with me?” Clara asked.

I glanced at Miss Lisk, who showed no signs of waking. “I’d love to.”

I sat on the floor while Clara proceeded to tell me about each of the dolls, holding them up for me to see. “This one’s you, Papa. And grandmama. This is a new one Miss Lisk got me from the toy store, and I think it looks just like Miss Stella.”

She set Miss Stella inside the sitting room of the dollhouse, then put me next to her.

“This is pretend, Papa, so don’t be sad.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m pretending that you and Miss Stella are married and I’m your daughter.” She held up one of the younger dolls to show me.

“That’s you?” I asked.

“She doesn’t look anything like me, but I pretend anyway.” Clara set the child doll on the floor next to the sofa where miniature me and Stella were sitting side by side.

“What’s happening in this scene?” I gestured toward the figurines.

“I’m playing with my doll on the floor, and you and Miss Stella are talking about a picnic we’re going on. We’re at the beach even though you can’t tell.”

“Do you miss the beach?”

“Yeah. But I like school too. Did you know Miss Stella left?”

“Um, yes, I did.”

“I’m sad.”

“Me too,” I said. “But she was only here for a short time.”

“Why?”

“She has her own life. She’s young and beautiful and will probably find a handsome nice man to marry.”

“Will she ever come to see me again?” Clara moved the child doll to sit next to Stella.

“I’m not sure.” The very thing my daughter wanted was the thing that later, when she was grown, she would see was impossible because the man who had made her mother irreparably damaged was Stella’s father.

“I heard her crying in her room this morning, but Miss Lisk wouldn’t let me knock on the door.”

“Maybe she was sad to have to leave us.” I knew that to be the case. I’d witnessed it up close. The way her expression had turned from hopeful to resigned as she’d stared at me with the eyes of a lonely soul. I saw a pair just like them every day in the mirror.

We didn’t discuss the matter further because Miss Lisk woke up with a loud snort. “Goodness me, what time is it?”

“Around five,” I answered.

“Is it time for tea?” Miss Lisk asked, looking for a moment as if she didn’t know where she was. “Clara, shall we prepare for tea downstairs?”

“Clara, go wash your hands and face,” I said. “I want to talk to Miss Lisk.”

“Yes, Papa.” She scrambled to her feet and ran off toward the bathroom.

“You may have the evening off,” I said to our elderly nanny. “And tomorrow I’d like to talk about your retirement. I think you would agree it’s time for a well-earned break. We’ll make sure you’re well taken care of. I’ve put away money for you in a retirement fund.”

I wasn't sure what I'd expected, but the look of pure delight was not it. "Very well, sir. I'll go and live with my sister up in Connecticut. She's been wanting me to move in with her since her husband passed, but I couldn't bring myself to give you my notice."

"You earned some years of peace and quiet," I said. "You've given a lot to our family."

She stood, smoothing her skirts. "Dr. Bancroft, I'm sorry for the way things have gone for you. Of all the men I know, you deserve to be happy. God sees your sacrifices, your commitment to doing the right thing even though it's hard."

"Thank you, Miss Lisk. I appreciate your kind words."

We talked for a few more seconds before she left for her room. I sank to the floor in front of Clara's dollhouse and placed the tiny dolls in the palm of my hand side by side. If only it were that easy in real life.

That afternoon, instead of heading straight home after my last house call, I buttoned up my jacket, donned a thick pair of gloves and a scarf, and headed out for a walk. Our weather was cold and clear, with a wintry pale blue sky above. With no particular destination in mind, I ambled along, hoping to shake the terrible sadness that had overtaken me.

As was typical this time of day, the city teemed with people and street vendors. I caught the scent of woodsmoke and manure from horses one moment and roasted chestnuts from a street vendor the next. As I stood there, a woman came out of the shop, bringing the scent of ginger and cinnamon with her. I thought about going inside and buying a few treats for Mother and Clara but decided against it in the end.

Horse-drawn carriages competed with automobiles and trams. Bustling with life, I

thought. How could I feel so dead inside when the vibrant city surrounded me?

I walked along Fifth Avenue, which ran along the eastern edge of our glorious park, passing the Metropolitan Museum of Art and residential mansions without really taking them in at all, too preoccupied and disheartened to care. At some point I headed into Central Park toward the Great Lawn.

I sat on a bench, warm from walking, to watch people. I'd sat on this very same bench after I'd been released from the hospital after Mary shot me in the shoulder. That day, like today, I had no idea how to continue.

I was surprised to look and see Mother making her way toward me. I stood to greet her. "What are you doing here?" I asked.

"I was out for fresh air and saw my own son sitting on a bench." She lifted her face for me to peck her cheek. "What are you doing here?"

"I don't know."

"I see." She glanced behind us. "This is perhaps fate that's brought us both here. There's an apartment for sale I want you to look at."

"Why would we look at an apartment?"

"I thought you might like it for an investment. It's by the river. Will be worth more as the years pass. And, if I were to, I don't know, have a friend who might need a place to live, for example, we'd have it ready for her."

"Mother, what are you saying?"

"You saved her life, Percy. We saved her life. Which means that we are responsible

for her for the rest of ours. It's not right to toss her aside. What happened has nothing to do with her. She needs us. We need her."

"No. I can't do it. I can't be around her. I'm too weak."

"Well, you know my thoughts on the situation. If you aren't interested in buying the apartment, then I will. There's no reason I can't offer it to her in exchange for helping me with my very important work."

"I will not be my father," I said. "I cannot do it."

"Dearest, for someone so intelligent, you really miss the subtlety of things."

I didn't bother to reply, knowing what she meant. My situation was not like my father's had been. I didn't have a wife waiting for me at home. Except for one thing. We were both married.

She tucked her hand into my arm. "Come along. I'll take you to the apartment."

Knowing it was futile to resist, I let her lead me out of the park and down the street.

Estelle

Christmas Eve soon arrived, and I had yet to secure a position. I'd faced slammed doors, expletives followed by commands to leave the premises, and cold, hard stares. If there was a way to be rejected and dismissed, I'd endured it. Yet I could not give up hope. I'd decided it was merely bad luck and vowed at the end of each day to stay hopeful. My father may have used his tenacity for evil, but I would tap into mine for survival.

The morning before Christmas, I sat outside the office of an attorney advertising for a secretary. I'd come to apply, standing in a long line of young women and men, after seeing the advertisement in the Times that morning. When it was finally my turn, I was called into a small interior office. A middle-aged woman with cold eyes sat behind the desk. After introducing herself as Miss Wright, she quickly explained that she was hiring her replacement. "One last gift before I go." She glanced down at the curriculum vitae I'd put together and shopped all over town. Her mouth twisted; she clicked her tongue. "This won't do. Not at all."

"Pardon me?" I held my breath, praying silently.

"Mr. King is a tyrant who wants things as he wants them. This job is not for the faint of heart." She swept her gaze over the entirety of my person and seemed to come to a conclusion about my past. "Or for princesses."

"I'm confused?" What did she mean?

“The way you’re dressed, and your way of speaking tell me you haven’t had to work before now, which would also explain the lack of references and the fact that you can’t type.”

I’d heard this more times than I could count. “I’m a quick learner.”

“The rest of the girls who come in here have been to secretarial college. You might have thought of that before applying for this type of position.”

I had exactly one dime left to my pitiful savings. If I didn’t find something soon, I’d be on the street come the first of the year. “Please, I’ll do anything.” I fought tears of frustration. This was impossible. I should curl up in an alleyway and wait for the elements to do their bidding. There was no way onward or out of this deprivation and loneliness.

She pushed the paper back across the desk. “I’m sorry, Miss McCord. There’s nothing I can do for you.”

Any remaining energy seeped out of me, and I was left like a rag doll, limp and without life. I didn’t even bother to thank her for her time, just hauled myself out of her office and headed for the street.

I walked home in the frigid weather blindly, tears obscuring my vision. Flakes of snow fell lazily from a gray sky. It was nearly dark already, even though it was only late afternoon. Tomorrow was Christmas, and I’d never felt more alone.

My thoughts drifted to my family and then to the Bancrofts. Was I destined to always be sent away from the people and places I loved?

My feet somehow took me to Central Park. The beauty of the landscaping, plants, flowers, and ponds always cheered me up. Plus, it was free. No one could charge me



to look at beauty.

I didn't want to return to my cold, lonely room just yet. The last few days had been progressively more depressing. I imagined the Christmas at home. Mireille would have her first Christmas. Although she probably wouldn't remember it, the others would. My sister always loved Christmas, and it would be heightened with a child in the house.

Memories of Christmas past came to me. If it was like other years, our cook would serve a scrumptious meal of roasted goose and all the fixings. My mouth watered thinking of the fluffy warm rolls smeared with butter and mounds of mashed potatoes. I'd grown so thin the last few weeks that none of my dresses fit. I was hungry all the time these days. The thin gruel in the morning and tasteless soups and stews in the evenings were not enough to nourish me.

A layer of snow blanketed the park. People were out for walks, alone and in couples or groups. Children and adults alike skated on the ponds, shouting and laughing with the sheer joy of being outside in the cold air. My thin coat was not enough to keep out the frigid weather. I tightened my scarf around my neck and walked faster to warm myself.

I didn't see the woman until it was too late. I'd already crashed into her. I opened my mouth to apologize, only to see Luella standing there. Transformed. No longer did she wear her tattered, thin dress. It had been replaced by a fine silk dress, wool overcoat, and hat with a large plume.

"Luella, you look beautiful," I said, grasping her outstretched hands.

"I'd like to say the same to you." Luella looked me over, head to foot. The sympathy in her eyes told me more than even her words. "You're thin enough to be carried away by a slight wind."

I started to sob. She took me into her arms, patting my back. When I paused to take a breath, she led me by the hand over to a bench situated near the walking path.

“You’ve not found work?” Luella asked, not unkindly but without the sympathy one would expect upon seeing an old friend looking dreadful.

“There’s nothing for me anywhere. I have no skills or references. I don’t have money for rent. I’ll be kicked out to the street come the first of the year. What will I do?” I didn’t try to curb my bitter tears. There was no pride left in me. They’d managed to take the rest of my self-respect and hope.

Luella patted my hand and let me cry for a few more seconds. “All right, here are our choices. I can give you the money for your rent and to get you by for another month. But at the end of the month you’ll be in the same bad way.”

“I can get a job at a factory, maybe?”

“Or you can come home with me. Miss Scarlet will feed you and let you stay for Christmas. We’re having the grandest affair tomorrow with food and dancing. Some of our clients will join us, of course, but for the most part it’ll be us girls. We have a lot of laughs; I can tell you with confidence. You would enjoy yourself.”

“And at the end of the day? After Miss Scarlet’s kindness has been spent? What then?”

“She’ll bring you into her special parlor and talk to you. Get to know you a little. If she finds you pleasant and believes you can get along with the other girls, you’ll be asked to stay.”

“But how do you do it? Isn’t it disgusting?”

“We have only the finest men of New York City frequenting our establishment.” The pride in her voice was undeniable. “Miss Scarlet charges high enough prices to ensure that. Anyone who tries to rough us up or harm us in any way is banned for life. Believe me, no one wants that. In just the short time I’ve been there, I already have a half dozen regulars.” She looked around, presumably to see if anyone was listening. But no one noticed us at all, too busy enjoying the day. “One of my clients is a senator. Can you believe it? Little old me entertaining such a fine man? There’s also a headmaster of one of the most prestigious private schools who enjoys my company.”

“Are these men married?”

“Most of them.”

“Why would they look for comfort outside of their marriage?” I asked.

Luella laughed. “After all these months in the city and you still don’t understand anything, do you?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean—men rule everything. What they want, they take. If they’re not satisfied at home, they come to us. Anyway, most marriages are miserable. Miss Scarlet told me the wives of some of our clients know exactly where their husbands are in the evenings they visit us. Others may have a suspicion and are only too happy their husbands don’t ask for anything upon their return home.”

I thought of my own parents. Did Father enjoy activities outside of his marriage? If he did, was Mother bothered? It was too ugly to think about.

My stomach growled, loudly enough for Luella to hear.

“That’s it. You’re coming with me. At least we’ll get you fed and sheltered for the holiday.”

I would have liked to think I was strong enough to resist the offer, knowing what it might lead to, but I was weakened from hunger and cold and loneliness. I followed Luella home to meet Miss Scarlet for myself.

Miss Scarlet’s house of ill repute was an ordinary-looking brownstone on a tree-lined street near the area of the city known for its theaters and dubious activities. My mother would have fainted dead away to see me walking up the front steps of a brothel, but there I was doing just that.

Before we went through the front door, Luella gestured down the street. “All along here are what Miss Scarlet refers to as ‘love nests.’ That’s where gentlemen take care of their mistresses. They have whole apartments all to themselves. Can you imagine their good fortune?”

I didn’t say anything, merely followed her up to the front door and into the foyer. If I’d not been raised in wealth and privilege, it might have seemed outlandishly posh. Instead, it seemed like home. Luella took me into a beautifully decorated parlor where a dark-skinned maid brought me tea and a tray of cookies. While I waited, I stuffed several into my mouth to tame the hunger in my stomach.

“I’m sorry to keep you waiting.”

I looked up from brushing crumbs from my lap to see a fine lady standing before me. Dressed impeccably in a pink silk dress and high-heeled shoes I was certain cost more than I’d make in a month at the factory, she appeared to be around thirty, with golden hair cut short and coaxed into attractive waves.

“Not at all,” I said hurriedly as I rose to my feet. “I’ve been enjoying the tea and

cookies.”

Miss Scarlet extended her hand, and I took it, noting the dry, soft texture of her skin.

“Please sit. Are you still hungry? I can order a plate of sandwiches.”

“Yes, please. I’d be grateful.”

“Consider it done,” Miss Scarlet said.

I returned to my seat on the sofa. She took a similar position across the square coffee table. “Luella tells me you’ve had a rough time of late. What can I do for you? Other than a meal?”

“I...I don’t rightly know, Miss Scarlet. I’ve been unable to find work and it’s the holidays and I feel so alone.” I hadn’t meant to share all of that, but hunger made me lightheaded. “Luella and I happened to see each other in the park, and she brought me here out of the kindness of her heart.”

“Luella’s very popular with some of the boys. I often send her out for parties. She has a natural way about her that men respond to. One of them told me recently she’s like a party all on her own.”

“Party?” I asked, squeaking.

“Yes, in addition to entertaining gentlemen here at my club, I’m often asked to send girls to liven up a party or impress customers.” She peered at me, green eyes narrowed. “Tell me, what’s your sad tale? I know you must have one or a well-bred lady such as yourself would not be sitting across from me.”

“I was engaged to a man I loved very much. He died before we could marry, but I was already pregnant.”

“I see.”

“My parents asked me to leave and never return,” I said. “I’m on my own and not doing terribly well, I must admit. My life of ease has not served me well. I have no skills.”

“What happened to the baby?” No judgment tainted her voice, merely curiosity.

I told her the entire saga, including leaving the baby with my married sister and being taken in by a nice family who helped me recover.

“Why have you not remained with them?”

I debated with myself for a second or two. Should I tell her what had caused them to send me away? In the end, I decided honesty was best. I’d told too many lies of late, none of which had ended up serving me in any positive way. “They discovered my real identity.”

“Which is?”

“I’d rather not say. Apparently, my father’s done a lot of harm to a lot of people, including the people who took me in. They were not so kindhearted once they understood who I really am. They sent me away forthwith.”

“‘The sins of the father are visited upon the children.’” Miss Scarlet poured herself a cup of tea from the kettle and helped herself to a cookie.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“My father was a preacher and very strict and morally superior, or so he claimed. I wouldn’t say sending away your daughter after an act of violence on her person is

something to feel proud of.”

I nodded. “What did you do to evoke this punishment?”

“I was raped and became pregnant. When I told my parents, they sent me to a place for an abortion. The doctor botched the procedure. I nearly died. I’ll not be able to have a child because of it.”

I winced. “I’m very sorry. Is that how you became a...” I couldn’t say the word. Even if I could, would it offend her? I had no idea what the rules were in this kind of work.

“The path that led me here was like yours, circuitous and unexpected. It starts innocently enough, at least in one’s mind. I at first thought of them only as dates where I was given a meal and a fun night in exchange for the type of currency a woman can use on a man. There’s nothing free in this life. We must pay one way or the other. After a time, I came to understand that in order to enjoy a life without hunger, I must use what I had—my beauty and personality. One learns over time how to cloak a mind and heart in layers of apathy and self-deceit. Anything is endurable for small amounts of time. Especially when it leads to a good meal.” She smiled and sipped from her teacup before continuing.

“One thing led to another. I’m a natural leader, I suppose. I saw quickly that it would be better for the girls to have me looking over them than one of the nasty pimps. These men take wages and give girls a bloody nose for their trouble. Here, I can keep the girls safe. Any hint of aggression, and the men are tossed out on their ear. Those who enjoy themselves here are of a certain economic class. They have needs not fulfilled in other ways, which brings them here. But it’s not only physical desires that are taken care of here. We provide a chance to party and enjoy food and drink. Even dancing. We have interesting parties, full of artists, writers, and actors. Men do business in my parlor. Laws are discussed. I provide a safe place where my visitors can be themselves without fear of repercussions and enjoy an environment free of

societal pressures. They can be who they truly are here.”

“You said anyone violent is forbidden entrance. Thus, not all are granted the privilege of entry?”

“That’s correct. Yet another benefit of running my establishment as I see fit.” Miss Scarlet gave me another long, searching gaze. “I can see you’re skeptical, and I by no means am interested in forcing anyone to do what they don’t want to do. However, if you’d like to attend our party this evening, you will get a better sense of what it would be like to be one of my girls. In the meantime, let’s get you fed. You need a meal, not a couple of tea sandwiches. Afterward, I’ll send you over to our seamstress for a new gown. Our clients expect the girls to look like ladies.”

“I don’t have any money to pay for a new dress.” My stomach rumbled again.

“It’s on the house, sugarplum,” Miss Scarlet said. “For now.”

She didn’t say anything else, but the message was loud and clear. She fully expected me to stay.



18

Estelle

The maid took me downstairs to the kitchen, where several women were preparing finger sandwiches and other small bites. A plump woman who introduced herself as Cookie invited me to sit at the rustic table where the staff must have their meals. “I have some leftover stew I fed the ladies earlier,” Cookie said.

She was in her fifties, with salt-and-pepper hair covered with a cap. Lively brown eyes seemed to take me in anew as she set down a bowl of steaming stew with potatoes, carrots, and slices of roast beef, along with several chunks of thick bread. My mouth watered as I waited for it to cool enough to eat, then ate heartily, downing every last morsel. If it hadn’t been bad manners, I would have scraped the bowl with the chunk of bread.

“That’s better,” Cookie said. “Color’s back in your cheeks. You looked half starved.”

“I was,” I said, smiling over at her.

Evelyn, her kitchen helper, appeared to be in her thirties, sporting a mop of red hair and a face and arms dotted with a thousand freckles. She spoke little English. Cookie explained that she’d immigrated from France not long ago. Regardless, she greeted me with a shy smile before turning back to peeling a large mound of potatoes.

After the delicious meal, I yearned for a warm bed in which to lay my weary body. Instead, I was escorted upstairs to the dressmaker.

The seamstress worked in a small room filled with more fabric than I had ever seen in one place. Rolls of fabric were stacked from the floor to the ceiling, arranged by color.

“I’m Mrs. Morris.” A small woman with stooped shoulders and a face lined with wrinkles appraised me. “Miss Scarlet says you need a gown for this evening?”

“Yes, ma’am,” I said. How could she possibly sew something for tonight? It was already after two.

She went to a wardrobe and opened both doors to peer inside. I did the same, shocked to see at least twenty dresses hanging there.

“Let me look at you.” Mrs. Morris’s gaze swept from toe to head. “You’re a pretty thing. Too thin, but we can work around that. I like to put brunettes in purple or blue for evening. Which do you prefer?”

“Mother always said I looked good in blue.” Thinking of her made the back of my throat ache. What was she doing right now? Had she met the baby? Did anyone ever think of me? Or had they all moved on, happy to be rid of me and my pesky ways?

“Blue it is, love.” She pulled out a periwinkle-hued gown with hundreds of beads sewn into the bodice. The neckline plunged startlingly low. I didn’t relish showing my breasts to a room full of men looking for intimacy, but beggars couldn’t be choosers.

Mrs. Morris pushed me toward a corner with a folding screen. “Try it on in there and come out to show me. I’ll have to make a few adjustments, but the fit shouldn’t be too far off.”

I did as she asked, slipping the surprisingly heavy gown over my head. The material

felt like a blanket, but I welcomed the warmth. Winter days were bitter in New York. I felt as though I'd been cold since I got here. If my feet ever warmed all the way up, I'd be surprised.

I stepped out from behind the partition. Mrs. Morris handed me a pair of dancing shoes that fit my feet perfectly, and then I stepped onto a platform in front of a full-length mirror. The gown was lovely. Mother would have approved. The plunging neckline wasn't as immodest as I thought when looking at it on the hanger. It was fairly flattering, even with my small chest. I had gotten too thin, though. My shoulder blades and collarbones stuck out, and my face had narrowed to the point of gauntness. I missed the robust, healthy girl I'd been when I'd first met Constantine. A wave of pain came at the thought of what I'd looked like in the mirror of my bedroom the morning of Mauve's wedding. Where had that girl gone?

Mrs. Morris hummed under her breath as she pinned the hem. "This won't take me but a minute to adjust this for you. Which room are you staying in?"

"I...I don't know. Miss Scarlet didn't say anything about a room."

In the mirror, I saw Miss Scarlet appear in the doorway, as if I'd conjured her out of thin air.

"I've had the pink room made up for you," Miss Scarlet said. "You'll share a suite with some of the other girls but have a private room. For entertaining."

Entertaining. I guess I knew what that meant. "Thank you." I wasn't sure that was the right thing to say. Everything was happening too fast. Now I had a new gown and a room? What was I doing?

A party this evening made my palms sweat. What was expected of me? Should I have mentioned my lack of experience when I spoke to Miss Scarlet earlier? One time with

Constantine didn't exactly make a woman of the evening.

Miss Scarlett drew nearer, her intelligent eyes sweeping over me. "Yes, this will do nicely. Well done, Mrs. Morris."

"Thank you, ma'am," Mrs. Morris said. "I'll just let out the hem so it's long enough for her."

"Wonderful." Miss Scarlet met my gaze in the mirror. "When you've finished here, a maid will show you to your room. You'll want a nap, I expect, and then a nice bath. One of the other girls will help you with your hair. I prefer minimal makeup. We don't want to look like what the society ladies refer to us as."

I simply nodded, unsure what they were called by society ladies or otherwise. I'd jumped into the metaphorical river, and its heavy current would carry me away, whether I wanted to go or not.

"What's expected of me tonight?" I asked meekly. "I'm not experienced in the ways of men, and I don't want to present myself as something I'm not. I have little left, Miss Scarlet, but my integrity." The moment I said it, I knew that in itself was a lie. I'd not told the Bancrofts the full truth. Had I done so from the beginning, where would I be? Murdered on the streets? Dead from complications of the infection? Those were distinct possibilities, so I supposed my lying was a matter of survival. Still, I didn't like myself for it. In fact, self-hatred had now crept into every part of me. I longed for the days when I fancied myself a good person with a delightful life ahead of me.

Lately, an anger toward Constantine had crept into my consciousness. It had been his idea to lie together. He'd convinced me that we were to wed shortly anyway, why not enjoy each other as we saw fit? If only I'd resisted. Would he be alive if I had? Did fate work that way? One small deviation and the entire trajectory of one's life

altered?

“As I said before, you’re my guest here. I expect nothing of you tonight other than to be gracious and charming to my other guests. If you decide thereafter you’d like to stay permanently, then we will work out the details at that time. It’s Christmastime, after all. What kind of woman would I be if I sent you out into the cold?”

“Thank you for your generosity,” I said. “I’ll do my best to be charming.”

“Young ladies such as yourself were bred and subsequently taught how to beguile men for the sole purposes of marrying well. These skills will suit you in whatever choice you make about your future, and none more so than this evening. I’ve asked Luella to bring you to my office when you’re ready for the party. I shall take a good look at you before sending you out to the parlor. For now, I suggest a long nap. My festivities extend deep into the night.”

I thanked her and watched her leave the room, her posture erect and her head held high. She’d found a way to live in a man’s world without a man. Was this the only way to do so? Give men the most sacred part of you?

The maid delivered me to the suite as promised. I was happy to see Luella there waiting for me. She gave me a warm hug and welcomed me. “I’ll show her around,” Luella said, dismissing the maid with a friendly nod.

As Miss Scarlet had said, the room she’d put me in was part of a six-bedroom suite. We shared a comfortable sitting room, with sofas, tables, and a fireplace. A chessboard had been laid out for a new game. Several packs of playing cards waited on the coffee table. Books lined shelves. It could be the sitting room of any apartment in the city. How odd. I would never have guessed a house of ill repute to look like a place where my mother would take tea.

“What do we do in this big room?” I asked.

“There are types of men who enjoy a quiet night instead of the liveliness of a party. If they’d like to enjoy private time with us, we take them into the bedrooms, but sometimes they enjoy playing games or talking—either before or after the deed.” Luella giggled as she took a small key from around her neck and used it to open a cabinet filled with liquor. “Miss Scarlet likes for us to be generous with the booze—for the customers. She doesn’t like us to drink too much, but once the party starts going, who knows what will happen.”

“Does Miss Scarlet worry about the law?” Since Prohibition, I’d read in the papers about the speakeasy raids and arrests of those partaking in illegal drinking.

“We’ve been raided only once since I arrived here,” Luella said. “They took a few of the girls in to the station, but the men were sent away without so much as a slap on the wrist.”

“What happened to the girls?” I shivered at the thought of jail.

“Miss Scarlet had them bailed out by morning.” Luella lowered her voice. “These are powerful men who frequent her parties. They help to keep her and her establishment from any serious consequences.”

“Like whom?”

“The mayor, for example. Dirty cops. Racketeers. Wall Street types. We even have a few famous actors and painters.”

God help me, I hope Father doesn’t show up here , I thought, feeling sick. Was he part of the underground system that delivered illegal booze? Since learning the truth about his business, I’d not allowed myself to contemplate it much. I’d told myself I

would think about it later, once I was in a more stable environment. For now, I didn't possess the energy.

"It's all very exciting," Luella said. "Think of it. Little old me entertaining men of such esteem."

It sounded frightening, not exciting, but I had to comply with whatever was expected of me if I wanted another meal and a warm bed.

"Where are the other girls?" I asked.

"They're probably all sleeping," Luella said. "Late night. We all woke with headaches, mostly because we didn't take Miss Scarlet's advice to heart and had too much champagne. Paid for our sins this morning. Petunia always leaves us breakfast pastries and pitchers of water for when we wake. Usually, we get up and have a bite to soak up the booze from the night before and practically drown ourselves with water. Then we all crawl back to bed like cockroaches."

"Which room is mine?"

"You're in Martha's old room. The pink one."

"What happened to Martha?" I asked.

Luella sighed dreamily. "Martha had a regular and he just put her up in a suite in one of the finest buildings in the city. She has it made. We're all terribly jealous but happy for her at the same time."

"What happens if that man decides he no longer wants her?"

"She'll come back here. Miss Scarlet never turns away any of the girls who worked

for her, whether it's a year or five. We always have a safe place to land. That's what she told me the first time I spoke with her, and I have to say, I didn't fully believe her. By now, though, I've seen it with my own eyes."

Luella led me over to the room with the open door. "This is all yours."

I looked around, surprised. The room had been decorated in pink and black, all very feminine and sophisticated. "This isn't what I thought it would look like. None of it has been so far."

"I had the same reaction. Some of the other girls used to work for brothels that were filthy and disgusting—both the men and the establishment. But Miss Scarlet only allows the right kind of man to spend time with us."

I sat on the side of the bed, nerves fluttering like a gaggle of geese headed south at the end of the summer. "What was it like? The first time?"

She flopped onto the chair, resting her legs on the ottoman. "Everyone has their own way to get comfortable with the idea."

"As in?"

"Booze. Opiates. I have a few drinks before the party starts to loosen up my tongue and the rest of me, if you know what I mean."

A stunning girl with dark skin and shapely legs showed up in the doorway, dressed in only her slip and bloomers. "I didn't know we were getting a new girl."

"This is Stella," Luella said. "She and I know each other from the boardinghouse. I ran into her in the park and convinced her to follow me home. Stella, this is Maxine. She's been here the longest of all of us here in this suite."



“Pleasure to meet you, Maxine,” I said shaking her small hand. “You could be in the movies you’re so pretty.”

“You’re not so bad yourself. Where you come from?” Maxine’s accent and rapid speech sounded similar to one of my father’s gardeners, which told me she was most likely from Brooklyn.

I glanced over at Luella for help. I’d not had a chance to work on my story.

“You can just tell her the truth,” Luella said. “We’re all here because we have to be. Which is sad but also nice. No one here will judge you for your past or present.”

What about our futures? Maybe no one thought much about that in here. One day at a time, maybe?

“You wait until you feel comfortable and then tell us if you wish to,” Maxine said. “My dear old pops, who was as mean as the day is long, died when I was thirteen, leaving my sick mom and me, plus two younger sisters. We had nothing and no one. I did the best I could to get work and steal food to keep us all fed. Mama got sicker and died about eight months after Pops. I had to keep my sisters from harm, so I started letting men take me on dates. For my trouble, I always got a meal out of it, most of which I’d take home to my sisters. Pretty soon, I met a girl who told me about a brothel over on Greene Street. I worked there until I learned about Miss Scarlet. She took me in and everything changed. For the better. The men here are not so rough.”

“Where are your sisters?” I couldn’t help but ask.

A shadow crossed Maxine’s face. “I lost them during the Spanish flu. One minute they were fine and the next gone. Those days won’t soon leave me. All those bodies piled up.” She shuddered.

I'd been lucky enough to be sequestered out at our country house for the entirety of the pandemic. At the time, I'd been sad to miss all the social events. Now I realized how spoiled and naive I'd been. I'd spent idyllic days in the countryside while here in the city the hospitals and funeral homes couldn't keep up with the sick and dead.

"I'm sorry about your sisters," I said.

"Thank you. But maybe they're the lucky ones? Getting out of this nasty world and entering the pearly gates. They're better off. I tell myself that, anyway."

I nodded. Of late, the idea of fading into blissful nothingness had sounded like a sweet ending to my suffering. Who knew, though? If faced with death, might I try as hard as I could to live?

"I'm off to nap. The girls all gather together for a drink before we go downstairs," Maxine said. "You can meet the others then."

I thanked her, and she slipped away, leaving behind the scent of French perfume. Luella said she would see me later, advising me to get some sleep. "Petunia looks after us. She'll draw you a bath and help you dress." She yawned. "Off I go. See you soon."

Too tired to think further about my predicament, I took off my dress and climbed into the double bed in my underclothes, pulled the covers up and over my head, and fell asleep.

I woke from my nap several hours later and wandered over to the window. Darkness had fallen while I slept. Pressing my nose against the cold glass, I peered out to see snow falling. A few inches had accumulated on the ground.

Soon, a knock on my door revealed slight young woman with a round elfin face and

wide-set eyes. She introduced herself as Petunia. “I’m here to help you prepare for the evening. Your bath’s ready for you if you would like to follow me.” I followed her out of my room and into the bathroom where a tub of warm, soapy water awaited.

“You get on in and I’ll be back to help you in a few minutes.” Petunia bobbed her head and then exited the bathroom.

I scrubbed my skin with soap that smelled of roses but left my hair alone. If Petunia was to fix it for the evening then it should be dry. Enjoying the warmth of the water, I leaned my neck against the back of the tub and examined the ceiling. I could still leave, I thought. Go back into the cold and traipse across town on foot. In the snow. Wearing my thin coat.

Or I could stay. Sell myself for the sake of survival. How bad could it be? The other girls seemed content enough. In fact, I’d never seen Luella looking so well.

I sat forward, hugging my knees to my chest in the soapy water. Miss Scarlet had said I could stay for the party tonight and decide afterward if this was the life for me. At least I would be well fed on Christmas.

Back in my room, I returned to the window. Expensive cars were pulling up in front of the apartment and dropping well-dressed men at the steps.

“They just come in like that from the street?” I asked Petunia as I crossed the room to sit at the dressing table.

“What do you mean?” Petunia stood behind me, lifting my thick hair in her hands, obviously contemplating what to do with it.

“I mean, aren’t they worried someone will see them?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Maybe they don’t care.” She rubbed rouge into my cheeks, her forehead knit in concentration. “Anyway, how else would they come inside?”

“I don’t know. The alleyway?”

She gave me a confused look but didn’t comment. Clearly, she took her job seriously, barely speaking as she fixed my hair and face. Soon, I was powdered and my lips stained a deep red. My hair was pinned back to appear short, with several finger waves pressed into my dark tresses.

Next, she helped me into the dress. “No need for a corset,” Petunia said, buttoning the back. “You have the type of figure everyone wishes they had.”

“Like a board, you mean?”

“Exactly.” She nodded, her expression serious. “Fashion wants us to be as skinny as a prepubescent boy.” She patted her generous hips. “No such luck here.” She stood back to get a better look at me. “It fits like a glove.”

She was right. The beaded dress now fit perfectly, with a hemline just above my ankles. I looked at myself in the full mirror. The woman who stared back at me looked like a different person from the one I’d been just a year ago. I was alive. That was the important thing to remember.

I thought of the cold room and cot back at the boardinghouse. Tonight Mrs. O’Grady would serve what she called chicken soup, but there was not so much as a beak or a foot in that broth. Every night I shivered under the meager blanket, hugging myself for warmth. Instead, tonight, I would sleep in the comfortable bed in this pretty room.

Tomorrow, I would go back to my life and look for work in a factory. I couldn’t live as a prostitute.

Petunia stood back to take one last look at me. “You look quite fine, Miss Stella. Now, off you go. The ladies are waiting for you.”

I hadn’t caught sight of the others who shared our suite. They’d all been busy bathing and getting dressed for the evening. The other five were already gathered in the sitting room, sprawled on various sofas, the fire shedding a pleasant warmth. Luella introduced me to the two I hadn’t yet met.

Ginnie was a redhead with a large bosom and big green eyes. She came from Georgia and spoke with such a thick accent that I had to listen carefully to understand what she said. Susannah, a recent immigrant from Poland, possessed a pair of dark brown eyes and hair as black as the night. She was more handsome than pretty, with a square jaw and wide shoulders. Her hair was shorn into one of the modern bobs, and bangs framed bright blue eyes.

Ginnie appraised me and seemed to find me adequate, because she held out a hand to give me a quick squeeze. “Goodness me, you’re shaking like a leaf.”

“I’m scared,” I said honestly. “I don’t know what I’m doing.”

“Don’t worry, kid,” Maxine said. “We’ll look after you.”

“There’s a lot of business conducted downstairs,” Ginnie said. “With some shady characters. You’ll do best to act like you don’t understand anything they’re saying. It’s safer that way.”

“And whatever you do, don’t repeat anything you hear downstairs,” Maxine said. “These racketeers are ruthless and violent.”

“Violent?” I asked, squeaking.

“Not to us but to one another,” Ginnie said. “Turf wars and such.”

“Don’t worry about all that tonight.” Maxine poured a splash of white liquor into a glass and added a few ice cubes. “Anyone want any hooch before we go down?”

Everyone but me asked for a glass. I watched in amazement as they all tossed back the liquor as if it were water.

“What do I do when I get down there?” I asked.

Luella poured another splash of booze in her glass. “Laugh at their jokes. Make sure they all have a drink in their hands at all times.”

“Sit on their laps if they ask you,” Maxine said. “But keep a lookout for one you can make your special friend. We like our regulars, don’t we girls?”

“We’re the luckiest of all the girls,” Maxine said. “She puts us all together in this suite because we’re the prettiest and have the best manners. Also, we know how to speak to a man that makes him feel good.”

“And we all have consistent regulars who treat us nice,” Ginnie said. “Miss Scarlet loves us for it and rewards us with the best rooms.”

“That’s why I can’t figure out why you’re here,” Susannah said, not rudely exactly, but with a hint of hostility behind her smile.

“Miss Scarlet’s hoping she’ll stay,” Maxine said. “Because she’s pretty and seems like a rich girl.”

“Educated,” Luella said. “She’s the perfect Scarlet girl, ain’t she?”

“Isn’t she,” Maxine said.

“Right. Sorry.” Luella flushed. “Stella, it’s only ’cause I look like I do, or I’d be in the north wing. Miss Scarlet likes us to have good grammar and elo—what’s the word?”

“Elocution,” Maxine said, smiling.

Soon, the six of us sauntered down the stairs, everyone talking and laughing at once. Except for me. I was so frightened I couldn’t feel my feet or my hands.

We walked into a room filled with smoke, collecting near the ceiling. A ragtime band played a lively tune from one corner. Several young male servers carried around trays of champagne. Another made drinks behind a counter. If I had not known better, I would have thought I was in the home of one of my father’s friends throwing a bash. But no. I was in a brothel.

Miss Scarlet appeared by my side, as if from thin air. “You look ravishing.”

She did as well, wearing a purple gown that flattered her complexion.

“You can stay close by my side tonight, if you’d like. I’ll introduce you to the men.”

For the next thirty minutes, I was paraded around and introduced as the “new girl.” The men were as varied as men from any walk of life. Short, fat, tall, thin, old, and young. Some dressed in flashy suits. Others dressed as my father did, in a conservative, well-cut suit.

A glass of champagne was shoved into my hand by a lanky gentleman and before I understood what was happening, I was seated at his table. Luella was also there, perched on a rotund man’s knee and playing with what was left of his hair.

I drank the champagne quickly, hoping that it would numb me, make me less aware. Soon, it had taken effect and I felt buoyant and glamorous. A young man asked me to dance and I said yes without thinking. Soon, I was being twirled around the dance floor. I danced with at least six men, one after the other, forgetting where I was and actually enjoying myself. Finally, I thought, something I could do well. Dancing had been taught to me from an early age. If only it had been something useful.

I collapsed into a chair, hot and tired from all the dancing. Another glass of champagne made its way into my hand and then down my throat.

Servers carried silver trays with meatballs, tiny sandwiches, and small bowls of fresh shrimp. I ate whatever was presented to me, relishing the flavors and textures. How much I'd taken for granted when I lived with my parents. If only I could go back and savor each delicacy and comfort.

I could never go back. That truth hit me anew, as it had almost daily since I left home. Losing the Bancrofts had opened the wounds that I'd thought had at least partially healed, but I'd been mistaken. I had not recovered from my traumas, only masked them by falling head over heels with another family. At least Percival and Mrs. Bancroft had been nice to me. For a time. Until I was a problem. Something they wanted to forget. What happened to a girl no one wanted to remember?

She ended up in a brothel, fighting for her life by opening her legs.

Miss Scarlet came sailing toward me. "You're doing very well. Some of our finest gentlemen have asked about you. I've made them thirstier by saying you're not available this evening."

I swallowed hard. Tomorrow I would be available. "Do they come here on Christmas?"



Miss Scarlet peered at me, lifting her thin brows. “Darling, they come any day of the year. Men’s appetites do not fall whim to a holiday.”

“Right. Of course.”

“We have a grand Christmas feast tomorrow night. Any of the men who can slip away, do so. I take pride in showing them the best night of their year. You should be prepared.”

Prepared.

“If you play the game correctly, my dear, I predict a lucrative future for you. You’re pretty enough one of them will want you for himself. You’ll end up in some penthouse suite. For now, however, I’m happy to teach you the trade.”

She was called away by one of the servers, asking about shrimp. I looked around the room for Luella or Maxine but they’d disappeared. They’d taken men upstairs, I realized.

Could I stay here? Give myself to strangers night after night? Or would I live a life of poverty and loneliness, toiling away like so many other women for little pay and no rewards?

I stood, preparing myself to dance some more. A server hurried over and took my empty plate. I turned toward the front entrance, and that’s when I saw him.

It was not my father as I’d feared, but no other than Percival Bancroft.

I wanted to run and hide, but it was too late. He’d spotted me. His eyes widened, staring at me as if I were a ghost rather than a woman of flesh and blood dressed in a fine gown.

I froze, standing there for what felt like an eternity as he crossed the room toward me.

19

Estelle

By the time he reached me, I trembled from head to toe.

“What are you doing here?” Percival growled, glaring down at me, nostrils flared.

“It’s absolutely none of your concern.” I tried to sound brave and flippant, but it came out no louder than a whisper.

“Do you realize what kind of place this is?”

“Do you?” I glared back at him, defiance building. How dare he come in here and pass judgment? Anyway, he was here too, so what could he possibly say about it without convicting himself?

Miss Scarlet caught my eye from where she stood by the bar. I waved and smiled, hoping to indicate all was well.

“If you’ll excuse me, I have friends to visit with,” I said, raising my chin.

“What in God’s name has happened to you?” Percival took me by the elbow, hustling me out of the room and into the quiet foyer.

“What do you mean?” I thought I looked nice in my new dress and with my hair fixed. Everything was tasteful, as Miss Scarlet dictated.

“You’re as thin as my neighbor’s greyhound.”

“You’re comparing me to a dog?”

“I suppose I am,” he said grimly.

“I’ve been at a boardinghouse with little to eat and long days on foot looking for work.”

A look of guilt passed over his patrician features. Good, I thought. I hoped he felt terrible for turning me out onto the street. As soon as I thought it, I silently repented. It was my lie that had caused our rift. That and the fact that my father was a murderer and wrecker of lives.

“This isn’t a boardinghouse,” he said, with the same growl in his voice as earlier.

“I’m quite aware of that.”

“And?” One eyebrow raised as he stared into my eyes. “You’re contemplating life as a prostitute? Please tell me I’ve misunderstood something here.” He pressed his fingers into his high cheekbones, as if they ached. In addition, a muscle on the side of his face twitched.

I wanted to turn away, but my pride wouldn’t allow me to do so. “If you must know, I was invited here as a guest of Miss Scarlet’s by one of the girls who lived at the boardinghouse with me. Luella is her name. We ran into each other in the park, and she invited me here for something to eat. It’s the first decent meal I’ve had since I was unceremoniously asked to leave yet another home I’d grown to love.”

“Where did you get the dress? If you haven’t had enough to eat, I find it difficult to believe you could afford it. Unless?” His gaze traveled the length of me. Clearly, he

didn't like what I wore. Who cares , I told myself. He's nothing to me. An acquaintance at best. A friend wouldn't have asked me to leave his home simply because of who my father was. Yes, I lied, but still. The kindness I thought the tenet of his life had disappeared the moment my true identity was revealed. I couldn't blame him for it, though. Not really.

"The dress is on loan for tonight, so I don't stand out for all the wrong reasons at this fine event. I didn't have anything appropriate, thus Miss Scarlet was generous enough to offer it to me."

"Generous? There's nothing generous about that woman. She's a cold, hard businesswoman. Women like her have only one thing in mind—how can they exploit pretty young women to line her own pockets?"

"And?" I asked, mimicking his earlier sarcastic question.

"And what?"

"And, it seems to me you have no higher moral ground from which to judge me. You're here too. Wait, don't tell me. You're here to make a business deal." I smirked, glad to see the glint I'd caused in his eyes. He was a hypocrite, and he knew it. I fluttered my eyelashes, feigning innocence. "I'm confused. What kind of business does a doctor conduct in a place like this? What would a visit here give to you? Unless it was to provide for a less-than-wholesome desire of yours?" Here I'd thought he'd been so loyal to his wife. Living as a monk. Why did men always disappoint me? "I mean, Mr. Bancroft, I'm shocked. Here I thought you were so devoted to your wife that you couldn't fathom an affair with me."

His mouth dropped open, then clenched. He spoke through gritted teeth. "Are you enjoying yourself? Mocking me is a great sport, isn't it?"

“Passing judgment on a woman like me—one with few choices and facing life on the streets. Is that enjoyable to you ?” My fists clenched at my side. How I would love to punch his smug face. Not that I knew how to throw a punch, but the idea of it sounded very satisfying.

Why was it bothering me so much that he was here? Because he wasn’t who I thought he was. Not the man I’d fallen in love with. Instead, he was as morally abhorrent as the rest of the men in the room. He’d played the role of dutiful husband, son, and father so well. But this is who he really was. A man who visited a brothel.

“Listen to me, Miss Sullivan .” He said my last name as though he had something sour in his mouth. “What I do with my leisure time is no business of yours.”

“Touché,” I said.

He sighed, and for a moment I thought he would walk away. Instead, he seemed to let go of pretenses. Suddenly, he was the same Percival I’d known from that first day on the train. “Stella, are you really going to stay here? Live this kind of life? Have you already been with a man here?”

I wanted to tell him yes, and that I loved it here, lying with a different man every night. Instead, I said the truth. “I already told you. I arrived today and was fed a warm meal and given a room to nap and then a bath and this beautiful gown. Will I stay and do what it takes to make this my home? I don’t know.”

“You don’t know?” More flared nostrils.

“I was contemplating this very question when you found me tonight. Stay in this warm, luxurious home and enjoy a full stomach and a soft place to sleep at night or go back to the boardinghouse and wait for Mrs. O’Grady to kick me out at the first of the year.”

“Why are you getting kicked out of the boardinghouse?”

“Because I don’t have rent money,” I said. “I have nothing left from the wages your mother gave me. Haven’t you been listening? I have no references or skills. I’m not even qualified to be a maid. I’ll be forced to do some other kind of factory work or die in the streets.”

He flinched and stepped backward as if I’d smacked him. “Surely it won’t come to that?”

“What don’t you understand about my situation? You and your mother took me in or this all would have happened earlier. I was lulled into thinking I had a home with you and work I could be proud of. But that was all gone in an instant because of who I really am. I’m the daughter of a criminal who destroyed your life. No one wants me around except Miss Scarlet. Why shouldn’t I stay?”

He sighed and rubbed his eyes, looking older than his years. “We’ve done this to you.” It was not a question.

“You saved me and then you sent me off to the lion’s den.” I could not keep the sadness from my voice. “It might have been better just to let me die on the train that night.”

He didn’t answer, other than to take a flask from the inner pocket of his jacket and take a swig.

“There are drinks here, you know,” I said.

“I’m aware.”

“Well, great to see you, Doctor Bancroft. But if you don’t mind, I should return to the

party. Miss Scarlet asked me to participate fully.”

“I do mind.”

“What?” His answer jarred me, keeping me from moving around him to return to the parlor.

“I do mind. You cannot do this, Stella. Estelle. Whatever your name is. This will set in motion a terrible ending to your life.”

“I’m not your problem,” I said. “We all agreed on that when I left.”

“I care about you,” Percival said. “You know that.”

I ignored him. “Here I thought you were a saint, only to find out you’re as much a slave to your desires as the rest of us.”

He flinched again as if I’d hit him. “Don’t. Just don’t.”

“Why? Does it hurt to hear the truth? How are you any better than me? Other than you don’t need to lie with a woman in order to survive? You’re a married man at a brothel. The truth is the truth.”

“Stella, please.” Tears glistened in his eyes. The pain I witnessed on his face made me immediately sorry for what I’d said. I was lashing out, trying to hurt him the way he’d hurt me.

“I’m sorry,” I said, voice softening with the rest of me. “It’s your life to do with as you please. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have to get back to the party.”

I slipped by him before he could say anything further. His lies or platitudes, if he



were to offer them, meant nothing to me now. He'd saved my life and then sent me into hell all alone. He was just like every other man I knew, selfish and disloyal.

20

Estelle

The rest of the night passed in a blur of champagne and dancing. When the clock struck midnight, I was surprised the time had gone so quickly. Percival and I had avoided each other for the most part. He'd not danced or interacted with the girls. Instead he'd sat near the band, smoking cigarettes, drinking whiskey, and from what I could tell, sulking. I didn't know what he had to feel so sorry for himself about. I was the one facing a life on the streets.

Miss Scarlet motioned for me to come to her table. For most of the night, she'd had a revolving array of male guests surrounding her. Did she ever take them to her quarters at the end of a party? Or did she only arrange it for her girls?

I obediently scurried over, heart pounding. Had I done something wrong?

I took the seat next to her. She slipped a cigarette from her gold case, stuck it into a tortoiseshell holder, and motioned to one of the servers. He came running. "May I have a light, darling?"

"Yes, ma'am." He struck a match and leaned close to light it for her. She inhaled; the end of the cigarette glowed red.

"Doctor Bancroft has inquired about your availability." Miss Scarlet tilted her head, cigarette held loosely between her fingers.

What should I say? The truth? Or a version of it anyway? So much for my vow to be honest from here on out.

“Who are you, really?”

I sighed, closing my eyes for a moment. “My father is Sean Sullivan.”

“Oh, I see now.”

“Is it true?” I whispered. “Did he kill Mary Bancroft’s father?”

“According to gossip, yes. I hear a lot on a nightly basis.”

“Once they discovered who I was, it was no longer an option to live with them or work for them,” I said.

“He’s inquired about securing your company tonight.”

I gulped. “Company? Tonight?” Did she mean what I thought she meant?

“Yes, in fact, he’s asked that you’re reserved only for him.”

I stared at her in shock. “Is that possible?”

“Anything’s possible for the right price.” She drew on the end of her cigarette, watching me through wafts of smoke. “You must know his situation if you stayed with them?”

“How do you mean? His wife?”

“That’s correct.”

“I know she’s very ill.”

“Terribly sad, isn’t it? The poor man.” Miss Scarlet tapped her cigarette into the ashtray on the table. “I can remember when it happened—such a shock. The whole sordid affair was in the papers, which was unfortunate, but you know how people love gossip.”

“What story is that?”

She flicked the cigarette ash from the end of her cigarette into a ceramic bowl. “He didn’t tell you what she did?”

Was she referring to the baby? Or something else? Had there been more to the tale than either of the Bancrofts had shared with me?

“I know she was admitted to the asylum after the birth of her child,” I said. “As it was told to me, she suffered a psychotic breakdown after she had the baby. Dr. Bancroft told me she tried to hurt the infant and he had no other choice but to put her into the care of others.”

“It wasn’t the infant she hurt. She shot Dr. Bancroft with a pistol. Although she had aimed for his chest, the bullet pierced his shoulder instead. He lost a lot of blood—they thought they might lose him for good.”

My mouth fell open. “I had no idea.” Why hadn’t he told me? For the same reason I hadn’t told him the truth of my situation? Shame? Fear? Most likely, there were so many complicated reasons and emotions that he might not even know himself why he’d lied and told me it was Clara she’d tried to hurt. “What happened to her afterward?”

“The police were informed, of courses. Typically, she would have been sent to prison,

but Dr. Bancroft refused to press charges—claimed it was an accident. Which doesn't make much sense. In fact, it's a bold-faced lie, or he'd never have sent her to the asylum. She's watched closely from what I understand, as she's deemed violent."

"How awful," I murmured. Yet he still visited her every week. However, she was the mother of his child. He'd loved her at some point and perhaps still did, despite what she'd done. Perhaps he understood that her violence was a symptom of her mental illness, not criminal behavior. "How do you know all this?"

"Like I said, kid, it was in the papers. The Bancrofts were once a prominent family in the city and are of interest to people."

"What do you mean by 'were once a prominent family,'" I asked. "Aren't they still?"

"Not in the way they once were. After the scandals, you know, things changed. First Mr. Bancroft dies in the arms of the wife of a powerful politician."

"I thought it was his mistress?"

"That's what I said." She cocked her head to the side and observed me through narrowed eyes, almost as though I was a little soft in the old noggin. "One of Mrs. Bancroft's enemies—to this day no one knows who—told anyone who would listen what had happened, and the papers picked it up. Instead of an obituary listing his accomplishments, everything was overshadowed by his affair."

"Mrs. Bancroft must have been mortified," I said more to myself than Miss Scarlet.

"I imagine she was." This was said without an ounce of sympathy.

The more I heard, the sicker I felt. Was it any wonder Percival and Mrs. Bancroft didn't trust people? They'd been betrayed by people they loved. As I knew from

personal experience, once that happens, one can never see the world in quite the same way as before.

“Does he come here often?” I asked.

“No. He comes with a friend now and again, but never goes upstairs with any of the girls. When I’ve asked him about it, he says it’s not something that he’s interested in but enjoys the parties.”

Why did her answer bring so much air back into my lungs?

“Which is why it’s such a surprise he’s asked for you,” Miss Scarlet said. “Although, now I’ve learned of your ties to him, it makes more sense.”

“Does it? We’ve not had that kind of relationship. You might not believe me, but it’s true.” The corner of one of my eyes twitched with nerves and exhaustion. How did these girls do this night after night? My emotions and nerves were frazzled and confused. I wanted to crawl into the warm bed that awaited upstairs and fall into a deep sleep just so I could forget everything for a few hours.

“Given his past, it’s understandable that he seek comfort outside his marriage, wouldn’t you agree?” Miss Scarlet asked before taking another drag.

“I daresay, it’s not for me to judge, one way or the other.”

“Many of our guests tonight have similar situations. Either they have an agreement that he’s to seek physical comfort elsewhere, or the union’s cold or contentious. Some of them have sick wives, in one form or the other. You look around this room and everyone has a story. Not all of them are victims of bad luck, of course, but many are. I’ve found, after years in this business, that the human need for physical affection outweighs many things, including reputation and pride. My girls and I provide a

service to those in need. There's no shame in it, for either party involved."

I wanted to ask her the reason for this lecture but refrained. Thoughts spun around my mind, unable to land on one subject for any period of time. He wanted to pay for my company? Night after night? Did he mean for it to be in the true sense of the word? For me to give myself to him in that way? If he'd wanted that, why hadn't he pursued me earlier? He knew how desperate I was. If he'd asked, I may have granted him permission to come and go from the guest room as he pleased in exchange for my room and board. I'd sunk low enough that I might have agreed. I was here, wasn't I?

No, that wasn't right. The truth was, I loved him. If I agreed to share a bed with him, it was not out of necessity. I must stop lying to myself. I'd known it for months before I left.

"He wants to speak with you in your room," Miss Scarlet said. "I sent him up, promising you would join him."

"What if I don't want to?"

She flicked her cigarette into the ashtray but continued to gaze at me, with a mixture of contempt and fury. "Do you wish to stay the night? Repay me for the meals you've scarfed down?"

"I'm desperate to stay the night, as I'm sure you guessed. The meals were a gift, no?"

She raised one eyebrow but then motioned toward the door with a dart of her chin. "Go to him. Now."

Feeling I had little choice, I did as she asked. Each step I took felt like one step closer to death. What did he want? By the time I reached the second floor, perspiration dampened the base of my spine. The dress suddenly felt heavier than when I'd been

dancing.

What was I supposed to do with Percival once I got to the room? At the top of the stairs, an additional question entered my mind. What if he wanted to take me to bed? What then?



21

Estelle

I n the suite, Maxine and Ginnie were entertaining gentlemen near the fireplace and did not look up when I walked past them to my room. I opened the door gingerly, steeling myself. Courage. I must have courage.

Percival sat in the chair by the window, a glass of whiskey on the table next to him. A quick glance toward the desk revealed a decanter filled with the same amber liquid. Who had brought it to my room? Had he asked for it specially, or was this something Miss Scarlet always had delivered to the rooms of her girls on a night such as this?

The lights on the street shone outside the glass. Snow continued to fall. Flakes danced and twirled in the breeze, creating a lovely pattern. He did not rise when I shut the door, only lifted the glass of whiskey on the side table to his mouth, watching me. A lamp shed a dim glow, creating shadows on his face.

“Percival, how lovely to see you,” I said with more than a hint of sarcasm. “Have you paid your way to my room?”

Even in the dim light, I could see him pale. “God help me, Stella. What are you doing here? Do you understand what the men downstairs want from you? What you would have to do with them? This isn’t just a party.”

I flushed with heat. “I’m quite aware, thank you. I’m not an idiot.”

“This is not the place for you,” Percival said.

“I have no place. Not anymore.”

“These men—they’re rough and don’t care who they hurt, especially a prostitute.”

I winced at the word. He was right, of course. I would be a prostitute if I stayed.

“What do you suggest I do about eating? Or finding a warm place to sleep? Because I’ve had little of either since I last saw you.” My legs shook as I lowered myself into the chair opposite him.

“That’s what I want to talk to you about.” He got up to pour himself another whiskey, as well as one for me.

I accepted it from his outstretched hand and took a small, tentative sip. I almost gagged. It was terrible, burning the back of my throat. I set it aside.

“You want to pay for me to stay here and come to visit me when you wish?” I asked.

His cheeks flamed red. “No, you’ve mistaken my intention.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I’ve felt terrible guilt since sending you away. Then tonight I saw you...here. I cannot in good conscience abandon you. Leaving you here to do this kind of work is out of the question.”

“Then why did you ask me to leave your home in the first place? If you’re so terribly guilty?” I couldn’t keep the anger from my voice. “Anyway, you’re not really in any position to decide my fate. Excuse me while I laugh at the very idea.” I scowled,

unable to conjure up even a sarcastic chuckle.

He returned my scowl. “You know as well as I that we couldn’t go on as we were. Not after what Simon discovered. If you’d told us the truth in the beginning, perhaps it would have been different.”

“Had you known I was a Sullivan, you would never have brought me home.”

He sighed, nodding. “You’re right. That’s the truth of it. However, I did bring you home, and it changed everything.”

I looked down at my lap. A bead had loosened during my dancing and now hung by a thread. An urge to tug it loose and toss it at Percival’s head came over me. I resisted, speaking through gritted teeth. “As I’ve said, I’m sorry I lied to you and brought this complication to your life. My lie was not to hide my identity specifically from you. There was no nefarious plan to infiltrate your family. I had no idea the connection between us. Surely you know that?”

“I do.”

“It’s important my family does not know where I am. That’s the only reason I lied.” Tears threatened. I bit the inside of my lip to push them back inside me.

“You said your family wouldn’t be looking for you,” Percival said. “Which makes your name change befuddling to me.”

Taken aback, I stared at him. He didn’t understand my reasoning. How could he not? “No, it’s not about my parents or sister knowing where I am. This is all for the baby. Mireille must never know I exist. If she found out I was her mother, it would break her heart. She’d come to believe that everyone who claimed to love her had lied to her. I couldn’t leave that to chance.”

He blinked, looking positively astonished. “I hadn’t thought about it that way. I should have. You’re a mother.”

“I can’t give her much—can’t raise her or be part of her life—but I can give her freedom from the burden of truth. You’re right, though, my family has no interest in finding me. I was their problem, and I conveniently left. No one cares whether I live or die. I can accept all that as long as Mireille doesn’t get hurt.”

“I care.”

“So you say.”

“I’d like to set you up in an apartment. A permanent situation.”

“You want to move me into an apartment?” I stared at him incredulously. “In exchange for the living arrangement, what will you expect from me? I know very little about the relations between a man and a woman. Constantine and I only shared intimacy the one time.”

An emotion I couldn’t place flickered in his eyes. “I did wonder about that.”

“Luella told me that women who work here dream of this kind of arrangement. Better a mistress than a prostitute, right?” I asked, a bitter edge to my voice.

“No, no. You’ve got it wrong. You won’t be my mistress. I expect nothing physical. I’ll want nothing of you, other than for you to stay safe.”

“You’ll pay for me to live in a nice apartment with absolutely nothing expected in payment?”

“Correct,” he said.

“You’ll excuse me for any doubt I might have in that regard? Constantine was a gentleman at first. From what I witnessed tonight, men have many motives, and charity isn’t usually one of them.”

“What kind of hypocrite would I be if I took you away from all of this only to force myself upon you? I am not my father.”

“I know you’re not,” I said.

“I want to look after you because I care about you. It’s as simple as that. I’m offering you a life of ease. Please, take it. For me, if not for yourself, so that I can sleep at night.”

“You haven’t been sleeping? Because of me?”

“God help me, woman, you’re enough to drive a man to drink. Of course it’s because of you. For someone so intelligent, you’re truly oblivious to certain things.” He scraped a hand through his thick brown hair. For the first time that night, I noticed how tired he looked. Haggard, actually, as if he hadn’t slept well in weeks. “Dammit, Stella, are you going to make me say it?”

I flinched at his use of a curse word. “Say what?”

For a moment, he seemed at war with himself before his mask slipped back into place. “I’ll be able to sleep at night, and you’ll have shelter and sustenance. We’ll both be better off.”

“What happens when you grow tired of me?” I asked.

He slammed his glass against the table, causing me to jump. “I won’t. I’ll never grow tired of you. All I want is to be with you every minute of the day. Don’t you see? I

love you. I'm madly in love with you. I have been since the first minute I laid eyes upon you. Living without you these last few weeks has been excruciating. If things were different and I wasn't married, I'd ask you to marry me. Actually, I'd beg you. But things being as they are for me—stuck in a marriage that exists only on paper—this is the best I can offer you.”

“You would marry me?”

“That’s what I said.”

I sat for a moment, letting it sink in. He would actually want me to be his wife, despite my past. He loved me. I loved him. Yet we could not have a life together. Not one in the light of day, anyway.

“I would say yes,” I said.

Tears brimmed in his eyes. “You would?”

“In a second.”

“I’m sorry I can’t offer you a better life. I truly am.” He paused, clearly trying not to cry. “I’d give you children and a family that loves you unconditionally.” He looked right into my eyes, his words like the caresses he could not give me. “You deserve the best of everything, but I can only give you what I have to offer.”

I was too overcome to trust myself to speak, and only nodded.

“What did you promise Miss Scarlet?” Percival asked.

“In exchange for a meal and a place to sleep tonight, I promised her I’d think about her proposition to stay permanently.”

His eyes flashed with obvious anger. “She lied to me—told me you’d been here for weeks. ‘Very experienced’ were her words she used when I inquired about you.”

“Since I only arrived this afternoon, it would be hard for me to have experience.”

“Thank God. The idea of you with—” He cut himself off. “If you’re willing to accept my offer, then I’ll work out whatever Miss Scarlet thinks she’s owed. As if she can claim you as her own. The woman has a lot of nerve.”

“What will people think?” I asked, my mind having moved along to the practical side of things. “A woman living alone in a nice apartment—won’t people ask questions?”

“You’ll have to be discreet. Keep to yourself. Ironically, you’ll need to come up with yet another name. One that Simon will not discover. I’ll make sure you have books and other entertainment. You’ll want for nothing. We can come up with a story about who you are. Possibly a widow? Not everyone will believe you, but at least it’s something to say when people ask.”

“What will I do with my time sequestered away in this apartment of yours? I’ll be lonely.”

“I’ll send Penelope to look after you. She’s fond of you, as you know.”

“And I her. Having her with me would be a great comfort.”

“You’ll have a cook and access to my chauffeur and car should you need it,” Percival said. “Your wardrobe and other necessities will be taken care of as well. Should you need anything at all, I’m only minutes away. I’ll come whenever you want me. Or need me, I should say.”

“Minutes?”

“I own a few properties as investments not far from my home. The apartment’s one of them.”

“Have you had someone else there before? A woman? Someone like me?”

“There’s no one like you.” He grimaced. “And no, I’ve not had anyone else stay there. I only recently purchased it.”

“For what purpose?”

“As an investment. Once you’ve moved in—if there’s anything you’d like to change about the decor, please let me know. I want it to feel like your home.”

“What about your mother?” I asked. “Will she know about this arrangement?”

He ducked his chin; a vein in the middle of his forehead pulsed. “I’ve found it impossible to keep much from her. She will find out, one way or another. However, she’ll not care.” He rubbed his eyes. “Mother’s known of my feelings for you. Sensed them, anyway. She wanted me to...to make you my mistress.”

“What?”

“Never mind. I’ll tell you about it some other time. Suffice it to say, she doesn’t seem to have the same moral dilemma that we do.”

“Yes, I’d like to hear more details about that conversation,” I said, smiling. Leave it to Mrs. Bancroft to think outside of the confines of society.

“My mother’s nothing if not surprising.” He smiled back at me, looking more like himself. “There is one thing I’d like to ask of you, and you can say no.”



“What is it?”

“I’d like to have dinner with you once a week at the apartment.”

“Yes, of course. Are you sure about all of this?”

“I’m sure. If I have anything to do with it, you’ll never be cold or hungry again, even though it’s not even close to what I wish for us.”

“You’re giving me what you can,” I said, rising to my feet. “For that, I’m grateful.”

Percival stood, fiddling with his tie. “I must go before I do something we’ll both regret. I’ll come by and get you tomorrow at ten.” He turned and headed for the door.

“If you look after me and everyone else, who looks after you?” I called out to him softly.

At the door, he pivoted back to address me. “If you’re safe and well taken care of, I’ll be fine.”

“Why didn’t you tell me your wife shot you?” I asked.

His shoulders slumped. “How do you know that?”

“Miss Scarlet said it was in the papers at the time.”

His expression darkened. “Yes, it was everywhere. I guess I didn’t want you to know how bad it was. Telling you felt disloyal.”

“I understand. Even though she hurt you and you don’t understand her, she’s still your family.”

“That’s right.” He smiled gently. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“I’ll be ready.”

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:03 am*

Percival picked me up at ten the next morning. As I gathered my few belongings, the house remained quiet. The party had gone on long into the night. I'd heard it from inside my locked bedroom while tossing and turning until I finally fell into an exhausted slumber around four in the morning.

We spoke about my cover story as Percival's chauffeur drove across town to the apartment. I would now be a widow named Mrs. Estelle Wainwright. My fictional husband was English and had died in the war, leaving his young widow no choice but to return home to New York City. "I want a quiet life and to be left alone," I said, thinking out loud. "No interest in society or anything of the sort. It's too risky."

"We can tell Benny, the doorman, and whomever else who asks that you're a recluse. Eccentric perhaps? A beautiful widow shrouded in mystery."

Beautiful. I chose to put that away to think about later, take it out like a favorite piece of clothing.

"Am I an artist or maybe a writer?" I suggested, enjoying making up my fake story. Being with Percival again made my entire body feel lighter, not to mention that I no longer faced a life of debauchery. For the first time in a long time, I felt a minuscule amount of hope for the future.

"No, that's too specific. What if someone asks to see your paintings?"

"Yes, right. I must remain mysterious."

A ghost of a smile twitched one corner of his mouth.

Soon, we arrived at the apartment building that was to become my new home. I hadn't realized it was only a few blocks from the home he shared with his mother and Clara.

"Here?" I asked. "But it's so close to you."

He got out of the car and gave me his hand. "Where else would it be?"

Joseph, the chauffeur, fetched my bags from the back and followed us up a set of stairs and into a white-marbled lobby.

"Joseph, please take her things up to the apartment," Percival said. "We'll be up in a moment. And please refer to her as Estelle Wainwright from here on out."

"Yes sir." Joseph took each of my suitcases and headed toward the elevator.

"Come meet Benny," Percival said to me. "He's one of the two doormen who work here. They keep the riffraff out, so you can rest easy. No one's getting upstairs without their approval."

"Aren't I the riffraff?" I whispered.

He gave me one of his Percival looks, clearly unamused.

"Benny, good to see you," Percival said. "This is Mrs. Wainwright, a dear friend of our family. She'll be staying in my apartment. Indefinitely."

Benny greeted Percival with a respectful smile and bob of his head. Bright blue eyes peered at me with obvious interest from under the rim of his cap. He was somewhere in his fifties, if I had to guess. A slight limp in his left leg suggested an injury of some kind.

“Of course, sir. Mrs. Wainwright, I’m at your service. Whatever you need, do not hesitate to ask.”

“Thank you, Benny.” I nodded, playing the part of a shy, reclusive widow. I’d never thought my life would involve so much acting.

“I’ll expect the staff to treat her with the utmost respect,” Percival said. “She is a special friend to my family, as I said.” There was no mistaking the subtext.

“Consider it done,” Benny said.

Percival escorted me over to the elevator. It arrived shortly thereafter with Joseph inside.

“Sir, Mrs. Wainwright’s bags have been delivered to the apartment and set in the bedroom,” Joseph said.

“Thank you, Joseph. You may return home,” Percy said. “I’ll walk from here.”

“Yes sir. Shall I give your mother a message of any kind?”

“That will not be necessary,” Percival said tersely. “She knows where I am.”

“Very good, sir.”

“Mrs. Wainwright.” Joseph gave me a slight nod, unable to hide his contempt. How strange that someone from meager means should judge another in similar circumstances? I would expect an ally, but instead it was clear he saw me as a whore. A woman who had somehow beguiled a married man into putting her into an apartment. I wanted to defend myself, explain that Percival had offered this to me not as a love nest for his mistress but because he cared about me. But of course I could not. Like so much of my life I had to swallow my words and my feelings and pretend

that everyone else was correct—I did not matter.

Percival and I stepped into the elevator. We began a slow ascent to the third floor. Suddenly self-conscious, I studied the tips of my shoes before darting a glance in his direction.

“Are you all right?” Percival asked.

“Feeling strange.”

“Yes, well, this is not something either of us ever thought we would do.”

I nodded but didn’t say anything for the rest of the ride up.

“Ah, here we are.” Percival exited first, then held the elevator door for me.

I stepped into a hallway and looked right, then left. There were two apartments on either side of the hallway.

“We’re number three, here.” Percival used a key to open the door and ushered me inside.

The foyer featured black-and-white marble floors with geometric patterns. Paint the color of white sand adorned the walls. A grand chandelier twinkled above us, reflected in the large mirror that hung on the wall just inside the door. I turned away at the sight of my reflection, appalled by my appearance. I’d grown too thin. Bags under my eyes made me look old and used up, like the women I’d seen on the streets these last few weeks, all of us looking for work, desperate to survive. Even my hair lacked luster, as though it had given up too.

An ornate table served as a place for mail and keys, flanked on either side by high-backed chairs. A fresh bouquet of lilies decorated the table and filled my nose with

their sweet scent.

“I love lilies,” I said.

“Good. I wasn’t sure.”

“They’re one of my favorites.”

“Come along then,” Percival said gruffly. “I’ll show you around.”

He led me into a large sitting room. For a moment, I stood still, taking it all in. Decorated in a blend of traditional and contemporary styles, the color scheme mixed deep, rich tones of blue and burgundy with lighter pastel shades of sage green and butter yellow. Plush upholstered furniture with curved lines and rich textures of velvet and satin were arranged around an ornamental rug. A fireplace with an elaborately carved mantel acted as the room's focal point. Bookcases filled with leather-bound books, games, and puzzles hinted at the inhabitant’s hobbies. Were they Percival’s? Or simply decoration? Heavy drapes framed the bay windows, layered with lighter sheer curtains that allowed for natural light.

A large polished wood table surrounded by upholstered chairs took up much of the space in the formal dining room. My eye was immediately drawn to an impressive crystal chandelier hanging above the table. A sideboard stored china and silverware. Walls were decorated with a floral wallpaper. All tasteful and in harmony.

“There’s so much room. What will I do with myself?” I asked.

“I’m sure you’ll find something to occupy that quick mind of yours.”

I doubted it. I’d be here alone, without friends or meaningful work or service to others. I was a princess in an ivory tower. Better than a common whore, I reminded myself. Be grateful.

Next, Percival took me into the bedroom. “What do you think? Will it suit you?”

“It’s beautiful,” I said in all honesty.

Decorated in soft, luxurious fabrics and warm shades of blue in addition to a large, opulent bed with an upholstered headboard draped with fine linen, an eiderdown quilt, and an array of pillows, it was the perfect sanctuary. Silk-shaded lamps shed light from the bedside tables. A chaise longue near the window was clearly meant for reading. Next to it, a table with a tidy stack of books waited for an occupant to dive into their pages. Both the wardrobe and dresser were crafted from dark walnut, as were a vanity table and writing desk.

“Will you be happy here?” Percival asked.

“I’ll be very comfortable. Pampered, really.”

“You’ll be safe. That’s all that matters.”

It was then I noticed that my bags had been opened. Several dresses already hung in the wardrobe.

“Is there someone here?” I asked, gesturing toward the open suitcases.

“Yes, Penelope’s already here.”

Just then, Penelope scampered into the bedroom carrying a pile of linens. “Miss Stella, I’m so happy to see you.” She set aside the laundry and hurried over, curtsying as if I were royalty and grinning from ear to ear.

“Penelope, I’m happy to see you too,” I said, shocked. “I’ve missed you.”

“Not as much as I’ve missed you,” Penelope said. “Doctor Bancroft was ever so kind



to suggest I come here to work for you.”

“He is kind,” I said, glancing his direction.

“I appreciate your willingness to change positions,” Percival said, sounding embarrassed.

“Would you like to see your bathroom?” Penelope asked.

“Yes, please.”

We left Percival at the window near the chaise, staring out into the foggy day with a frown tugging on the corners of his mouth. Something weighed on his mind. Was he regretting his generosity already?

I forgot about him for a moment as I took in the tiled flooring, pedestal sink, and claw-foot bathtub, reminded of my bathroom I’d shared with Mauve at home.

Mauve.

My heart seized. What was my sister doing right now? Was the baby with her? Had Mireille said any words yet?

Percival led us into the kitchen next, complete with tiled walls, a large stove, and an icebox. A central table served as both a workspace and an informal dining area.

“Your cook’s named Mrs. Landry,” Penelope said. “She went out to the market to get a few things for your supper.”

“As I mentioned, mother’s cook trained her, thus you’ll be well fed. Penelope, you must take good care of Stella. She’s not been well since she left us.”

Penelope shot me a look that made me know she'd noticed how thin I'd become. "I'll do my very best, sir."

"I'll take my leave, ladies," Percival said. "I have to get home. It's Christmas."

"Are you having a nice dinner?" I asked, jealous I couldn't join them.

"Nothing extravagant. Just Mother, Simon, and me."

I nodded. Simon. He would be at dinner, and I would be alone.

"Penelope, will you excuse us a moment?" Percival asked.

"Yes, of course. I'll go make up the beds." She scurried out of the room and disappeared behind the closed door.

Percival reached into the pocket of his jacket. "I have something for you. A Christmas gift."

"But I don't have anything for you."

"That's not necessary." He handed me a skinny rectangular box. "Go ahead, open it."

I lifted the top and gasped. Inside lay a string of perfect pearls. "Percival, it's too much."

"No, it's Christmas."

I lifted it from the box, enjoying the weight of it in my hand.

"I'd offer to put it on you but...I don't think that's a good idea."

I wasn't sure what he meant but didn't ask.

"Do you like it?" Percival asked, his expression vulnerable, conjuring an image of what he must have looked like as a young boy.

"I do. Very much."

"Perhaps you could wear it when I come for supper tomorrow night?"

"You'll be here tomorrow?" I asked.

"If you'll have me."

"Yes, yes, please come."

"Penelope will take the guest room. Mrs. Landry will have the maid's quarters off the kitchen. You'll be less lonely with them here, I should think."

"I agree. Thank you. Doesn't Mrs. Landry have a husband to go home to, though?"

"No, she's widowed. Lost her husband in the war."

"How sad."

"Yes. Like so many women who lost loved ones in the war."

"May I ask after your mother and Clara? Did they have a nice Christmas morning?"  
Thinking of Clara on Christmas morning squeezed my heart.

"Yes, they did. Although they both miss you. In fact, Mother was wondering if she could come by and see you soon? She's hoping you'll agree to come work with her again."

I clasped my hands together, delighted. “Really? She’s forgiven me?”

“She was never angry with you. Mother understands more than you’d think.”

“Please tell her I shall be delighted and ready to get back to work whenever she wants me.”

“I’ve told Clara that you’ve moved close by and that she’ll see you again soon. If you’re willing?”

“Oh, yes. If you’ll allow her to visit me, I would be forever grateful.” The thought of seeing her again made me want to weep with happiness.

“Clara’s been somewhat despondent since you left,” Percival said. “I caught her playing with her dollhouse one day. She had named the dolls after us and had them sitting together on the couch.”

I couldn’t speak for a moment, overcome by what that meant. “Will it hurt her in the long run to come here? To have a relationship with me?”

“You are her father’s and grandmother’s close friend. There’s no harm in it. In fact, she’ll be the better for it. Having you in her life fills many gaps in her childhood. You know that, don’t you?”

“I’ve not thought of it from her perspective, only my own. She taught me that I could love a child, even if they were not mine.”

He looked away, pain in his eyes. “I wish it were different.”

“I know. Me too,” I said softly. “But I’ll get to be in her life. In all of your lives. That’s more than I ever thought I’d have.”

He nodded, tugging on his ear. "I should go. Please send word if you need anything at all."

I needed something. Someone. But I could not have him in that way, and I had to accept it. He would be my dearest friend, and that would have to be enough.

"I'll see you tomorrow. And Merry Christmas."

He stepped closer and lifted his hand as if to cradle my face but in the end, stuck it in his pocket instead. "Merry Christmas, Stella. Until tomorrow."

With that, he was gone, leaving me alone in the kitchen. I bowed my head and said a prayer of thanks. "And forgive me for wishing things were different instead of simply being grateful."

I wandered out to the sitting room and went to the window. Snow had started to fall again, blanketing the world in sparkling white. I didn't know what the year would bring, but I was safe here. Even though I yearned to be with Percival, it was not to be. I'd been fortunate enough to love two men in my short life. That would have to be enough.

Anyway, I would have Percival and his family in my life. I'd have good work to do and a little girl to love, even if she wasn't altogether mine. I could still be an influence in her life. An auntie who lived a few minutes away whom she could visit anytime. Maybe she could even stay over once a month. We could make cookies and read books together. I could have a full life. I'd been given this second chance, and I was not going to squander it. Self-pity served no one.

Penelope entered the room, cheeks flushed. "Miss Stella, are you sorry to see him go?"

I turned to look at her, standing under the archway between the sitting room and

hallway, and made a decision. She would be the person I confided to. The one person I would be completely honest with. I could have a true friendship.

“I’m very sorry to see him go. I love him.” My voice caught. “But I must be grateful for what he’s done for me and not yearn for someone who was never meant to be mine.”

“Yes. All that. Yet the heart doesn’t always listen to reason.”

“No, it does not.”

A rustling at the front door drew our attention.

“That’ll be Mrs. Landry,” Penelope said. “Would you like to meet her?”

“I surely would. It’s Christmas after all. We should have champagne and a feast. All of us together. We’re going to do this my way, since I’m the mistress of the house.”

“I’m at your disposal.” Penelope grinned.

The two of us walked together toward the foyer to meet the woman who would hopefully become a new friend.

As we crossed the luxurious room I thought about my family. The pang that I felt so often stung less today. Was it because I could see a future for myself now? I had a beautiful place to live and meaningful work and deep friendships. I’d made a new life for myself despite all the setbacks. Despite being the thing thrown away. The one no one wanted.

I’d done what was right for the baby. As much as I loved her, she was never meant for me. Percival and I had accepted what we could have together and what we couldn’t.

Could it be that life came down to this? We must come to understand who is meant for us and who is not. Parting from someone we desperately love must be met with courage and acceptance.

Yes, this was it. Love was a verb. Letting go was an act of love. Sacrificing one's own joy for the good of someone else was perhaps the deepest form of love.

For some, the only way to truly love someone was to let them go and wish them well.

If only my heart understood as well as my mind.